

## Adding a second language

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Friday, February 20, 2009

<http://www.curmudgeon-alley.com/adding-a-second-language/>

I'm in the process of trying to learn/relearn Italian. Many moons ago I lived in Italy for 3 years during my Jr. High years. I was never fluent, but I spoke enough to not be cheated in the markets and play with the Italian kids.

I would like to revisit the country for an extended period, and go to places off of tourist road. So that is my motivation for studying the language.

I asked an Indian friend of my mine who is bilingual about language. He has been in the USA for 7 years, and of course, English is widely spoken in India. I was wondering about whether he thought in English, dreamed in English, did he need to translate English to his native tongue, etc. Below is his well thought out answer:

*Well... the reason why I ask is because I have had this discussion with some friends of mine. Given that they also speak multiple languages too, the opinions were interesting.*

*The general conclusion seems to be that people think and dream in their mother tongue. And translate it to the "other" language. The proof was that we have met my fellow country men who immigrated to this country more than a decade back, but still seem to think in their mother tongue than English.*

*Based on the above discussions, it seems likely that people continue to think and dream in their mother tongue.*

*Except.... I am not sure I do so ... anymore.*

*I feel I think in English now-a-days. And I think most of the time, I dream in English too.*

*This makes me wonder if it could depend on the person in question. And how much effort he/she has taken to be a part of the new culture.*

*In my case, I was the "dreamer who was wasting his time dreaming of going to America and reading useless English novels" when I was growing up.*

*My best friend was born in a rich family and so grew up in the middle east where he went the "English schools" and when he came back to India, studied in the "private schools" where the resident students have to speak in English. So they know and speak the language well.*

*I thought – Both of us had made that switch to thinking in English. Perhaps I was wrong. Coz the last time I saw him – about a year back – he seemed to have "gone back". And the only way I could explain was that he got married about 6 years back after which he started hanging out other Indian couple –*

*friends and family. So they had an incentive to be a part of that groups culture to fit in.*

*So, without any clinical proof, I feel it might be that:*

1.

1. *Most people think in their default language – their mother tongue.*
2. *People who love another culture and have taken the time to learn the mother tongue of that culture very well, and then gets a chance to live in that culture for a sufficient amount of time, could start thinking in the new language. In other words, over a period of time [say 10 years], the new language could become his /her new “default language” over a period of time. I wonder if I may be in this stage.*
3. *I also feel people think only in one “default” language.*
4. *I also wonder if emotions play a part – How close you are to you mother tongue and the corresponding culture. If for instance, I loved my mother tongue and the culture, my brain would have an emotional connection to it and it probably makes the switch harder.*
5. *I feel there is always a tendency to “fall back” to the original mother tongue. A little but like Alcoholism – without the negative connotation. So when I go home, say the first 2 weeks, I probably think in English, but by the end of the month, the default language has been reset.*
6. *In some ways, the above might be the reason immigrants have a hard time making the leap. They hang out with their fellow countrymen – Friends and/or families. Even if they do not, they take a vacation back home to their folks and by the time they come back, all the progress they have made has been reset. So they start again. Rinse. Repeat. Ad-infinitum.*
7. *Which probably explains why even in immigrants who have taken a lot of effort to integrate with their new country, it takes an entire generation before that language switch is made*

*I think it is easier to dream in a language that is not your mother tongue. In some ways, dreams are like the stock market. They are the leading indicator. They change first.*

I asked a Sicilian gentleman I know who is in his 60s and has been in this country since his 20s similar questions. He did say he dreamed in both English and Italian. This person has a Masters and worked in a technical field with lots of math. He did tell that he did multiplication in Italian and translated it to English. Apparently his time tables are hard coded in his brain in Italian.

I just find the topic interesting. I would especially like to hear from some who is truly bilingual and has a foot in both worlds. I remember a Hispanic gentleman I worked with a while back. He was on the phone to his mother and was just rattling away in Spanish. He finished the conversation and turned around to say something to me. He started off in Spanish, got a confused look on his face, then switched to English.

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