



CRACKING THE CODE: Thanks to his extensive knowledge of Coptic, archeologist and polyglot Jean-Francois Champollion helped decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. ANGEL NAVARRETE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The world's polyglots

By LEONARDO VINTIÑI
Epoch Times Staff

"To understand a language isn't the same as living it," explains Clarisa M. who admits to difficulties remembering her mother tongue. Chilean born, but currently residing in Australia, Clarisa claims to experience small hesitations when she tries to speak her native language. Having spent 35 years away from her homeland, she has had to relearn part of the Spanish language, which according to her, only exists "in the depths of her subconscious."

Learning a language is no easy task, and maintaining fluency is, for most, a constant struggle. However, there are some individuals capable of commanding great skill in several languages. These are the world's polyglots.

One of the more surprising and recent cases of the hyperpolyglot phenomenon is that of young German-born Sebastian Heine, who has been dubbed the "Human Tower of Babel." By the time he was 22 years old, this student of Indo-German philology could communicate in no fewer than 35 distinct languages, of which he prefers Pashto, spoken by a Middle-Eastern ethnic minority.

While many have labeled him a prodigy, Sebastian affirms that he's no genius—merely an individual dedicated to the study of languages. His love of language began at only 7 years old when he was introduced to Greek, approaching it almost as a game. Today Heine has set a "modest" goal for himself: learn two new languages a year.

The case of Jorge Fernandez, while he hasn't mastered nearly as many

languages as Heine, is still incredible. At only 18 years old, this Peruvian could speak and fluently write in a dozen languages, including Spanish, English, French, German, Swiss, Romanian, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Catalan, Gallego, and Mandarin.

According to Jorge, his obsession with languages began when his mom punished him for getting bad grades in high school by taking away his phone privileges. Fernandez suddenly found that he had more time on his hands—and a desire to communicate.

One required French course awakened Fernandez's curiosity, and he then continued with Italian and Romanian on his own. The next nine languages came shortly afterward, and now the young Fernandez says he aims for fluency in 25 languages some day.

Mastery of over 30 languages is certainly impressive, but who is the biggest polyglot in the world? How many languages can one human mind master? More than 40. More than even 50. Ziad Youssef Fazah holds a basic understanding of at least 60 distinct languages. Of course, as Clarisa stated above, "to understand a language isn't the same as living it." The same applies to Fazah, who must regularly exercise his skill in these acquired languages so that he doesn't lose what he's learned.

GREAT POLYGLOTS IN HISTORY
It seems that whenever we have an understanding of the limits of the human mind, there are always a few people who are able to go beyond it. When it comes to multilingual proficiency, Cardinal Giuseppe Cas-

par Mezzofanti and linguist John Bowring are two such individuals who had far surpassed what many thought was possible.

The cardinal was born on September 17, 1774. He was able to command fluency in 38 languages and nearly 100 dialects, and he possessed a basic understanding in many more languages. It has been determined that, in total, the cardinal knew approximately 100 distinct forms of communication.

It can be said that Bowring was one of the most scholarly linguists ever known. He demonstrated a basic understanding of over 200 languages and was fluent in about 100. Bowring was born in 1792. He was governor of Hong Kong as well as an author and world traveler. He received the title Gentleman of the Bath Order and was a member of the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society. Up to today, no one has known a better interpreter of language than Bowring.

EXPANDING COMMUNICATION
While they may not have mastered as many languages as the incredible hyperpolyglots mentioned above, several contemporary historical figures can also boast fluency in multiple languages. It is no surprise that these individuals are also known as great communicators.

The papacy has a long history of multilingualism, and the tradition has carried up through today with the most recent popes: John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The former could fluently speak Polish, Classic Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, Esperanto, and German, and had basic knowl-

edge in Czech, Lithuanian, Russian, Hungarian, Japanese, Tagalog, and some African languages. The latter possesses fluency in at least a dozen languages.

Polyglot writers James Joyce and J.R.R. Tolkien each knew 13 languages.

The archeologist Jean-Francois Champollion—who also commanded fluency in 13 languages—helped decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics by translating the Rosetta Stone in 1822, thanks to his extensive knowledge of Coptic.

Among the other great language prodigies is linguist Kenneth Locke Hale, who demonstrated an incredible skill at learning languages quickly and precisely. During his studies of syntax and lexicons at MIT, Hale set his sights on unstudied and endangered languages, such as those of the Hopi, Navajo, and Australian Walpiri. In total, Hale ended up mastering 50 distinct languages.

The world of languages is fascinating, and there are many benefits to acquiring fluency in more than just one. In fact, there are more multilingual individuals in the world than there are monolinguals, as the United States is one of the few countries in the world that doesn't require learning a second language in school.

Learning new languages not only brings us closer to the rest of the world; it can also offer linguistic insights that might never be found in our native tongue. But if you want to learn a new language, it's best to start early. Studies show that the younger you are, the easier it is to pick up a new language.

Butterfly that mimics ants points to conservation clue

OSLO (Reuters)—A blue butterfly died out in Britain 30 years ago because of disruptions to a life cycle that includes pretending to be an ant, according to a recently published study that points to smarter ways to protect wildlife.

Research into the large blue butterfly—now successfully re-introduced to Britain from Sweden—hints at how governments can use science to achieve UN goals of slowing a loss of animal and plant species, scientists said.

For decades, overzealous human collectors were blamed for dwindling numbers of the large blue until scientists found that wrong-minded conservation had let grass grow taller and made soils unsuitable for the red ants that its caterpillars eat.

"We discovered that the butterfly was much more specialized than anyone had thought," said Jeremy Thomas of Oxford University who led a study with British colleagues published in the journal *Science*.

"It only took the grass growing 0.4 to 0.8 inch taller for the species of ant it relied upon to be replaced by another," he said. Longer grass means more shade and can make the soil 3.6 to 5.4 degrees Fahrenheit cooler.

"To human beings the change looks like absolutely nothing. But when you are on the scale of insects, it makes a huge difference to the microhabitats where they live," he said.

The butterfly, which vanished from Britain in 1979, lays its eggs on thyme flowers and the caterpillars fall to the ground after hatching. They secrete chemicals and even

make noises that make the red ants believe they are wayward grubs.

GOBBLE GRUBS

The ants then mistakenly carry the caterpillars to their underground homes and keep looking after them even though the adopted intruders gobble ant grubs for 10 months before forming a chrysalis and flying away as adult butterflies.

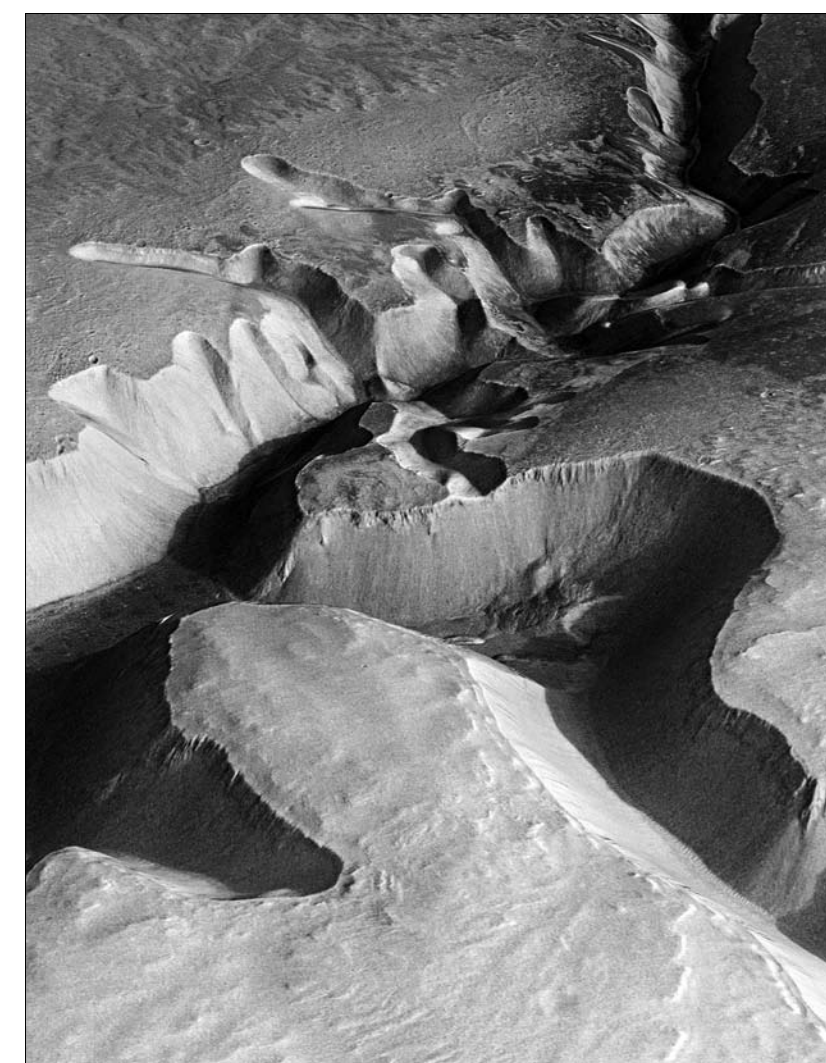
In 1931, for instance, conservationists bought and fenced off an area in England to keep out butterfly collectors. But the fence kept out animals—such as cows and sheep—that kept the grass short. Myxomatosis among rabbits also let grass grow in some areas in recent decades.

Thomas said renewed grazing helped both the butterflies and other wildlife such as the pearl-bordered fritillary butterfly, the woodlark bird, and the pale heath violet flower.

The recovery of the large blue showed that better research into habitats, at risk from expanding cities or climate change, was a key to better conservation.

"The project tackled problems typical of many temperate butterflies that were disappearing from apparently suitable sites, and provided insights for quicker, cheaper approaches," the scientists wrote. The large blue butterfly and its relatives were selected in 1974 as one of three big test cases for conservation.

The other two were Queen Alexandra's Birdwing of Papua New Guinea, the biggest butterfly in the world with a 1-foot wingspan, and the monarch butterfly of North America, which migrates in millions to Mexico.



SHORELINE: Scientists say they have evidence of a 30-mile-long canyon that indicates a former lake on the red planet. ESA VIA GETTY IMAGE



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Less Nutrition in Modern (Conventional) Veggies

"If you're still not buying the whole "organic-is-better" argument, this study might convince you otherwise. As Davis points out, more than three billion people around the world suffer from malnourishment and yet, ironically, efforts to increase food production have actually produced food that is less nourishing. Fruits seem to be less affected by genetic and environmental dilution, but one can't help but wonder how nutritionally bankrupt veggies can be avoided."

From The Skimmer, Time magazine



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Proof of Martian lake

WASHINGTON (Reuters)—A long, deep canyon and the remains of beaches are perhaps the clearest evidence yet of a standing lake on the surface of Mars—one that apparently contained water when the planet was supposed to have already dried up, scientists say.

Images from a camera called the High Resolution Imaging Science Experiment aboard the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter indicate water carved a 30-mile-long canyon, a team at the University of Colorado at Boulder reported.

It would have covered 80 square miles and been up to 1,500 feet deep, the researchers wrote in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*.

There is now no dispute that water exists on the surface of Mars—robot explorers have found ice. There is also evidence that water may still seep to the surface from underground, although it quickly disappears in the cold, thin atmosphere of the red planet.

Planetary scientists have also seen what could be the shores of giant rivers and seas, but some of the formations could also arguably have been made by dry landslides.

"This is the first unambiguous evidence of shore-

lines on the surface of Mars," said Gaetano Di Achille, who led the study.

"The identification of the shorelines and accompanying geological evidence allows us to calculate the size and volume of the lake, which appears to have formed about 3.4 billion years ago," Di Achille said in a statement.

Water is key to life and scientists are looking desperately for evidence of life, past or present, on Mars. Having water on the planet could also be useful to future human explorers.

"On Earth, deltas and lakes are excellent collectors and preservers of signs of past life," said Di Achille. "If life ever arose on Mars, deltas may be the key to unlocking Mars's biological past," Di Achille said.

"Not only does this research prove there was a long-lived lake system on Mars, but we can see that the lake formed after the warm, wet period is thought to have dissipated," assistant professor Brian Hynek said.

The lake probably either evaporated or froze over after abrupt climate change, the researchers said. Its waters would have turned into vapor. No one knows what turned Mars from a warm, wet planet into the frozen, airless desert it is now.