

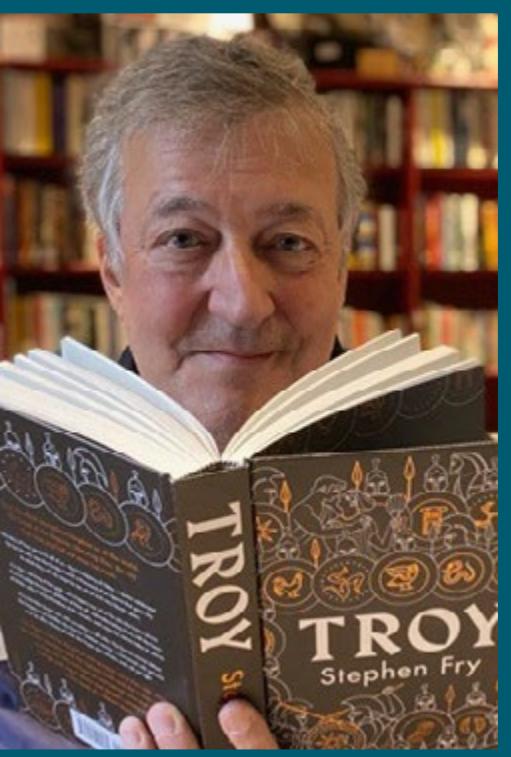
Where can **learning a language** take you?

We spoke to **Stephen Fry** about his passion for languages, and why he believes language learning is so important.



Please can you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about yourself?

My name is Stephen Fry and I'm 63 years old and an actor, writer, broadcaster sort of a person.



What is your profession or career?

I write books, act in films, plays and TV shows. I do stage performances and generally busy myself.

Can you tell us what the best aspect of your profession/career is?

Goodness. The satisfaction and fulfillment when it goes right is hard to overstate. There's a lot of (I hope invisible) slog and effort and disappointment along the way but when something you do is appreciated and admired well...

How and why did you get into your line of work?

Good fortune really. A student performer and writer,

what I did was picked up by broadcasters in Britain who asked me and my troupe to perform on television, and it just grew from there.

How many and what languages do you speak?

I am familiar with French, German, Spanish, Italian, Latin and a little Greek and Dutch.

When did you start learning languages and why?

At school like everybody else! I just clicked with Latin and Ancient Greek, and French and German followed. I was hopeless at Maths and science, but the structure and rhythm and sounds of other languages always appealed to me and seemed



natural. I had a special love of philology and etymology - I loved to see the patterns that connect different languages.

What are your favourite things about being able to speak a second (or multiple) language(s)?

The cultural insights, the rapport with native speakers of that language, the feeling that one can have a stronger bond with people as a result of speaking their language - and indeed asking them to help strengthen it. Most of us enjoy being asked by a non-native speaker if they are getting it right.

How has learning a language affected your life – both personally and professionally?

I've made friends from other countries, been able to visit those countries and not worry about getting lost!

“ Go for it! There's nothing to lose and everything to gain. ”

Were there any moments or events that inspired you and led you to learn a language?

When I fell in love with the operas of Mozart and Verdi, it really strengthened my desire to be more familiar with Italian, for example. Similarly, I wanted to read and understand Rilke, the German poet and the best way was to polish up my German a bit more.

Were there any people who inspired you to learn a language?

I was lucky to have good teachers and my parents, both German, enough to

intrigue me. When I was young, they would speak it sometimes if they didn't want me or my brother to understand. Nothing encourages learning a language more!

Were there any obstacles or factors that put you off learning a language at any point? If so, what where they?

I have always wanted to learn Russian, but I have been put off by the difficulty (especially of verbs of motion). Just lazy, but that's something I really regret.

What advice would you give to someone who is thinking about learning a language?

Go for it! There's nothing to lose and everything to gain.

What skills does someone need to be able to learn a language?

If you can speak your native tongue, you can speak any tongue. Unless there's a specific cognitive deficiency, anyone can learn a language. My grandfather spoke so many, but not French and he used to shake his head with disappointment in France if he saw children chattering in the street. "Look," he would say, "they are four years old and speak better French than me!" And that's what you

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How important do you think it'll be to learn an additional language in the future? Why or why not?

have to remember — if some Spanish or German child can speak the language, then I can too. Admittedly there is a 'language acquisition window' as linguists call it, during which languages and their structures are absorbed as easily as a suntan, but that doesn't mean one should put off when the window has closed. The brain can still do it.

What excites you the most about language learning?

The feeling of power and splendor when you get it right. It's like flying or swimming, it's an extra gift that enables you...

What do you think are some of the best tricks or practices to learn a new language and maintain your knowledge of it?

I like to pretend I'm a commentator, like a sports commentator, so you look out of the window and commentate on the birds, the traffic, the people walking by in the language of your choice. It's silly and fun.

Do you think learning another language is important? Why or why not?

It's like learning to drive or play a musical instrument. You don't absolutely need to drive or play to have a complete and happy life, but the extra quality, the richness and the capabilities are rich and rewarding.

“ The feeling of power and splendor when you get it right. It's like flying or swimming. ”

People always go on about Chinese and the reason is always a business one. Well, that is for some people of course a good enough reason, but really, I think it's wider than that. The more we understand each other the better we are likely to get along, the more likely we are to thrive and see each others' points of view. As the great linguist Chomsky puts it, 'the miracle of the world's languages, what an alien observing us would see, is not how different they all are one from the other, but how similar. They all come from the same place and they all solve the business of describing the world and sharing it, communicating it with others in very similar ways. They remind us not how different we are, but how alike.'



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