

TOURISM AND LANGUAGES. WHAT SHOULD A TOURIST KNOW AND WHAT CAN THEY EXPECT?

When traveling abroad, more often than not, one is confronted with the problem of language. Sure enough, a language may be shared by a few countries – thus an Ecuadorian traveling to Argentina will hardly have an issue; but more often than not, one’s native language will be spoken at their destination at best as a foreign language, at worst not at all.

So, what should a tourist know, as far as languages are concerned, and what could they expect when traveling abroad? In particular, which languages are useful where? How will the native speakers receive you when you try to talk to them in their language?

The following summarizes the author’s own conclusions, drawn from his trips to about 100 countries worldwide and his experience with communicating in eight or so languages.

Needless to say, the first language that comes to mind when one tries to think of a “universal” language is English. It is indeed the *lingua franca* of the modern world, and it would be hard to conduct any international activity on a serious scale without a working knowledge of English. The French might disagree with me here, but facts are stubborn things. True enough, it has not always been like that. For example, back in 1914, a letter from a bank in London to the city *uprava* (governing board) in Kiev was written in... French. Today, this would be unimaginable.

Hence, quite a few British and American tourists expect that “by default” everyone everywhere will speak their language. For better or for worse, that is a false expectation. English will certainly help you get by in many places and in many situations, but not everywhere and not always.

Countries where you will fare best with English – apart, of course, from the former British colonies where that language is official – are, in my own experience, the Scandinavian countries (including Iceland), Finland, and the Netherlands. In any of these countries the “Do you speak English?” opening phrase is pretty much unnecessary: you can just address the locals in English and be all but certain to get as good a reply as if you were in England itself. Close to that list comes Estonia (but there the age of your interlocutor matters: with younger people, you will most probably succeed with English, but with the older generation, try Russian first) as well as, somewhat unexpectedly, Poland (the same English vs Russian correlation with age takes place here, for the same reason).

In the rest of Western Europe, your chances with English are, generally, decent but not perfect. Many years ago in Germany, I addressed a shop assistant in English, only to hear a harsh reply: *Ich spreche kein Englisch!* Not as many years ago, on a visit to the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, I was somewhat surprised to meet a rather young archive worker who claimed to speak no English, either. One could characterize as “less-than-perfect” the average level of knowledge of English in Italy, Spain, and Portugal. That said: on the one hand, this average level seems to be increasing with time (aided by the mounting volume of travel, as well as by the Schengen agreement, which opened most of intra-European borders); on the other hand, despite what the *average* level may be, it matters very much *who* you try to speak to. A hotel manager is much more likely to speak English than a random passer-by.

In principle – all other things equal – the more widespread a country’s own language, the lower the chance that a random inhabitant of said country will be good at English. In that respect, the French once again deserve a special mention. Their jealousy towards English is proverbial – and it does have deep historic roots, dating back to the Napoleonic (and post-Napoleonic) times when French was to the world more or less what English is to it now, and deeper than that. So, the stereotype is that the French will typically refuse to speak English to you even if they know it. As far as my experience goes, this is little more than a stereotype. They *will* speak English to you – provided they *do* know it, which is, however, not a given. The chances that they do are higher in Paris than elsewhere in France. As a matter of fact, in Paris, waiters in cafés, formerly known as *garçons*, relatively often switch to English themselves when they hear my less-than-perfect French (although I don’t want them to – and, as a rule, I don’t follow suit!).

Which leads us to another interesting question. How do natives typically react to your attempts to speak their native language, be it English, French, or some other? To your grammatical mistakes? To your accent?

The answer is, of course, “it depends”.

The United States and France are (again, as far as my own experience goes) pretty much on the opposite ends of this scale.

In the United States, a country of immigrants and also one that puts pragmatism ahead of many other things, your less-than-ideal English or your accent is of concern to pretty much nobody. (True enough, there are no rules without exceptions. Many years ago, in a phone conversation, a customer service agent with a *strong* accent told me approximately this: *Ah can’t unde’stan’ ya, ’cause ya ’ave an accen’!* But those are indeed exceptions.) Not so in France. The already-mentioned attitude “it’s *our* language that rules, not English!” seems to also influence the French perception of foreigners who try to speak French. They typically don’t *encourage* you – rather, they will, explicitly or implicitly, make you aware that your French is less than ideal.

Which is all but the opposite of the Italians’ reaction; a couple of phrases in their language are quite likely to earn you a compliment along the lines of *Oh! Il suo italiano è benissimo! Come mai?* [Oh! Your Italian is excellent! How come?]. With the Germans, it is much less than likely that your interlocutor’s reaction will be as emotional as that, but I have found them to be quite patient and tolerant to (my own) mistakes in their language.

Now then, what other languages, except English, can be useful, and where?

The first seven European languages (I will not discuss Asian languages, which I am anything but an expert on), ordered by the estimated total number of speakers worldwide, are: English (1.35 bln), Spanish (543 mln), French (267 mln), Russian (258 mln), Portuguese (258 mln), German (135 mln), Italian (68 mln). Another interesting number is the ratio of non-native speakers to native ones, which gives us an idea how useful a language is outside its own domain. English, quite expectedly, takes the lead by this count as well, with 2.64 (that is, for every native speaker there are more than 2.5 people who know it as a second language), followed quite closely by French (2.35). The others trail far behind: German (0.76), Russian (0.68), Spanish (0.15), Portuguese (0.11), and Italian (0.048). Hence, in absolute terms, after English, the second most useful language is Spanish; but if you know that you *do not* know your interlocutor's native language, then, failing English, try French.

Which reminds me of the situation in Israel. I know no Hebrew whatsoever. So, before my first trip there, a friend gave me an interesting advice: "First, of course, try English. Failing that, just switch to Russian: you will not miss!" It has indeed worked out just like that – except for two occasions, when both English and Russian failed, and in both cases, French came to the rescue.

Spanish opens up many countries for you: Spain, most of Latin America (except Brazil, the Guyanas, and Suriname), the whole of Central America except Belize, the two largest Caribbean countries (Cuba and the Dominican Republic) – but, as the numbers above show, little else.

French, on the other hand, brings you not only France and Québec in Canada, but also a good portion of Africa, a few Caribbean islands like Martinique or (a half of) Saint Martin – and, as a special bonus for those who are courageous enough to go there, Haiti (the situation there is dreadful to say the least, but the people are helpful, as I have had a chance to see personally).

German, apart from Germany itself, Austria, and most of Switzerland, is somewhat useful in the parts of Europe that used to belong to the Austro-Hungarian Empire – in particular, Hungary: it is estimated that 16 to 20 % of the population speak English there, while 11 % speak German.

Russian is, obviously, (still) pretty much the *lingua franca* in the ex-USSR, and is also spoken by a share (decreasing with time) of the population in the former Soviet bloc countries. As of late, you can expect some primitive knowledge of it by the staff in popular tourist destinations such as Egypt or Turkey. It does not help that Russian, unlike all other above-mentioned languages, uses the Cyrillic script, and, worse still, that its grammar is *very* much more complicated than that of the others, making it respectively more difficult to study.

Portuguese, apart from Portugal and Brazil, is the official language in six African countries (Angola, Cape Verde, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and São Tomé and Príncipe); it is of little use outside of this set.

Italian, as per the above numbers, is all but useless outside of Italy (plus San Marino and Vatican City) and the Ticino canton in Switzerland. The few exceptions include the region of Istria, which is now shared between Croatia and Slovenia but which used to belong to Italy, and – as I have had a recent opportunity to discover first-hand – Albania, where a sizeable share of the population have had some work experience in Italy, and thus picked up the language.

Languages are useful. They help remove communication barriers and more. I will conclude with a proverb I am a strong believer of:

As many languages you know, as many times you are a human being!