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## The polyglot community: an interview with Richard Simcott, by Tita Beaven

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# 12 The polyglot community: an interview with Richard Simcott, by Tita Beaven

**Tita Beaven<sup>1</sup> and Richard Simcott<sup>2</sup>**

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The closing plenary session at the InnoConf17 conference was an informal interview that Tita Beaven conducted with Richard Simcott, which we reproduce here in an edited version.

**TB<sup>3</sup>:** So, Richard, you are a polyglot. What is that?

**RS<sup>4</sup>:** Well, I suppose polyglot will take you back to the Greek: ‘poly’ is a lot and ‘glot’ is languages or tongues. So, someone who speaks lots of languages. How many that is is up for debate and a lot of research.

**TB:** Ok, so we know what polyglot means, but what is a polyglot for you?

**RS:** I think for me a polyglot really is somebody who sets out intentionally to learn multiple languages, say more than maybe just your school language that you carry on studying because you like the culture or fall in love with it... I’m not sure whether to use the word serial, but a ‘serial language learner’. So, I guess it’s about doing something that you don’t necessarily need for your education, you don’t necessarily need for your work; you’re learning languages just because you want to...

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**TB:** But you did study languages yourself. Tell us a little bit about where it all started.

**RS:** I grew up in Chester, around the border of England and Wales, and so around me, there were lots of very interesting accents. I heard other languages around me; Welsh, Thai, because my stepmom is from Thailand, and I was studying languages at school, picking up books, and listening to kids speaking languages on holidays and so on. That's what sparked my interest. I was also studying languages in a formal environment at school and then at university. My university course at the University of Hull was a BA [Bachelor of Arts] programme in combined languages, and they allowed me to do French, Spanish, and Italian, with Portuguese as a subsidiary language. But then they said that if I wanted I could sit on another degree, so I started the Scandinavian studies degree as well, and did Icelandic and Swedish. And then decided I could also study languages by myself as well, so I am a bit of serial language learner!

**TB:** Okay, so you started learning languages formally and then you've carried on studying languages informally. What's the difference?

**RS:** The difference I think is that in formal language learning, at university, for instance, there are these criteria that you need to meet, and it can become a bit like a tick box exercise. Sometimes those box-ticking activities can diminish your motivation... But I do think it's really important for people to study in an academic way, to understand that language learning has to be rigorous to some degree, depending on what you want it for of course, but, when I was learning on my own, I could go off and do my own thing and meander through the languages and pick up as much or as little as I wanted, and I wasn't constrained by these box-ticking activities that I had at university. But I enjoyed both...

**TB:** And can I ask you then, how do you use your languages now, especially at work?

**RS:** I work for a social media management agency called the Social Element. I am their languages director, so I give advice on multilingual projects for our

clients who have projects for their various campaigns and products on social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.). I am responsible for quality assurance. So, when we are producing materials in different languages for a specific campaign, I am the point of reference in the company to check the material and to understand the feedback from clients. I also project manage, working out how to use our teams and our resources to the best of our abilities.

**TB:** And I know that you also use languages at home, so tell us about the languages you use in that context.

**RS:** I am married to a Macedonian and we live now in the Republic of Macedonia, in the capital, Skopje. At home, my wife and I only speak Macedonian amongst us. My daughter is ten, and she speaks Macedonian and English. She was born in the UK and I spoke to her in French from birth, so she also speaks French; she did her nursery school in French and now she studies in English at school, where she also does French and Macedonian as her first languages. From the age of 16 months I also introduced Spanish and German. So, she has five home languages, which are the languages we use at home on a daily basis, and then she also understands some others like Bulgarian, Serbian, and Italian.

**TB:** How do you manage? For those of us who are from bilingual families, bringing up a kid bilingually is hard enough, so how do you manage five languages?

**RS:** Good time management is all I can say! It was quite easy to do French and English from birth because she couldn't say anything back, so I just said the same thing twice in the two languages. So, if I sang a lullaby in French, then I'd sing either a similar one or the same one in English and vice versa. I was able to really give her exactly equal doses of both languages until she could speak. Because we were living in the UK at the time, I then switched to only speaking French with her because her input from outside groups and other family members and friends was English, so I could switch quite comfortably to just French at home to make it a lot easier. My wife just spoke Macedonian to her, and my wife and I spoke Macedonian to each other. Until she was three, my daughter only spoke

to me in Macedonian – she would say bits and bobs in other languages, but she would use Macedonian mostly. I think it's because she thought that: 'as mum speaks to dad in that language, I speak to dad in that language'.

And there was a turning point at that age where we thought that she was doing so well with the three languages... She was saying three-word sentences by the age one, so doing well compared to a monolingual child. Therefore we decided that maybe she was able to pick up languages easily and we decided to introduce another language, but we couldn't decide between German or Spanish. I spent time playing with her every day and I decided to just use both. I would play with her for an hour in German and an hour in Spanish, and she seemed to like them both and pick them both up. And within a couple of months she was using words and preferring words in those languages over the other three, so we just carried on with both till this day.

**TB:** And she's happy to do it? She hasn't rebelled?

**RS:** No, she hasn't. She did say to me once when she was three: 'Daddy, why do you speak to me in Spanish?' And I said: 'Because a lot of people don't know how to speak in Spanish. When you go to school when you are older, you'll probably have to study Spanish anyway, and this way you're going to know more than the other kids and you'll have a head start'. And she just said: 'Clever Daddy!'.

**TB:** Indeed! But going back to the polyglot community, how did that start?

**RS:** Well, like probably many people here, when you are growing up, you like languages and you don't really have anyone to communicate that ambition, love, and drive with and I felt the same way, and all the way through school and even at university, I expected to find people like me, but I really found very few people who actually had the same real passion that I have for languages. As I got a bit older and the internet started developing and people started speaking in online forums, I got involved in a few online forums. There was one called 'How to learn any language' or something like that, and I was on that forum for a couple

of years, about ten years ago. I noticed that more and more people were joining, and I made a video on YouTube speaking in 16 of the languages I'd studied at that point. They were at different levels because I wanted to show that there's some I spoke really well and others not so fluently. My idea was to reach out to like-minded people and also to show other people in the world who are in the same position that I was that they are not alone; and it's kind of a party trick... everyone who knew me in real life always wanted me to do this party trick. They would wheel me in and say: 'This is the one who speaks all these languages! Go on, say something in every language!'. So, I thought this video would serve all of these purposes in one go. I made the video and from there, I started meeting people who shared this passion. I started making real connections with real-life people, and we started meeting in person, even in one-on-one situations. One summer in Poland, I was talking to one of my friends and a few people noticed me on the streets, and they approached me because they had seen my videos; and that got me thinking...

So, that's how the idea of putting together a polyglot conference came about. The name of the Polyglot Conference came out of the fact that there was beginning to be a polyglot community online. I decided that the scope of the polyglot conference was going to be to unite academia with people working in languages from very different circles: translation, teaching, business, anything, and then just language learners who love languages and to bring them all together under one roof.

I wanted the expertise from the academic world because the injection of that knowledge is super important to feed the conference, and I also wanted to generate conversations and to get people asking questions and to see how the practicalities of academic work and academic research can be used in other fields that maybe we've not even thought about before, and that cross-pollination I saw is very, very important. For the first Polyglot Conference I picked Budapest for a couple of reasons: one was that it was a homage to Kató Lomb, a famous Hungarian polyglot. The second reason was a bit of an ironic one, as very few people learn Hungarian as a foreign language. So, in 2013, I rented a theatre in the center of Budapest and managed to get

140 people there over a weekend. I was on stage for 20 hours introducing all of these people I'd met from all corners of the globe... they came from America, all over Europe, Asia, you name it!

From there, actually, quite a lot of things happened. People who had been talking online got together in real life, and quite a few things were born out of it. One was the Polyglot Gathering, which is another event. Judith Meyer, a woman I had met on the polyglot forums online, came up to me and said: 'do you mind me doing something similar to this in Berlin next year? An event more laid back, inspired by the events run by the Esperanto community, where people can get together and talk about language learning and practise their languages?'. So the Polyglot Gathering grew out of the Polyglot Conference; it started in 2014 and has been taking place every year since. Then the Add1Challenge grew out from one of the presentations at the conference. The Add1Challenge is basically an online community where people set to learn a language for three months, and they make videos and document their learning as they go, using iTalki tutors, using course books... and they may be studying the language in a formal context as well. They document their progression in the language and it serves as motivation for them. All these great things came out of that initial meeting in Budapest. Benny Lewis, another well-known polyglot, came and presented at the conference, and he's now written some Teach Yourself courses... Some really interesting things just came out of this first conference, and we are now planning the fifth Polyglot Conference in Reykjavik. So we went from Budapest, where we had 140 attendees to, Novi Sad, where we've worked with the Serbian government, who liked the idea of the conference and supported us, where we had 240 attendees. The next event was in New York, where 420 people came to Manhattan. Now we're able to get sponsorship and interest, so in Greece, in 2016, it was just absolutely out of this world: roughly 450 people came to the conference. And this year it's in Iceland<sup>5</sup>. Every year, we celebrate the local languages and the local cultures. Every year we also try to find a theme, so in Reykjavik, one of the themes is autism and multilingualism. There is a lot of interesting research into the

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5. The Polyglot Conference in Reykjavik took place in October 2017, and attracted 400 attendees. The next Polyglot Conference will take place in October 2018 in Ljubljana.

autistic spectrum and language learning. We've noticed in the community a lot of people identify on that spectrum and are very accomplished language learners, so we wanted to salute that. Another theme of the conference was how technology can support minority languages.

**TB:** These events, both the conference and the gathering, are really interesting because they bring together language learners, rather than language teachers. I think the language learning and teaching landscape in the UK can be a bit grim, and yet these polyglot events are incredibly vibrant, they attract a lot of young learners who are passionate about languages. One of the things that I find refreshing and stimulating about the polyglot events is that, as a language teacher, it is great to be surrounded by expert language learners and it's like turning the tables on what we normally do. It's normally the expert teachers who tell the students what to learn and how to learn it, and this is the other way around. And it's fascinating in terms of the relationship between formal and informal learning. From your experience, what do you think these expert language learners can teach expert language teachers?

**RS:** I think that one of the key messages is that there are many different methods and there's not one magic pill that anyone can take to learn a language. I think that's one of the misconceptions. And also that the level of confidence of people signing up to learn languages is really low. You hear so often just in daily speech 'I'm terrible at learning languages, I can't learn languages, I always fail' ... And of course it's not true, we know it's not true! It's just the lack of confidence and it's possibly because they haven't found the right way of learning a language for them, and the right things that stimulate and motivate them. These are the kinds of things that we hear at the conferences and at the gatherings. All these things are really helping to promote language learning to ordinary people, to really get that message to as many people as possible. I think that's the real key thing. Although the conference and the gathering grew from the polyglot community, they are for anyone interested in languages. There are people who are learning their first language and they come to one of these events that they say: 'Oh, I also want to learn this one now, and this one, and this one too'. They go and they come back energised and enthused.



**TB:** Yes, I've found it is an amazingly welcoming community. It's really not about counting how many languages someone speaks, it's about sharing the fun and the love and the enjoyment of learning languages. The other thing I was going to ask you is that technology has played a central part in all of this, making all of this possible, from you posting your first video online to what the polyglot community has grown into; so how do polyglots use technology?

**RS:** All the time and every day! So, for instance, Skype and talking to teachers in different countries has become just an integral part of the daily or weekly routine of most people in the language community online. I certainly use it for any language projects, whether it's a short-term or a long-term language project I'm involved in. Because I'm living in the centre of Skopje, I don't hear that many Norwegians around me... So, when I was studying Norwegian, I found somebody to speak with online, and just met up regularly for a chat. There are also lots of people interacting together on social media, on Facebook groups, and on Twitter... But there are also lots of language apps, so you see more and more people signing up for Duolingo, Memrise, Babbel and the like, and using also the more interactive elements to well-known publishers such as Teach Yourself or Assimil...

**TB:** What about language exchanges? It is something we use a lot in formal contexts at university, but a lot of polyglots also do them regularly. Is it something that you use yourself, and what makes a good language exchange?

**RS:** Yes, and it works really well when you find someone you can really get on with. The same goes for teachers online. For instance, last year I was studying Greek and I found a great Greek teacher. We got on really well and I ended up going to his wedding in January with the whole family. I think when you meet somebody online and the chemistry's right, it works really well. Sometimes you need to go through a couple of people and find someone you gel with. What I find is having a clear idea in your head of what you want to achieve in the language is really important. It's good for the teacher to have a plan and to be structured if that's what you need. For example, I was learning Norwegian for a couple of months and my teacher said that as I already spoke Swedish

and I could already understand her, we could just go straight to listening to podcasts and chat about them. And I said: 'You know what? No, I don't want to do that. I want to start from the beginning and make sure I've got all the basic vocabulary', because that's where the differences tend to be in some of these similar languages. I just took the Teach Yourself Norwegian book and went through each chapter with my teacher. So I would tell her what happened in the dialogue of the chapter, and tell her how that was relevant to my life. I changed the examples so it fitted with me, so I could talk about my life. It is important to be able to talk about what is relevant to your own life, because that's what you're going to use and I think when learners understand what language they need to have and what language is appropriate for their lives, that's when they get that buzz, that feeling, and that endorphin rush and think: 'Oh! This is actually useful! It's not just me learning random words and vocabulary that I can only use in obscure situations'. It also applies to students who are going on an Erasmus exchange, for instance. If you are going to spend some time in France, or in China, or whatever, what language do you need to learn that is going to be relevant to that setting?

**TB:** So it is important to make your learning relevant?

**RS:** Yes, make it personal.

**TB:** And take control... Speaking of the year abroad, the Erasmus programme is celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. I remember when I went on my year abroad 30 years ago, we just went and that was that. Maybe once a month or so we would phone home, but we had no contact to speak of with our friends back home. Now, this has completely changed of course...

**RS:** I had the same experience as you. I went away and I was off the radar. I wasn't really in touch with anyone back home, I had to make new friends, and go out and do things that normal people do. Nowadays, it's quite different. I was working with a student who's just graduated from Cambridge and he was abroad in Germany, but he was getting these cheap flights every other weekend, going back home or going to see friends in other countries on their Erasmus

exchange programmes. When I did my year abroad, for me to get home was really expensive back then, and even to call home was really expensive also.

Now you've got the internet, you've got Whatsapp, you've got all of these great things on your mobile phone and you can just be talking to someone anywhere else in the world. That was unthinkable then, and I do wonder how much people who go on a year abroad can immerse themselves in their target language and culture.

**TB:** So in fact, all those apps and resources that help language learners immerse themselves in the language and the culture they are studying also work the other way, and prevent students on their year abroad from fully immersing in the language and culture of the country they are visiting, because they are able to keep in touch so easily with their friends back home, and with TV, the news, and so on, online. One final question, Richard. How do you pick what language to study next?

**RS:** They pick me! Normally, if I've got plans to go somewhere then I might take on a language project: last year I went to the Polyglot Gathering in Bratislava, so I took on Slovak. I did this Slovak language challenge and gave a presentation in Slovak, which is a lot of fun. I'm going to Indonesia on Sunday for a month, so I'm learning Indonesian.

**TB:** Well, good luck with that, and thank you very much for sharing some of your knowledge and expertise with us.

**RS:** Thank you!



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**Innovative language teaching and learning at university:  
integrating informal learning into formal language education**

**Edited by Fernando Rosell-Aguilar, Tita Beaven, and Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez**

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