

What's the Most Difficult Language?

As a linguist, a common question I often get asked is, “Which language is the most difficult?” There are five answers to this question!

The first answer is that the most difficult languages are those most different from your mother tongue. English and Japanese are very different, so English can seem difficult for Japanese speakers. In contrast, English and German are quite similar, so Germans can learn English relatively easily.

The second answer is that the most difficult languages are those with a complex linguistic structure. Russian, for example, has complicated grammar with complex nouns, word endings and sound combinations. In contrast, Swahili has a relatively simple structure, which is easier to learn.

The third answer is that all languages are equally difficult. They just hide their difficulties in different places. Russian keeps its difficulties in its grammar. Japanese hides its difficulties in its writing system and honorifics. All languages are difficult. They're just difficult in different ways.

The fourth answer is that all languages are equally easy. Here's why. Imagine that an Arab family raises a baby. If we visit her ten years later, she'll speak fluent Arabic. If a Chinese family raises her, then after ten years she'll speak fluent Chinese. It doesn't matter where she grows up. In each case, she'll learn to speak fluently in the same amount of time. For babies, all languages are equally easy!

The final answer is that languages – like other things – are easy if you love them. If you love mountain climbing, you climb mountains because you enjoy the challenges. In the same way, if you love languages, then studying them is a joy and you enjoy the difficulties.

What can we learn from this? First, that some questions have multiple answers. Second, that if you love languages, they can be easy. Motivation is everything!