



Speaking other tongues opens important doors



**Laurie
Bauer**

**WATCH YOUR
LANGUAGE**

I HAVE just returned from a brief visit to Vienna, where I attended a professional conference.

Vienna was once the centre of an enormous empire, and is still a major trade and cultural centre for a large part of central Europe.

On the streets of Vienna and in the trams, you can hear German, English, French, Italian, Polish, and Hungarian, at times shouted loudly into mobile phones.

Prague is several hours away to the north, but lies slightly west of Vienna. Budapest is closer, but in the opposite direction, and there is an hourly train service to Bratislava.

When the conference was over, a group of delegates retired to a nearby bar for lunch. On my right, the conversation was being held in French. There were some native French speakers there, but also an Austrian and a Slovak. On my left, the conversation was being held in Italian. A Czech and a Frenchman made up part of that group. Sometimes the conversation switched to English or German.

When the waitress came to take our orders, everyone spoke German to her, except for one person, who clearly could not. He spoke English to her, and she understood perfectly well. The casual multilingualism on an individual level was striking.

In an earlier conversation to which I had been party during the conference, someone had commented on the way the rhetoric surrounding the European Union is changing in some of the countries involved.

While in a few countries, the Europeans are still "them", it was claimed, in more and more countries the Europeans are "us".

The co-operation can be seen in the way the politics of the economic crisis are being dealt with. The multilingualism that goes with that predates the new feeling of togetherness, and is an important part of the perception of a European unity.

The Swiss have been trained in school to be bilingual or trilingual for many years.

The Dutch have long realised that if they want to trade beyond the boundaries of their own country, they will need to speak foreign languages well. I heard Dutch speakers at this same conference who could have been mistaken for Britons, so good was their English. At the same time, the Dutch seemed quite at home speaking German with our hosts.

Even the French and Spanish, traditionally recognised as monoglots in Europe, are thawing in their attitudes.

Parisian waiters, once so good at the linguistic put-down, now readily speak English to visitors.

At a time, then, when multilingualism is increasingly the norm in Europe, it is disturbing to find that in New Zealand, learning foreign languages in schools is in decline.

Research done a few years ago at Victoria University shows this clearly to be the case.

The New Zealand attitude to business overseas seems to be that if we want to get involved in trade with Germany, we will hire a

German to do the talking, and similarly for any other country.

AT SOME level, that will work, but for a really good transfer of information, nothing beats face-to-face meetings between the principals involved, and being able to talk with someone in their language makes an immensely positive impression.

The business schools in Europe know this. Centres like Copenhagen and Vienna have huge language programmes attached to their business schools, whereas in New Zealand, such factors are ignored.

Undoubtedly, contracts are being lost because New Zealanders cannot speak the language of the other party in some negotiations.

So after this trip to Babel, it was something of a shock to return to a rather monolingual New Zealand. At Auckland Airport, it was announced that "Air New Zealand wishes to apologise for the delay of boarding this service". Of?

What happened to "in"? Is this some new piece of local dialect like "bored of something" (people used to be bored with things, not of them), a momentary lapse, or are the scripts for the people who make public announcements now being produced by non-native speakers of English?

Laurie Bauer is a linguist from Victoria University.





Taken for granted: Casual multilingualism is the rule In Vienna's bars and cafes.

Photo: REUTERS