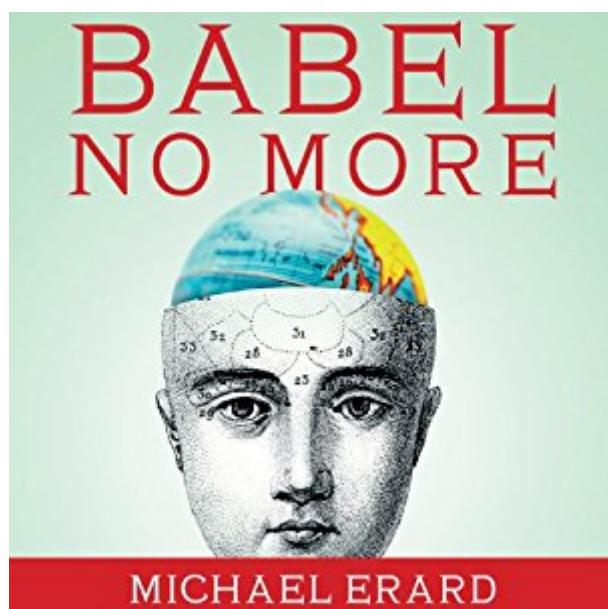The book was found

Babel No More: The Search For The World's Most Extraordinary Language Learners

Synopsis

A "fascinating" (The Economist) dive into the world of linguistics that is "part travelogue, part science lesson, part intellectual investigation...an entertaining, informative survey of some of the most fascinating polyglots of our time" (The New York Times Book Review). We all learn at least one language as children. But what does it take to learn six languages...or seventy? In Babel No More, Michael Erard, "a monolingual with benefits," sets out on a quest to meet language superlearners and make sense of their mental powers. On the way he uncovers the secrets of historical figures like Italian cardinal Giuseppe Mezzofanti, who was said to speak seventy-two languages; Emil Krebs, a pugnacious German diplomat, who spoke sixty-eight languages; and Lomb Kat, a Hungarian who taught herself Russian by reading Russian romance novels. On his way to tracking down the man who could be called the most linguistically talented person in the world, Erard meets modern language-superlearners. Among them is Alexander, who shows Erard the tricks of the trade and gives him a dark glimpse into the life of obsessive language acquisition. "Others do yoga," writes Erard. "Alexander does grammatical exercises." With his ambitious examination of what language is, where it lives in the brain, and the cultural implications of polyglots' pursuits, Erard explores the upper limits of our ability to learn and to use languages, illuminating the intellectual potential in everyone. How do some people escape the curse of Babel - and what might the gods have demanded of them in return?

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Erard's book "Babel No More" is about hyperpolyglots, defined arbitrarily by the author as anyone

knowing six or more languages. Many characters appear along the way. For example, Cardinal Mezzofanti, a 19th Century Italian Prelate who knew dozens of lanaguages, to modern day South Indians who use multiple tongues on a daily basis, to modern Europeans who have apparently learned numerous languages.Babel No More is original, being the first book I have found that deals with hyperpolyglots as individuals, how people can master many languages, how the brains of hyperpolyglots are different from others and several other related topics. Of course, numerous books have dealt with each of the covered topics in far more detail, but Erard brought them all together in a book accessible to the lay reader.It was clear from early on that the book would have benefitted from more work and research by Erard. The book starts off with the author at a library in Bologna, Italy, doing research on Mezzofanti. Erard then makes clear that he doesn't know Italian or much of anything about most of the languages he sees in Mezzofanti's archives. I'm less than clear about how much the author hoped to gain by conducting archival research on materials in languages he didn't know, and even worse, that he didn't try to get translated. He comes across materials in native American languages and rather than trying to determine what level of linguistic competence Mezzofanti was demonstrating in them (such as by contacting an Algonquin scholar), Erard just moves on. Later, he describes the polyglot Emil Krebs as having learned "Altarmenisch." The word is German for Classical Armenian, which Erard could have easily found with a few seconds worth of research. Yet he leaves the word "Altarmenisch" in, leaving the reader to wonder where in the world it is (or was) spoken.Erard went to South India and discusses the situation there with people being multilingual. But beyond describing the "Sprachbund" there and the similar grammatical features among the languages, Erard does not get into any serious discussion about the mechanics of how people there learn multiple languages. He briefly discusses other places where hyperpolyglots exist (e.g. parts of Africa and South America) where people tend to know many languages, but again, the processes involved in learning them aren't addressed. The book is rather Western-centric.Erard also seemed unable or unwilling to take a firm stance on what level of linguistic competence would count as "knowing" a language and then judge how many languages a person knew. Many such criteria are discussed, and people's linguistic competency described, but never does Erard state unequivocally that pursuant to a set of criteria, e.g. EU or US government linguist ratings, X speaks more languages than anyone else. The author could have tried to have native speakers of languages test some of the present day hyperpolyglots to reach his own conclusions on how good they are, and to determine just how many languages a person can truly master.While the book could have earned a fifth star from me with more research and effort by Erard, I still enjoyed reading the book and recommend it for anyone who is an aspiring

hyperpolyglot, loves learning languages, or is generally interested in linguistics.

Michael Erard sets himself the goal to untangle the myths, history, and science surrounding what he calls the hyper-polyglots. Mr. Erard defines the hyper-polyglot as a person who can speak (or can use in reading, writing, or translating) at least eleven languages (p. 12). The author initially chose Dick Hudson's definition of the hyper-polyglot, i.e., a person who can speak (or can use in reading, writing, or translating) six or more languages. Mr. Hudson, a British linguist, has found that community-based multilingualism, where people, not just special individuals, speak many languages, has a ceiling of five languages (pp. 12; 23-24; 47; 68; 104; 189).Unfortunately, Mr. Erard's prose wanders too aimlessly. The author summarizes his findings about hyper-polyglottery in eight recommendations that he articulates in chapter 19 (pp. 260-265). As a multilingual native originally from Belgium, I did not find all these recommendations practical. Think for example about the next three recommendations:1. "If you want to improve at languages, you should manage your dopamine."2. "If you want to promote brain plasticity, you should find flow."3. "If you want to improve at languages, you should build executive function and working memory skills."(American) readers will have to look elsewhere in Mr. Erard's book to figure out what it takes to become a bilingual, multilingual, polyglot ... or a hyper-polyglot.1. Language learning is not easy and takes hard work, pushing (successful) language learners to use their time efficiently (pp. 115; 141; 268-269).2. What makes someone a successful language learner is interest driven by motivation, perseverance, and diligence. Instant gratification has no place in this equation (pp. 84; 103; 122; 142; 163; 180; 241).3. Efficient language learners do not feel embarrassed with their accent, body language, intonation, and pitch. Otherwise, they would be blocked from the start from achieving much (p. 238).4. The three pillars of language learning are concentration, repetition, and practice (p. 100).5. One learns grammar from language, not language from grammar (p. 103).6. The way most people usually learn a language, in a traditional classroom, does not provide a conducive setting for language acquisition. Infants do not learn their native language in this way (pp. 86; 100; 128).7. Multilingualism is about context and need, and those together engender a cultural confidence about learning languages that is hard to replicate (pp. 18; 204-206; 210; 251).8. Hard work is not solely central to success. Some people really have a predisposition for learning languages or are better equipped than other people (pp. 8; 14; 33; 134; 137; 139; 151; 160; 164; 168-169; 209; 212; 220-221; 232; 234; 239; 243; 252; 255).9. Brain, culture, and individual biography interact with each other to produce a hyper-polyglot (p. 242).10. Being intelligible and clear is more important in language learning than being "native." Furthermore, speaking like a native is not as important for

English, the world's current lingua franca, as for less widespread languages. Even English native speakers will have to tolerate and learn that English can be spoken and written in many ways (pp. 123; 180-181; 211; 251; 261).11. Cultural blindness, social inertia, and political inaction stand in the way of language learning in a country like the U.S. Once monolingualism is the genome of a culture, it is hard to breed out. Interacting with native speakers of the target language is key to overcoming these obstacles (pp. 18; 72; 206; 261).As a side note, learning at least another language is apparently not without some health benefits. It may protect people from the effects of cognitive aging (p. 140).In summary, Mr. Erard could have done a better job in showing the respective roles of nature and nurture in the language learning process.

I picked this up because I'm working on becoming bilingual, and was intrigued by the title and topic. The author is on a search to diagnose polyglots and draw conclusions about the nature of them. The book has interesting parts describing, unearthing, and in some cases exposing overstated claims of multiple languages mastery. The journey has its moments, but bogs down, especially in the latter part of the book. To his credit the author approaches his investigation in an academic way, but that may cause the casual reader to lose interest as the book progresses. At first I felt I was gaining useful insight, but ultimately I'm not sure I should have invested the time.

I had to laugh when I finally finished this book. It is definitely an interesting read about the author's search for polyglots. However, what I suspected is true! I have studied a bunch of languages and I can tell you that you don't just absorb it by putting the book under your pillow at night, or listening for a thousand hours to the TV. You have to learn the words and you have to learn some grammar. Sure, the brain will do a lot of the work subconsciously for you, but there is effort involved, nevertheless. Read the last chapter! The dude found a box full of little flashcards that the linguist used to memorize words, lol!! I loved it. GREAT book. Great stories. Well worth the money and the time!

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