

# MENSA<sup>®</sup> | BULLETIN

The Magazine of American Mensa



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Hurricane Milton left this Anna Maria, Fla., home in ruins in 2024, another verse in what Chris Marek calls “That Old Hurricane Refrain” on [page 34](#).

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For a hyperpolyglot, belonging is everywhere and nowhere, found in the spaces between words.

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# Taking Action



BY JON GRUEBELE, AMERICAN MENSA CHAIR

IN MY FIRST *Mensa Bulletin* article two months ago, I listed three major goals:

- **Learn and improve** by reflecting on the challenges this year brought and making changes.
- **Listen and empower**, seeking constructive feedback to gather and prioritize ideas.
- **Refocus on our strategy** to increase membership, provide better value to members, and find money somewhere besides dues.

We're already taking initial steps. First Vice Chair Tabby Vos and Bylaws Committee Chair Dan Burg have reviewed at least two dozen Bylaws proposals that could be brought to the membership for approval. To get more member feedback before initiatives are brought to a vote, Tabby is managing a new Mensa Connect Community, "Bylaw and Order."

The first post there was about a draft proposal regarding the confidentiality of hearings. It has received considerable feedback already. Discussions will continue about various proposals, including any suggested by members. We encourage members to join the Community and contribute to the conversation. Among other topics, we also expect discussions about elections and any requirements imposed by New York law or Mensa International.

We are renewing our focus on membership. If we continue to do all the same things, we can only expect the same results: a 1.3 percent annualized membership drop since our peak in 2010. Our Executive Director, Tamesha Logan, is working with National Office staff and member volunteers to reinvigorate our efforts. Part of that will no doubt require improving our digital presence.

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In other news, the AMC was delighted to announce the appointment of Erin Risch as Regional Coordinator 2. She was recommended by the LocSecs of Region 2 to replace Henri Fishkind, who had been appointed as Second Vice Chair.

American Mensa remains engaged with Mensa International. Our annual International Board of Directors meeting is in October, where Mensa leaders from across the globe decide policies that affect us all. Currently, 7% of our dues revenues go to Mensa International to support a very small staff, our Direct International Members, and activities of Mensa organizations worldwide — particularly those that are still working to achieve Provisional or Full National Mensa status.

Finally, the special election for RVCs is proceeding, and I encourage you to review the candidates' qualifications and participate in voting starting in November. The winners will help determine our future direction, so your choice is important.

As always, this is your organization, so your views matter. Please feel free to email me or any AMC member with your comments. ✉

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# MENSA BULLETIN

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Mensa is an international society in which the sole requirement for qualification for membership is a score at or above the 98th percentile on any of a number of standardized intelligence tests. Mensa is a not-for-profit organization whose main purpose is to serve as a means of communication and assembly for its members.

Mensa's purposes are to identify and foster human intelligence for the benefit of humanity; to encourage research in the nature, characteristics, and uses of intelligence; and to provide a stimulating intellectual and social environment for its members.



# Fluent in CONNECTION

Inside the mind of a **hyperpolyglot**,  
where language is lived not learned

By Karen Landmann | Illustrated by Cherie Fruehan

A few years ago, when MIT sought participants for a study of hyperpolyglots, I wasn't sure if I belonged. The call was for anyone who spoke six or more languages fluently. I listed 51 I knew to some degree — Spanish, French, and Russian near native level; German, Dutch, Portuguese, Swedish, and Italian for deep conversation; Wolof, Zulu, Sranan Tongo, Japanese, Mandarin, and more in smaller pieces. It looked like an impossible catalog when I wrote it out, and yet it was my normal.

They invited me to Cambridge. At MIT, the process was clinical: an interview about my languages, then time in the fMRI machine. I lay there listening as *Alice in Wonderland* unfurled in a medley of voices, some languages I spoke well, others I barely recognized, still more I had no knowledge of — all interspersed with nonsensical excerpts rooted in various tongues. I tried to relax, but my brain doesn't idle. Even with the gibberish, I found myself straining for patterns, savoring the mechanics as much as the essence, trying to decode rhythm from chaos.

Later came the surprise: The scans showed that almost every language illuminated my brain's verbal processing area. But English, native to me, hardly registered. Hyperpolyglots' first language is so efficient that it doesn't require

much energy, the researchers explained. My brain saves its effort for others. It was a scientific confirmation of what I had felt all my life — that language flowed through me differently. I inhabit it rather than standing outside trying to master it.

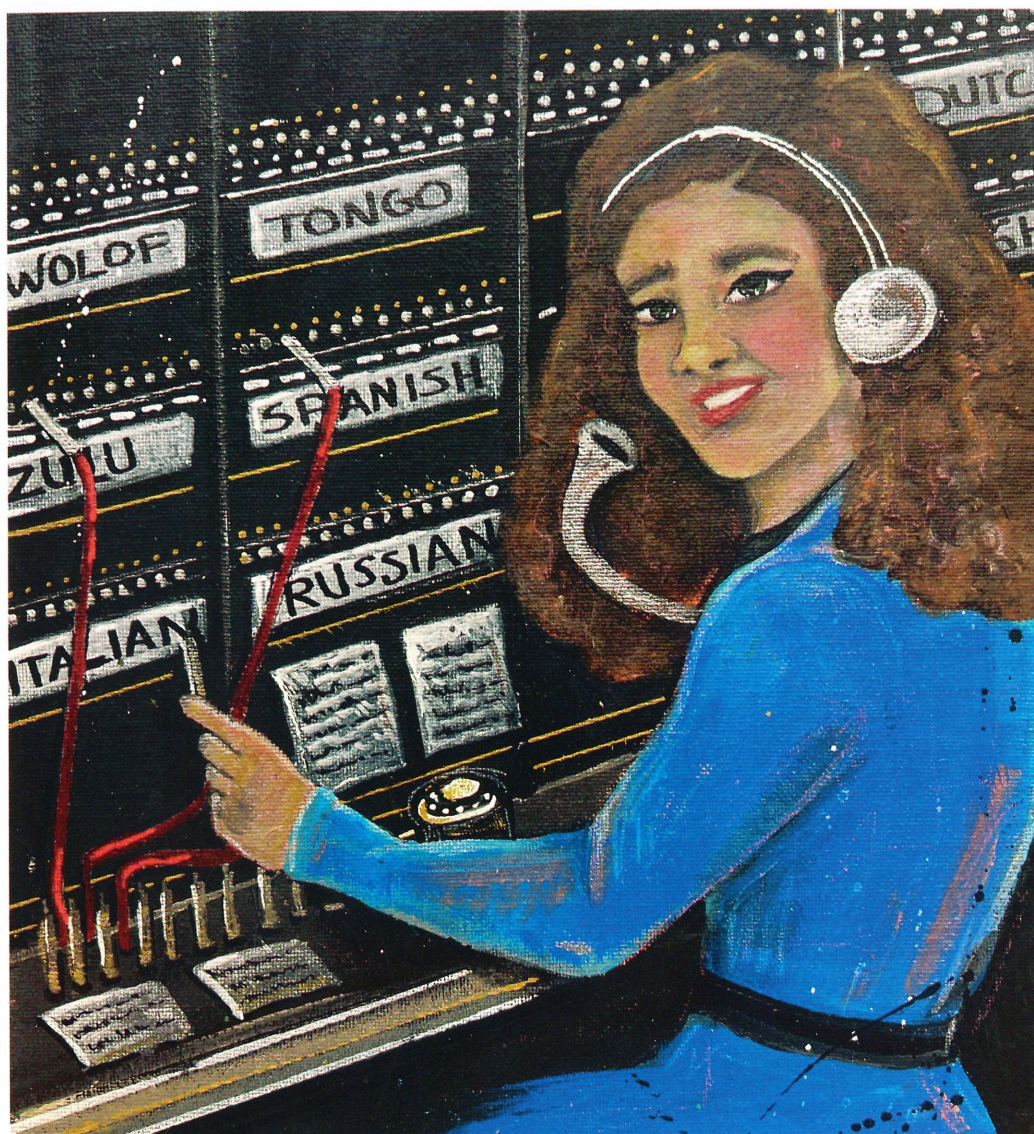
On Aug. 1, 2024, I joined the International Association of Hyperpolyglots, known as HYPIA, a global network of people fluent in at least six languages. I had been watching from the sidelines for some time, hesitant to apply. Membership required essays and videos, reviewed by the founders. Before sending mine, I attended one of HYPIA's online "Grande Fête" gatherings — a five-hour marathon where members swapped stories and flitted through dialects with ease. It was both exhilarating and intimidating. I admired the sheer devotion many members had to the logistics of language: tracking word counts, diagramming grammar, juggling mnemonics. I recognized myself in that joy — and also in the desire for something more. I went home and finally recorded myself in English, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, Portuguese, Swedish, Russian, Japanese, Norwegian, even Sranan Tongo.

I expected weeks of silence. Instead, I was admitted within hours. That evening, my phone erupted in a storm of linguistic input: greetings in German from Brazil, Spanish from Moscow, Portuguese from Sri Lanka, Russian from Nigeria. I was overwhelmed and, for the first time, not alone.

MIT gave me scientific validation. HYPIA gave me human recognition. But neither was the inception. Long before a scanner traced the contours of my brain, or a global network welcomed me in a dozen tongues at once, I had already learned that language was more than grammar or vocabulary. I love the systemization — the puzzle of conjugations, the elegance of syntax, the history embedded in a word. That exuberance has never left me. But what those forms make possible is what matters most: community and connection. Language is form itself but also a link, a way to think with facility. It shows me how to exist in an alternate fashion. This story is not about languages as trophies. Rather it describes the trestles they build between cultures, strangers, and sometimes even parts of myself.

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## The World Speaks Back to Me

I was born in Canada, a country that had just declared itself officially bilingual under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. When I was 5 and living in Toronto, my parents took a sabbatical to Guanajuato, Mexico. We settled in a hilly neighborhood called Marfil, where houses spilled down the slopes in bright patchwork colors. I went to a local kindergarten, played marbles and dice with my friend Concha after school. I chattered away in Spanish like any other child.

One day my father overheard me say *Me gusta*. Later he told my mother, "That doesn't literally mean 'I like it.' It means 'It pleases me.'" He was struck that I had already internalized that Spanish doesn't map one-to-one with English, instead following its own rhythm and logic. I had absorbed that not from drills or lessons but from living Spanish.

When we returned to Canada, I skipped first grade. I already knew how to read, thanks to Spanish immersion. I entered second grade just as Trudeau's bilingualism policy made French instruction mandatory

nationwide. Every Canadian child now had daily lessons. For me, that meant starting a third language before I turned 7. Initially, I confused Spanish and French, tripping over similar words, but soon I realized I could keep them apart. Where classmates strained, I slipped into grooves already laid down in my mind.

Even as a child, I perceived myself differently. I didn't believe I was smarter than the other kids, but where they memorized conjugations, I occupied the language.

That difference sharpened in Toronto, a city dense with cultural



diversity. My grandparents spoke German at home, and visitors from every continent came through our door. I remember being 8 years old before realizing that a family phrase I heard constantly, *Gehst Du mit der Karen?* — “Are you going with Karen?” — wasn’t English at all, but German. I thought code-switching was the norm.

My favorite trick was to embarrass my parents in the ethnic restaurants we frequented by asking for the foreign-language version of the menu — the one intended for nationals, not for monolingual Canadians. It was mischief, yes, but also the gratification of being understood. The way a server’s face brightened when I made more than an educated guess at pronunciation was a gem itself, proof that I wasn’t just dabbling.

By high school, I threw myself into every language offered: French, Spanish, German, and Latin. I loved the frenzied anticipation of a new tense in French, the puzzle of Latin syntax, the voyage that showed how modern English was cobbled together. My friends learned to brace themselves: If they uttered an unusual word, I was almost certain to jump in with an etymological diatribe. They cringed, but with affection, because they knew I couldn’t help it. For me, language wasn’t just a subject; it was play.

Yet even then I wondered: What was it all for? Beyond exams and vocabulary drills, what could this ability do in the world? I loved reading Voltaire’s *Candide* in the original French and tracing John Donne’s cadences in 17th-century English, but the deeper question was already forming: Could language be more than deftness and prowess? Could it be a way to join with others?

The exhilaration of that question crystallized when I received a Canadian government grant for a French immersion program during my gap year. Trois-Pistoles, a small town in eastern Quebec on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, was about as French as Canada gets. Fewer than 3,000 people lived there, and every summer it became an experiment in bilingualism. Students from across the country arrived to immerse themselves in Francophone language and culture. I was one of them. I

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requested placement in second-year French despite not having studied it in college.

Though I’d had only the standard 20 to 40 minutes a day of French in school, I already carried the language distinctly. I remember walking into a corner shop and, without hesitation, asking for *dentifrice* instead of toothpaste. The word surfaced in context, unbidden. Canada’s bilingual packaging laws had trained me without my noticing: Phrases like *cent pour cent de blé entier* — “100 percent whole wheat” — had imprinted themselves on me, waiting to be used.

One morning, our young instructor from Montreal played a French pop song, *Un garçon pas comme les autres* — “A boy unlike the others.” The first verse seemed straightforward: a woman infatuated with a male musician working at a clothing store. Then the pace quickened; the vocabulary altered. As the class scrambled to keep up, I caught a line that made me burst out laughing: *Oui, je sais qu’il aime les garçons* — “I know he likes boys.” The teacher laughed with me. My classmates just blinked, still piecing the words together.

It was then that I knew: My brain wasn’t merely good at language; it was programmed to process it distinctly. Where others were still translating

phrase by phrase, I heard the change in tempo, anticipated connotation, and decoded nuance.

After class, the teacher pulled me aside and asked how much French I had studied. When I told her it was only the standard school requirement, she looked at me in disbelief. “You should have been placed in first-year French,” she said. “Or even advanced to third. But I want to keep you in my class.”

After hours, most of my classmates slipped gratefully back into English, exhausted by the mental effort of a full day in French. I felt the opposite. My gears kept churning. Instead of depletion, I felt exultation, as if language had tapped into a fresh current of energy. Where others needed rest, I wanted more.

I fathom now that part of this sumptuousness comes from how I learn. I have a strongly visual style, both photographic and eidetic. Once I see a word, I don’t forget it. I can still picture pages from old schoolbooks — the layout, the sentences, the way meaning settled into place. Sometimes the recall is even sensory: In second grade, *la lune*, French, appeared in my mind as bright yellow bubble letters against a navy sky, distinct from the Spanish *la luna*, which I saw as red edged in orange. I didn’t know what “synesthesia” was back then, but I knew that words came to me with shape and color, as if etched into memory by more than sight alone.

These were never just letters or characters. It was how the world opened itself to me.

## Spanning the Distance of Language

In 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, I went to Moscow on a student visa. Travel to the Soviet Union was still tightly restricted, with solo tourism out of the question. I enrolled in a four-month language program. I had been studying Russian on my own and in summer intensives. I loved the cadence and fluidity of Russian, but more than that, I was drawn to the place. A primary reason was Mrs. Kaplan, a 96-year-old Russian Jewish woman I visited regularly while in college. She had fled the revolution as a girl and still had a



niece in Moscow. I wanted to meet her. I wanted to see the country for myself, not via headlines and history books. I wanted both language and vivid personal experience.

My arrival felt more like an interrogation than a welcome. A gruff immigration officer barked *Shto u vas yest?* — “Whaddaveya got?” — as he rifled through my belongings. From there, our group was driven down bumpy Soviet roads to a locked student dormitory, where we had to bang on the door until someone let us in.

The elevator was creaky. The floors were coated in chemical paste meant to repel cockroaches. The toilet hadn’t been cleaned in weeks. But I collapsed into sleep that night with a strange sense of possibility.

I made friends. One, Dzhambi, was a blue-eyed blonde woman from Kyrgyzstan whose parents were dark-skinned, something that confused everyone but her. She took me under her wing and showed me how to encounter coveted consumer goods, how to navigate Moscow, how to blend in. I spent hours speaking Russian at her dorm until one day there was an unexpected discovery. In the middle of a long conversation, I suddenly felt how my next few thoughts were going to coalesce, not in English but in fully formed Russian. The language structures weren’t something I was reaching for anymore. It just ... happened. Like a landslide. Dzhambi’s face showed she detected it too.

I remember another afternoon at GUM, the grand department store on Red Square. After weeks of empty shelves and shortages, I stumbled on something miraculous: toilet paper. Stacks of it. I loaded up six canvas bags and dragged them onto the Metro. The car went silent. Everyone was staring at me. Then a woman asked where I found it. Then another. Before long, I was handing out rolls to strangers. We laughed; we bantered. Some people rushed off to the store at the next stop, but the ones who stayed kept conversing with me, not as a Westerner, but as one of them.

That’s what language did. It didn’t just let me study Russian. It absorbed me into a new society, if only for a time.

Years later, in another city and another language, I got that same bridging of a gulf, though it happened in a single word rather than whole conversations.

In October 2019, I traveled to Madrid with my friend Kristina, who was applying for Spanish citizenship through her Sephardic ancestry. At the Reina Sofía, for some time she stood transfixed by *Guernica*, while I pulled myself away from the enthralling masterpiece, meandering toward the next gallery. A couple adjusted their stance slightly to let me pass, and before I could think, the word that came out of my mouth was *blagodarya*, “Thank you” in Bulgarian.

I hadn’t planned it. Somewhere in the background of my mind, the word had been waiting, and it surfaced as naturally as breath. The man’s eyes met mine with a flash of incredulity, then recognition, and for a moment neither of us needed more words. His wife turned, just catching our interaction. Her glance said the rest. A twinkle, a smile, the silent comprehension of two people who knew what had just occurred.

It wasn’t skill. Nor was it performance. The chasm between humans had been traversed. Two art-loving strangers were contemplating a painting about war and grief, and then a single borrowed word created something softer. Reciprocity. Participation. Kristina looked over, not surprised at the

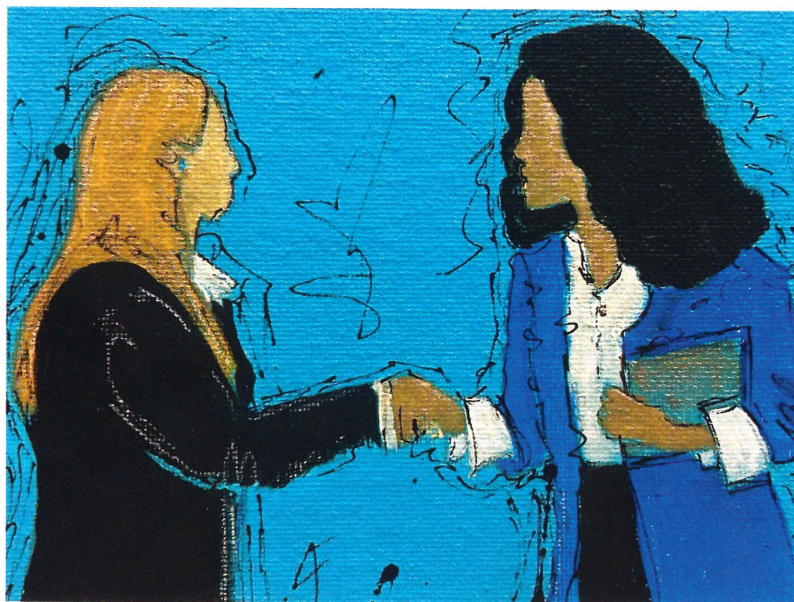
occurrence, and went back to *Guernica*. She had experienced this before.

Not long after, in my psychotherapy private practice, I received a referral for two teenagers from Guinea, a small country in West Africa where French is the national language. One of them, a boy named Alassane (a pseudonym), logged on to our video call. He knew I spoke French, but he didn’t expect how far I would reach into his world.

After initial greetings in French, I asked if he was from Conakry, the capital. He sparkled, stupefied and jubilant at the same time. I continued probing, gambling on what I’d read about Guinea’s languages. In French, I asked, “Do you speak Pulaar?” And before I could second-guess myself, I added a phrase I had tucked away: *No wa?* — “How are you?”

His face transformed. He beamed and answered instinctively, *Jam tan* — “Peace only.” A bridge had been built, and from there the conversation flowed.

In the weeks that followed, Pulaar became our ritual: a quick exchange at the start of every session, his glee in teaching me new words as I stowed them safely away. He imparted stories of his family and culture, educating me on current West African music. I countered with older classics and their ties to younger generations. This repartee opened space for deeper work and trust.





These connections aren't only personal. Scientists and linguists have tried to map what underlies them, from brain scans to genetic clues.

## The Hyperpolyglot Brain

Many hyperpolyglots describe their ability as a “key” to the hearts and souls of others. I often think of it instead as a window into others’ worlds: bantering in Sranan Tongo with villagers in Suriname, saying thank you in Japanese to a pianist in a mostly Black jazz ensemble, or exchanging quick greetings on the No. 7 train in Queens as Ecuadorians step off and Lebanese riders embark.

Michael Erard studied more than 400 hyperpolyglots for his book *Babel No More: The Search for the World’s Most Extraordinary Language Learners* (2012). Erard describes the ability as “neurological hardware that responds to the world ... recognition-heavy, sound-heavy, structured, and also highly sociable.” That rings true.

Dick Hudson, a British linguist at University College London, set out on a quest in 1980 to find the world’s foremost language learner. From this enterprise he coined the term “hyperpolyglot.” The list was never scientific, but it became a touchstone: part folklore, part data set, and the first attempt to map a community that had previously been nameless.

Other research has added sharper detail. Evelina Fedorenko, a cognitive neuroscientist at MIT, leads EvLab, which has used fMRI studies — including the one I took part in — to see how hyperpolyglots’ brains differ. Her team found that the first language of polyglots demands *less* activation than it does for monolinguals or bilinguals. With less familiar tongues, the brain recruits more resources, though still below average. Even when hearing entirely unknown languages, the pattern holds: The network responds but at a lower cost. Counterintuitively, the scans show a leaner footprint of activity — reduced oxygen use across the left-hemisphere language areas — hence, English hardly registering during my fMRI. Fedorenko calls polyglot brains “small and effi-

cient,” tuned to grasp a signal without wasting energy.

Hyperpolyglots’ efficiency gives them an entree to language-learning. They acquire new tongues with ease, rapidity, grace, and aplomb. Fedorenko calls it “striving to grasp a linguistic signal,” a phrase that feels deeply familiar to me. I think back to the scanner, when even nonsense or split-second patterns enticed me to reach for understanding.

Others, such as Simon Fisher of the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, have explored the genetic dimension. Fisher is best known for identifying the FOXP2 gene, the first gene linked to speech and language ability. His research suggests that at least some of our capacity for language is inscribed in biology, not just learned through exposure.

For me, it has always felt like more than wiring. When I enter a new language or deepen one I already know, I sometimes feel what I can only describe as a shift inside my head — as if a wall has cracked open or a new foundation is being laid. Scientists might call it neuroplasticity, the brain’s ability to reorganize itself with new growth. I just know that every language changes me.

I’ve also noticed a subtle split among hyperpolyglots themselves. Some approach language as a technical puzzle to be solved, charting grammar rules and syntax trees. I am indeed intrigued by the mechanics themselves. I find great fulfillment in that process.

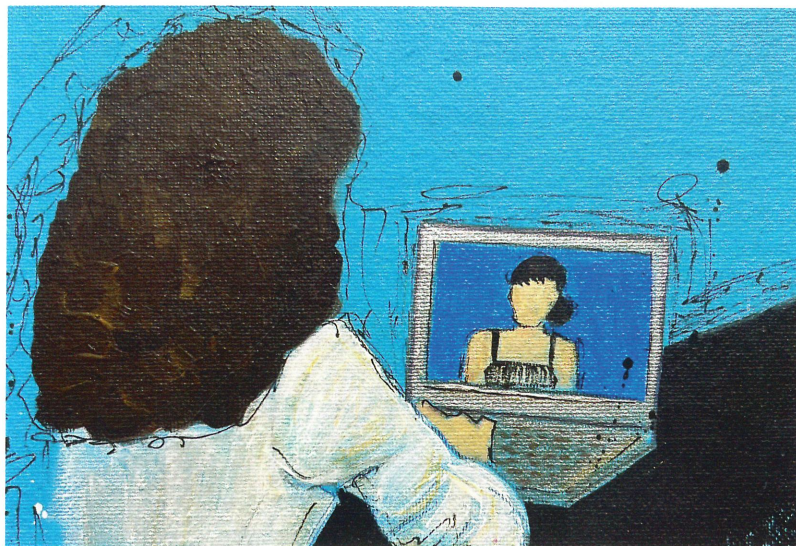
However, I am also drawn to relationship: the delight of hearing a *jaaraamah* — “thank you” — in Pulaar from a Guinean teenager or watching someone’s face gleam when I greet them on their terms. Both approaches are valid. But for me, language is never merely a system to comprehend.

## Fitting In, Standing Out

In my social work program at Columbia, a beloved professor once told us: “The goal of a first meeting is to have a second session.” That stayed with me. When I opened my psychotherapy private practice in New York City in 2017, I began offering free 15-minute introductory calls — not as a sales pitch but as a way to relate.

That’s how I met Pinar (a pseudonym) in 2019. She reached out directly, and we scheduled a video call. I could tell from her accent that English wasn’t her first language, though I wasn’t sure where she was from. She appeared on screen, early 30s, with long straight black hair and a guarded posture. I greeted her with, “When I ask how you’re doing, I really mean it.” She laughed gently, tension easing but not gone.

There’s an ongoing debate in the clinical world about self-disclosure. Too much blurs boundaries, but sometimes a small detail — a flash of humanity — builds confidence. I told her I was fascinated by language and culture,





informing her I was also an immigrant, born in Canada. She nodded, softened, and admitted she was from Turkey.

I don't speak Turkish — not yet — but I carry scraps of many languages in a mental pocket. *Merhaba*, I said. "Hello." Her eyes twinkled. It was a single word, but it transformed our dialogue. Pinar began talking more freely. Soon she shared that she had moved with her family to the Netherlands at 6, grown up immersed in Dutch schools, and spent years straddling cultures. She longed to blend in, to be "just Dutch."

I understood and code-switched. *Ik praat Nederlands* — "I speak Dutch" — I told her, with a Surinamese accent, no less. She laughed in recognition. I switched languages briefly to welcome her. Her eyes widened and her shoulders dropped. For the rest of our time together, she told stories in a voice that was suddenly her own. We were two people who knew what it meant to live between worlds.

But that gift has its shadow. To slip so easily into other people's languages and cultures is to risk being mistaken for something you're not.

During my Master of Social Work fieldwork, I ran a Spanish-language housing group for women in Washington Heights. Most of the participants were Dominican, a few Puerto Rican. One day, as we waited for the last arrivals, a woman leaned toward me and asked in Spanish, "So, which country in Latin America do you hail from?"

"I don't," I said.

She frowned. "Then where are you from?"

"Canada," I told her. She blinked, laughed as if I were joking, then slowly realized I was serious. The ambience reverberated in subtle shock. It wasn't hostile, but it was a rupture — the sudden insight that I could pass as an insider without ever experiencing true inclusion. My Spanish was fluent, my mannerisms fit, yet still I was something else.

It happens outside the therapy room too. Strangers sometimes assume I'm Latina before I've opened my mouth or Jewish because of my last name and family history. In truth, I'm cultur-

ally Jewish but not by blood. My Holocaust-survivor father gave me values and identity by osmosis, but ancestry is another matter. People rarely ask about that distinction. They see the hair — thick, dark, curly enough to need Black hair products — and draw one conclusion. They see the pale skin and freckles and draw another. My hazel eyes tilt just enough for more than one person to have asked if I'm part Asian. A teen in a youth program once looked me over and blurted out, "Are you a half-breed?" He didn't mean cruelty; he was simply grasping for a category. People usually are.

Sometimes the misread comes not from ethnicity but from nationality. Once, consulting in a New York school, I stood among children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. Despite my U.S. citizenship, I didn't know the words. Heads turned. Had I carried a foreign accent, the confusion would have made sense. It seemed I was an insider — until I wasn't.

Acceptance and misrecognition live side by side. It can be flattering to be welcomed as one of "us" but then quite unsettling to be unmasked in the next breath. The paradox of my life has been to fit everywhere and nowhere — fluent enough to blend in, different enough to be questioned.

Over time I've come to see that belonging isn't only about heritage. You can live inside a culture without claiming bloodlines you don't have, so long as you're truthful about your origins. What matters most is how you move in those spaces, whether you offer respect, curiosity, and mutuality. That, to me, is the difference between passing and presence. That precarious but rich in-between place is where language has left me most changed.

## Where I Belong

I came to Zulu late, almost on a dare to myself. The language dazzled me from the start: three distinct clicks, a cadence that felt closer to music than speech, grammar that moved like nothing I had studied before. It was humbling, a reminder that even after decades of languages, I could

still be a beginner, still stumble. But it was also scintillating.

My teacher, Zama, lives in eThekweni (Durban), South Africa, where she teaches both English and Zulu. Very quickly, she morphed from being just a teacher to becoming a friend. Even across Zoom screens and seven time zones, we found a rhythm that swung between light and serious — silly jokes one moment, long conversations about family and work the next. She guffaws when I mangle a word, not in scorn but with relish for my ability, my attempt itself cause for happiness. *Ngusisi wami omdala*, she called me — "my older sister." Now it's *nomngani wami* — "my friend."

Zama also taught me to say *Haibo! Hamba kahle, mtombazane!* — "Wow! You go, girl!" She has made me promise on multiple occasions to shout it when I finally step off a plane in Durban. We've played that scene out so often it feels like a memory already: me hollering the phrase into the air, both of us collapsing in uproarious hilarity. But Zulu hasn't only given me laughter. It has given me Zama's daughter, Nothile, who calls me *umkulu wami* — "Aunty." That single word carries more than affection. It is continuity, a thread stretching beyond us, proof that different tongues can knit together generations as well as strangers.

These instances remind me that language is never just about structural minutiae or word order. Hope lives in the fragile exchanges: the stumble that still brings a smile, the silly palaver that turns suddenly serious, the child who decides you belong in the family circle. I want my Zulu to grow strong enough to carry the heaviest discourse, not just playfulness.

That yearning takes me back to the fMRI study — fun in its way, clanking and all — but no machine can capture what language has become for me. The charge I feel in Zulu, Spanish, Russian, Pulaar, French, German, Dutch with a Surinamese accent — every word that narrows a distance and turns strangers into kin. It's the giggle of a friend halfway around the world. It's a child calling me Aunty. It's the spark that leaps when we step into someone else's language and find ourselves part of something larger. A greater whole, yes — but one built word by word, laugh by laugh, connection by connection. 🌸