

Freedom of SPEECH

The Prime Minister is fluent in Mandarin and in Australia, almost 400 languages are spoken. However, most of us speak only English. David Astle asks four people how language has shaped their lives.

Three months ago, our Prime Minister took to the podium at Beijing University and made history twice. First, he admonished China's role in Tibet and second, he spoke in fluent Mandarin. Australia, ventured Kevin Rudd, is China's *zhengyou*, or "true friend" – one who dares to speak unpleasant truths. With solid Mandarin, Rudd could speak his diplomatic heart, free of message meddlers. Bilingualism allowed for connection.

Yet in 2008, UNESCO's International Year of Languages, most of us speak only English. School trends reflect this mindset (see box, below), laments Professor Michael Clyne, a linguistics lecturer at the University of Melbourne. "You hear the term 'foreign languages'," he says, "as if to say these are languages spoken 'over there'."

In fact, our homes resound with almost 400 languages, from Afghan's Pashtu to the indigenous Pitjantjatjara dialect of Central Australia. However, those who speak two languages fluently are the exception, not the rule. *Sunday Life* spoke to four people about the benefits of being bilingual.

LUCY RHYDWEN-MARETT, 26

Saya mau pergi ke pasar – "I want to go to the market" – was Lucy Rhydwen-Marett's first Indonesian sentence. In 2002, a six-month scholarship enabled the University of Sydney student to travel to Java to research her passion – performance art. She began with a crash language course in the first six weeks, learning and living with the national language, Bahasa Indonesian, in Saltiga, central Java.

Bungles occurred. "One student in my class asked his host mother if anyone in Saltiga drank *susu keledai*. He thought it was soy milk. But it meant donkey milk!" says Lucy. "The Indonesian people were so encouraging – better than we are in Australia when someone isn't speaking English very well."

She thinks "being brave" also helped. "I used to petrify my host family by catching buses to Yogyakarta by myself, about two hours away. They weren't used to host children bugging off but I said, 'I'll be fine. I can always say, I want to go to the market.'"

And then the Bali bombs went off on October 12, 2002. "I was in Bali the week before, celebrating my 21st birthday." But family, friends and the university

wanted Lucy home. "I remember bawling my eyes out on the plane. It felt like I had unfinished business."

True to her word, Lucy finished her honours thesis before securing a volunteer post in Jakarta in 2003. "I ended up at the National Islamic University, working for two research centres, mostly editing journals about Islam and society," she says. It was an opportunity available only to those fluent in a second language.

Then the tsunami hit in 2004. Lucy's language skills meant she was in great demand during the aftermath of the disaster. The United Nations seconded the young Australian. Working in logistics, Lucy fielded situation reports, translated updates for government and kept close tabs on rescue and relief. She quit her university post and flew into Banda Aceh with UN personnel, staying on the ravaged island for a year. "My first words of Acehnese were *hana ie* – no water." Language, in a sense, was Lucy's ticket to another vocation.

Now a project officer with Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad and based in Darwin, Lucy knows the difference that speaking a second language has made. "For years, I wanted to be a journalist – at 15, I started a school newspaper. It wasn't until Aceh that I realised I wanted to be doing it, not writing about it."

Favourite phrase: *jam karet* or "rubber time", where urgency is a flexible idea. →

SCHOOL SPEAK

Most Australian high schools offer classes in one or two languages but the drop-off rate is steep. A 2008 report shows a slump – in NSW, only 12.8 per cent of year 12 students study a second language and Victoria it's 20.2 per cent, compared with an overall average of 40 per cent in the 1960s.

Reasons for the ebb vary, from lack of specialty teachers to perceived relevance among parents and career advisers. This is coupled with a concern for university entry marks and dwindling language pathways at tertiary level.

Recognising the decline, the Rudd Government aims "to help foster a generation of Asia-literate Australians" via a \$68 million system overhaul. Priority languages are listed as Japanese, Bahasa Indonesian, Mandarin and Korean.

