Six mois sur Duolingo pour apprendre le français, le chinois, et d’autres langues : An Experiential Diary Account of Linguistic Diversity

Rachel Suet Kay Chan, National University of Malaysia.

Corresponding email address: m.sullivan@ecu.edu.au

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Preface to the Column

Rob Werner, Chiba University, Japan
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2293-8377

I am pleased to introduce the next article to appear in the “Ethnographies of self-access language learning” column. In this auto-ethnography, Rachel Chan discusses her experiences learning French, as well as Chinese, Indonesian and other languages through the app Duolingo for six months during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to describing ways that Duolingo tries to motivate its users, her diary entries connect milestones achieved through the app to personal feelings about the journey. At the same time, Chan demonstrates both how she grew as a language learner and how her perspective changed throughout the process. This article takes a unique approach in connecting self-access language learning with sociology, in particular the concepts of linguistic cultural capital and super-diversity.

Six mois sur Duolingo pour apprendre le français, le chinois, et d’autres langues: An Experiential Diary Account of Linguistic Diversity

Rachel Suet Kay Chan, Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), National University of Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia. https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4207-023X

Abstract

This essay is a diary account of learning French, as well as exploring eight other languages in six-months through the app, Duolingo, and how exposure to this diversity of languages has enriched my possession of cultural capital. My perspective is that of a sociology lecturer from Malaysia, specialising in ethnic studies, who also teaches Malaysian, international, and French exchange students among others, and is thus exposed to a cornucopia of languages. During the global pandemic, global trends such as the shift towards online learning and ‘levelling up’ through enhancing one’s skills, brought me to the idea of learning ‘foreign’ languages in an informal but guided sense, replete with a structured syllabus. I now recount, post-six months, my journey in learning French, my completion of two other language ‘courses’, as well as my exploration of several others, all through Duolingo. I contextualise my experience within the phenomenon of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007), and encapsulate my benefits within Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of cultural capital in the linguistic domain.

Keywords: cultural capital, diary account, Duolingo, linguistic diversity, multilingual
I registered on Duolingo on June 29, 2022 during the period known as ‘academic year summer holidays’ for professional and personal development, and out of curiosity. This essay charts my experience through an auto-ethnographic diary account in acquiring the basics of French, mastering Chinese, testing my Indonesian, as well as exploring six other globally-spoken languages including Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, German, and the less-spoken Latin, the root of Romance languages (Sala & Posner, 2023). My final progress was celebrated by Duolingo sending me a year-end ‘report card’ in December 2022, informing me I was a “World Champion” in the “top 1% of learners worldwide” due to my devotion (and time), as well as having completed lessons with 91% accuracy (on average) in the nine languages above. In addition to these nine languages, I have officially completed formal education in the English language and in Malaysia’s official language, Bahasa Melayu – two languages which I use officially at work, in academia. As my academic expertise revolves around studying ethnic diversity, I situate this experience within the paradigm of linguistic diversity, regarding whether I experienced a change of taste and disposition after having learning these languages. The discussion contextualises Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) framework of cultural capital within the phenomenon of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) and encapsulates my benefits within Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital in the linguistic domain. This ‘diary’ is hence an exercise in recounting my experience as an informal, hobbyist language learner who desires to someday become more than a dilletante.

**Introduction: Le voyageur solitaire**

Initially, when first embarking upon the study of French (and other languages) on Duolingo, I took a completely exploratory approach, more of testing the app to see if it was the best way to learn a language (since I actually tried using books prior to that but found it less engaging). Eventually, upon receiving the ‘report card’, I found that this provided legitimacy on top of my unsystematic observations as a learner, beyond just an ‘app review’. Thus, my purpose evolved from reviewing an app to chronicling changes in my mindset towards language acquisition. Since I also completed the Chinese and Indonesian language trees simultaneously with French, I perceived differences in my worldview when comparing languages. For other educators (or perhaps self-educators), this provides an insight into the process of completing the Duolingo language tree for a particular language as a reference point for those who are interested
to repeat the process but are unsure of the amount of commitment that it takes or the rewards that it brings. Below, I chronicle the milestones that I have achieved, and the story behind each achievement.

I am a Malaysian citizen who attended Malaysian national schools for my primary and secondary education. This means that I attended a Malay-medium primary and secondary school, with English being a compulsory language. There are options to study vernacular languages, such as Chinese and Tamil, but I did not enrol in these. Hence, being ethnic Chinese, I have only attempted to learn Chinese informally through interactions with others who are fluent speakers, television programmes, other forms of multimedia, and most recently Duolingo. By ‘speaking Chinese’, I mean that there is ‘formal’ Chinese, or Mandarin, which is taught in schools as a medium of instruction, and there are also the Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, which I speak at the beginner’s level.

My perspective is that of a sociology lecturer from Malaysia, specialising in ethnic studies, who also teaches Malaysian, international, and French exchange students among others, and I am thus exposed to a cornucopia of languages. During the global pandemic, global trends such as the shift towards online learning and ‘levelling up’ through enhancing one’s skills brought me to the idea of learning ‘foreign’ languages in an informal but guided sense, replete with a structured syllabus. I now recount, post six months, my journey in learning French, my completion of two other languages, plus my exploration of several others, all through Duolingo.

My choice of these languages stems from the following reasons. For French, it is because I use a lot of Bourdieu’s theories in my academic research. I would like to be able to read his original works in French. My reason for choosing Chinese (Mandarin) was to gauge my ability in a semi-formal way given my past informal and scattered learning attempts. As for Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian), it shares much similarity with that of Malaysia’s national language, Bahasa Melayu. It is a ‘sister’ language (bahasa serumpun) which I had used briefly in limited social interactions and media consumption, and I wished to gauge if I had ‘mastered’ it due to the similarities. As for the other languages, they were mainly exploratory attempts at gaining an insight into how different languages appeared, how ‘challenging’ they appeared to be, and whether I could see ‘linguistic tree similarities’ between them. These were Spanish and Italian, which share a linguistic tree with Latin, Japanese and Korean, which I believed shared a linguistic tree with Chinese, and German, which I believe shares one with English. Many of
these languages also are official United Nations languages – Chinese, English, French, and Spanish (United Nations, n.d.) and the rest are spoken by a large majority globally (Duolingo, 2022), hence I felt they would be more useful to me.

Vertovec (2007, 2019) defined super-diversity as a concept created to express “differential legal statuses and their concomitant conditions, divergent labour market experiences, discrete configurations of gender and age, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents” in which “the dynamic interaction of these variables […] is ‘super-diversity’” (p. 1025). In my initial perception of my journey in learning French and Chinese, my experience is that the French language appeared (like English) to be focused more on the intangible aspects of life, while Chinese appeared to focus on physical and tangible matters. I relate this to my prior research on the cultural capital differences between Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese and their counterparts, the non-Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese. The former have often been described by scholars (and laypersons) as focusing more on physical and tangible matters in their speech, as well as displaying more ‘pragmatic and collectivist’ attitudes; while the latter has been described as having a more ‘intangible’ and ‘individualistic’ focus in their speech and attitudes. Chan (2016, 2018, 2020, 2022) noted that in the globalised world however, other forms of multimedia can help to transcend this worldview ‘divide’, for example, where learning another language is concerned.

Duolingo operates in a gamified manner, where the learning process resembles a video game. As such, players (learners) will be able to collect experience points (XP) upon completing lessons and exercises. Figure 1 shows the XP I gained during my six months of self-study.
A complete grouping of lesson topics is known as a ‘language tree’. A language tree is a kind of mind-map that shows the subtopics one has to learn under every major topic, although Duolingo has made several redesigns over the years. A language tree consists of a number of lessons, for example, after the autumn 2022 revamp, French now contains 199 lessons (it used to contain ten checkpoints or units with around ten topics each before). “Hearts” are similar to ‘lives’ or ‘turns’ in a video game, and a player gets a maximum of five hearts at a time (in the free version of Duolingo). If the player loses all hearts (they become heartless), they are unable
to proceed to the next lesson or complete the failed one, but can ‘practice’ past lessons to regain hearts. “Lingots” (desktop version) and “gems” (mobile version) are similar to in-game currency that a player can use to purchase items such as hearts (if they would rather not practice old lessons). By default, when a user signs up for Duolingo on a mobile device, they are entered into the weekly XP contest, assigned randomly into groups of 30 players around the world, and compete to see who gets the highest number of XP. The winner moves through the leagues, beginning with Bronze, then Silver, Gold, Sapphire, Ruby, Emerald, Amethyst, Pearl, Obsidian, and Diamond (Duolingo, n.d.). In the following section, I provide a diary account of my milestones using Duolingo.
This is a screenshot of the ‘report card’ issued by Duolingo in December 2022 to commemorate my six months of learning several languages on the app. On this graphic, it is written “2022: Year in Review – Celebrate what you achieved and reveal your unique learning style.” It purports to reveal my learning style. This was a two-way mutual data collection exercise: Duolingo collecting data on my learning ability and I observing the workings of the app. My perception is that my learning style is kinaesthetic, in that I tend to learn by doing, in an experiential manner. Secondly, visuals help me recall words as well.

This image says “You completed lessons in French, Chinese, and 7 more languages. Your average lesson accuracy was over 91%. Amazing!”. It features Duolingo’s mascot, Duo, a green owl, holding up symbols of the French and Chinese languages. Will I now speak ten languages? Could I list them on my CV? Would I be able to bond with my étudiantes Françaises (French students) from the student exchange programme? Did I develop that elusive quality of _je ne sais quoi_? I started Duolingo with the intention of learning French in order to be able to read books in their original language, sans English translation. The most cited theorist in my academic works so far is Pierre Bourdieu, but I also wish to be able to read historical sources regarding other topics.
(e.g., other periods in the history of France). I started learning French by attempting to immerse myself in the language during the global Covid-19 pandemic and its lockdown. I did this by watching YouTube videos, listening to music, attempting karaoke (badly but mercifully in isolation), and having purchased a rather elementary book of phrases. I realised I needed a more systematic approach to measuring my ability to learn, in the manner of a course outline. After exploring several apps on Google Play, I decided to give Duolingo a try. I stuck with it because of its user-friendly features: simple exercises (similar to a children’s interactive workbook), cute animations, engaging ‘characters’ such as Duo the Owl (pictured left), Zari and Lily, Junior and Eddy, etc., the conversational stories, and mostly the daily reminders by Duo the Owl and others if I should miss my lessons. The initial setup also included a weekly competition of entering into successively more challenging leagues, but I gave that up as I wanted to learn at my own pace and not for competition’s sake. I finally completed my French language tree (albeit imperfectly) in October 2022. I continued to practice French on it every day. Shortly afterwards, the new design rolled out, but it was quite a challenge to continue with the new setup. However, I decided to persevere with it, and at the moment, I am still using the app for practice.
This image says “Top 1% among all learners this year. Wow, you earned a whopping total of 50944 XP!” There is a function to “Share my stats” on social media. This came as a surprise as I had no longer continued to compete in the weekly tournament of collecting XP. Still, it was very encouraging to know that my dedication to part-time language learning had paid off.

This image says “13546 minutes spent language learning. July 1 was a special day with 252 minutes spent learning!” This stands testament to the amount of time I spent looking at my smartphone, being invested in conversation (speaking and messaging/writing exercises) with artificial intelligence (AI) companions.
This image reads “7364 words learned in total. You practiced 17664 sentences this year. Way to go!” This covers my vocabulary for French, Chinese, Indonesian, and the six other languages I explored (Spanish, Italian, German, Japanese, Korean, Latin). There were steps that I skipped while exploring language trees of languages for which I already had some background.
This image states “155 days was your longest streak. Only 5.8% of learners make it into the Duolingo Streak Society, and you’re one of them. Impressive!” I put in my best effort to practice French daily, as well as Chinese and Indonesian. In terms of learning French, this was a totally new experience. As for learning Chinese, although I am not educated in the Chinese medium, being a Malaysian of Chinese ethnicity, I am capable of basic conversation skills. For Indonesian, it is a language closely related to Bahasa Melayu. As for the other languages, I am still exploring the possibility of completing lessons in them fully. I have completed all the lessons for French, Chinese, and Indonesian, and four units of Japanese, followed by at least one unit of the other languages, with the exception of Korean, as it requires knowledge of Hangul without Romanised script from the very beginning.
This graphic says “You climbed to the Sapphire League this year. Nice work staying there for 1 week. Can you rise even higher next year?” This was proof of my earlier participation in the weekly tournaments in which the challenge was to collect the most XP by completing as many exercises as possible. The mechanism revolved around having batches of 30 random strangers compete every week. I eventually found this too competitive, even though it was fun. I preferred to practice daily at my own pace to better absorb the nuances of the language, rather than compete with strangers, who could be competing in another language.
This image reads “You joined our community 161 days ago. This year Duolingo celebrated our 10th anniversary. We couldn’t have done it without you!” This was the time I received my report card from Duolingo, having also maintained a 155-day streak since joining (and figuring out the mechanisms in the first few days). My Duolingo account is a free one, so I experience advertisements and limited turns (5 hearts). When I run out of hearts, I will have to do practice exercises to regain them, or use lingots (desktop version) or gems (android version) to purchase a new set of 5 hearts. I have not tried the paid version of Duolingo. I think that at the moment, the free version is more economical and does not require me to commit beyond my present ability to practice daily in order to maximise utility. But this is perhaps because I am also able to find other supplementary sources and am quite an independent learner. Being a lecturer myself, I am probably more capable of designing a learning plan for myself compared to the average person, so this is sufficient for me. However, I do believe that for regular learners who do not have a professional guide, the paid version might be more conducive to learning.
This final image reads “You are a World Champion. You’re in the top 1% of learners worldwide. What an epic achievement!” It is very encouraging to discover that one is capable of achieving world championship in something. This measure is based on the percentage of learners worldwide, and it very likely measures the time I have spent on Duolingo and the accuracy of my responses.

Finally, there is a summary graphic saying, “Tell the world how much you learned this year!” The statistics say “I’m a top 1% language learner on Duolingo! 50944 total XP (Top 1%), 13546 minutes spent, 7364 words learned, and 155 longest streak. It is described as “Your learning stats as of November 30, 2022”. These are my total statistics, which I am encouraged to share with others through a variety of social media. It is a summary of all the points mentioned above. This is symbolic of the gamification of learning, which I welcome as an educator. I have mentioned my self-learning to my colleagues and students, and people are mostly encouraging. I do not actually use social media; hence I did not share this publicly. If one does use social media, however, it would be a good word-of-mouth tool.
Duolingo sends weekly reports by email (see Figures 2, 3, & 4) of the time I spend studying. It actually emails me regularly about my learning progress and my performance statistics – such as the amount of time spent on the app, my total XP, any challenges of the week which I have won, etc. I wrote this paper at the six-month mark, at which I had completed the French, Chinese, and Indonesian language trees, but I continued to practice French daily. Duolingo maintains your “streak”, which is the number of days you have continuously used the app. In my case, the stats measured half a year, starting from June 29th to November 30th. Hence, I used this six-month period as a cut-off point for my diary. I believe this is the reason why the stats appear to be collated before the year has ended.

Figure 2

Duolingo’s Weekly Email Report – Days Active

Duolingo’s weekly email report tells how many days I have been active for this week (February 25, 2023). At this point I am doing daily practice since I have already completed the French language tree.
**Figure 3**  
*Duolingo’s Weekly Email Report – Experience Points*

![Bar chart showing XP earnings for the past three weeks.](chart_xt.png)

**Figure 4**  
*Duolingo’s Weekly Email Report – Learning Time, Words Learned, Phrases Reviewed, Lessons Finished*

![Time learning chart with data for the past week.](chart_time.png)
I made it to the Sapphire League before I decided that ‘round-the-clock’ competitions for the highest XP was not my personal learning preference, and so I opted out of the weekly competitions and ‘played’ anonymously instead. My perception is that my learning style is kinaesthetic in that I tend to learn by doing, in an experiential manner. Secondly, visuals help me recall words.

Currently, I am still practicing French daily on Duolingo, and I have downloaded another more ‘advanced’ app called *Apprendre le français avec TV5 Monde*. I combine usage of both apps in enhancing my learning, as *Apprendre* covers real news topics from the francophone international news channel TV5 Monde. I wish to master my command of French before I continue doing daily practice with the other languages that I have completed or started.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

After receiving my “report card” from Duolingo, I decided that it would be useful to chronicle my learning journey as a guideline for myself (and for other self-directed learners) should I wish to continue embracing other languages (i.e., the remaining six languages that I was exploring and deciding whether to complete). I envision that this entire journey (completing the other languages) could be a lifelong process, taking into account the practice after having completed the course on Duolingo. I feel that writing these down in a ‘diary entry’ style lists my achievements in a way that encourages me to not give up. I have also found that Duolingo encourages me in a similar way, with the app’s daily reminders, words and posters of encouragement, and Duo the owl mascot’s constant reminders for me to “faire mes devoirs” (do my homework).

Mynard (2020) noted that ethnographies can be considered a suitable but less explored research methodology to understand self-access learning, in which auto-ethnographic accounts of language learning can be counted. She calls for more of such studies through the auto-ethnographic method. Auto-ethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experiences in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). Personal narratives are stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and/or personal lives, such as works cited by Ellis et al. Some trace autobiographical writings as far back as Greek classics, such as those by Herodotus the historian and Homer’s
Odyssey, through the Enlightenment, to a reaction against positivism as introduced by Auguste Comte, structuralism, postcolonialism, and feminism, right up to the present (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Auto-ethnography includes several genres, such as indigenous auto-ethnography, narrative ethnography, reflexive interviews, reflexive ethnography, layered accounts, interactive interviews, community auto-ethnography and, contentiously, personal narratives that stand alone (Denshire, 2014; Ellis et al., 2011). Contemporary auto-ethnography is multidisciplinary, although it was originally a method used mostly by anthropologists (Denshire, 2014). I would situate my auto-ethnography within the final category, that of a personal narrative.

Auto-ethnography is a method of conducting participant observation in a way that acknowledges the centrality of the researcher’s experience (and possible biases) in documenting their experiential perception of social phenomena. It is a sociological method, but one that is lesser applied and more reflexive than ethnography, which is the researcher’s documentation of ‘others’ and not the ‘self’, and much more so than other less interpretivist methods, such as surveys. It has its strength in capturing the phenomenological aspects of social life, in comparison to the more positivist approaches. Previously, Werner (2020a, b, c, 2021) wrote a four-part autoethnography that also included using Duolingo to learn French, going into multilayered, stream-of-consciousness detail about his experience.

Pierre Bourdieu, the celebrated French sociologist, used the concept of cultural capital to explain the tastes, dispositions, and intangible notions acquired and displayed by individuals in the course of their lives, which came from their lived experiences, through interaction with social institutions (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus, cultural capital is composed of the institutionalised, the objectified, and the embodied. Language falls under the institutionalised form and can affect one’s attainment of the other two forms. As Chan (2022) explained, “in today’s increasingly interconnected world, Malaysians no longer face barriers to learning new languages, as the advancement of information technology enables individuals to expand their bridging social capital, stretching beyond the nation’s borders to include friends from other countries” (p.338). Tan and Raman (2007) had declared that although learning a second language may pose challenges, it did not override the crucial need to acquire a second language because of its instrumental value. Chan (2022) also observed that “regardless of education as a primary socialization agent, people can venture beyond and embrace different value systems as a result of shared interests” (p. 338).
In pursuing knowledge of French and other European and Asian languages, such as Chinese, I had the opportunity to observe structural differences strictly from a non-linguist’s perspective (as a layperson). To compare two of the languages I had completed, I experienced the Chinese language (Mandarin) as having a focus on the tangible and practical, while I experienced the French language as being focused more on intangible and abstract thoughts. I wish to append this observation to that of Chan’s (2018, 2020) writings on the convergence of Chinese and Western values as global habitus. This comparison, I believe, is objective because I am comparing my experience of both through Duolingo, and I am still learning both languages. Thus, I am not comparing my knowledge of a language which I am new to with a language I am already familiar with, such as English or Bahasa Melayu. In Chan’s writings, she concluded that despite prior preliminary differences in value systems stemming partially from sociolinguistic differences in Malaysian Chinese who were educated in the Chinese medium (and those who were not), Malaysian Chinese in general were converging in terms of value orientation due to the effects of cultural globalisation facilitated by global mass media.

In this essay, I reiterate the possible effects of sociolinguistic influence on an individual’s thinking. I also observe that exposure to various languages on a platform which is as accessible as Duolingo has afforded me cultural proximity to several other cultures, most of which I had no certainty of gaining entry to prior to Covid-19. Learning languages on Duolingo has, in a way, been my window to the world.

Notes on the Contributor
Rachel CHAN Suet Kay is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Ethnic Studies, National University of Malaysia. She specialises in cultural sociology, having written on cultural capital flows between East Asia and the West, and most recently, cultural heritage. Her latest publications are on Chinese clan associations, English translations of Chinese online fiction, habitus and field in Malaysian cosplay, anti-capital in the Ah Beng subculture, Malaysian manga, and the convergence of cultural values among Chinese-educated and non-Chinese-educated Malaysian Chinese. Her recent books are “The Convergence of Chinese and Western Values as Global Habitus” and “Ah Beng Subculture and the Anti-Capital of Social Exclusion”. She received her PhD in Sociology and MA in Sociology by Research from the University of Malaya and a BSc (Hons) in Sociology and Diploma in Economics from the University of London.
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