

Ciao! Ola! Bonjour! Over the last two years people all over the world have taken comfort in learning new languages
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From flirting in Spanish and keeping in touch with their mother tongue to being able to understand their favourite K-dramas, there are a myriad reasons why an increasing number of people have started learning new languages during the pandemic. Klingon included

•• PRIYADARSHINI PAITANDY

Roopali AS, a GIS analyst, has watched more than 20 K-dramas through the pandemic. She especially revels in *Hometown Cha-Cha-Cha* and *Hotel Del Luna*.

In the quiet of lockdown, she also discovered new Korean programmes on apps such as Rakuten Viki. "K-dramas are cute and romantic; very different from series in other languages," says Roopali. Last year, she finally enrolled in Korean classes at InKo Centre in Chennai, to better understand what she was watching. "I am going to learn enough to watch Korean serials without subtitles," she states.

She is not alone. Between washing their hands and following the daily COVID count in the news, a growing number of people have channeled their energy, through lockdowns and solitary evenings, into learning a new language.

Encouraged by the demand, numerous language schools such as Alliance Francaise, Goethe Institut, and InKo Centre moved their courses into the virtual realm. InKo Centre's Korean language classes have seen an uptake since April 2020. "We are in the happy position of getting more teachers because of demand. There is a waiting list," says Rathi Jafer, director, InKo Centre. "The advantage of a virtual class is that it cuts through geography. Which means anyone anywhere can attend the sessions," she adds.

Roopali can now read Korean and understand 30% of what she watches, without subtitles. "Tamil and Korean have similarities. There are around 6,000 similar words. For example: Amma, Appa, Naal (day), Va (Wa in Korean), Naa (Me)," she lists. Next, she wants to visit Seoul and Jeju Island. "Watching these K-dramas has also made me want to go to Korea for my Masters," she says.

For Snigdha Konar, an ambition to study Archaeology in South Korea propelled her to learn Korean. "COVID-19 disrupted my plans but I continued to learn Korean as I enjoy K-pop and K-dramas," says Snigdha. "I have Korean friends on Facebook and I

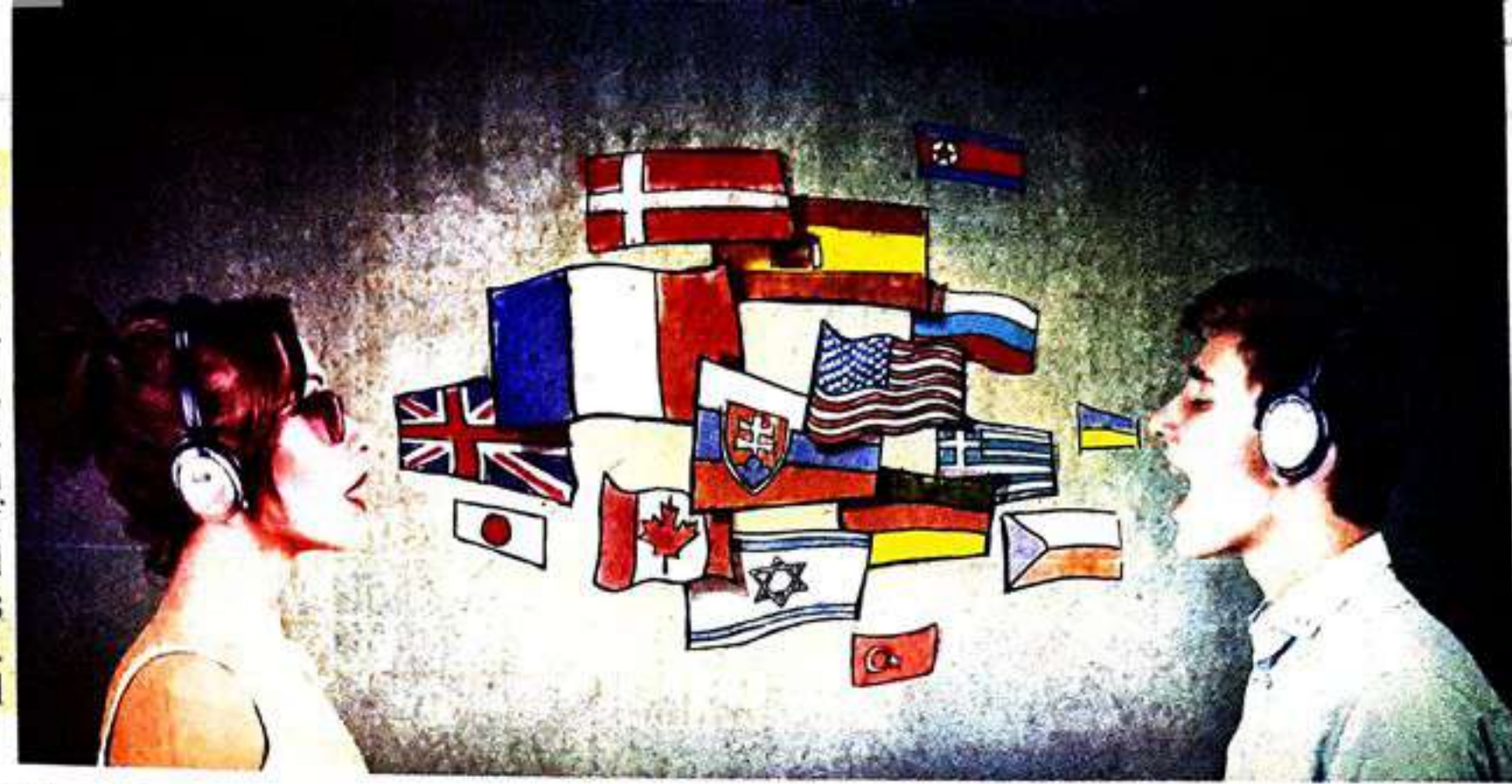


chat with them; my keyboard is in Korean," she says, adding with a laugh that at times her family gets tired of her talking in Korean, while her brother practises the German he is learning.

Language classes today are a diverse mix of students, working professionals and retired personnel... The motivation to learn a language is no longer limited to academic or job-related pursuits. "There is a guy in my virtual class who is learning the language because his wife is Korean," says Roopali.

Lost in translation

Diya Bhatia's Spanish classes on the other hand are the result of a chance meeting at a flamenco party in Spain. After meeting a charming Spaniard, who she



Linguists of lockdown

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PRABHAKAR NARAYANAN
Goethe-Institut

communicated with via a translation app on her phone, she made a mental note to learn the language. In 2020, when the pandemic had put an end to most people's social lives, Diya began learning Spanish online.

"It's liberating to be able to interact with someone directly without depending on a gadget or app. Otherwise, a lot gets lost in translation," she says, adding that she can't wait to go on a holiday to Spain again. "Apart from Spain, Spanish is spoken in around 20 countries in South America. It is definitely an advantage to be a linguist," she says, adding that some of her friends have been keen to learn the language after watching the Spanish series *Money Heist*.

At the Goethe-Institut, Bach is cited as a source of inspiration. "While 50% of our students are those who plan to study abroad, the rest learn it for novel reasons such as to de-stress, or out of love

for the work of German composers, such as Bach," says Prabhakar Narayanan, deputy director and language head, Goethe-Institut, Chennai.

He says he has also noticed a number of grandparents learning the language so they can converse with grandchildren living in Germany. "There has been a definite increase in German learners. In 2021, we had 2,200 registrations in Chennai. This year we are targeting 2,500," says Prabhakar.

There are dedicated classes every day. "Since 2020 the classes have been virtual. We have intensive, super intensive and weekend classes," he says. Ten thousand people took the exam last year from across Tamil Nadu, including students from Kumbakonam,



Madurai, Coimbatore and Tiruchchi.

Language learning apps such as Busuu, Babbel, Fluent-Forever are also seeing more users than ever before. Popular for offering learners the flexibility to engage with a language as and when they like, minus the formal setting of a class, they draw both serious as well as casual students.

US-based Duolingo, which made its India presence in 2016, offers 103 courses for 40 languages. This includes a mix of popular ones like English, Arabic, Hindi, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and Italian as well as more niche languages like Hawaiian, Scottish Gaelic and Navajo.

"India is currently one of our fastest growing markets," says Karandeep Singh Kapany, country marketing manager - India, Duolingo, adding that amid restrictions on movement, Indians stayed home and used smartphones as windows to the world. "While time spent on OTT and other entertainment platforms increased, an acute need to up-skill was also felt leading to an increase in downloads for Duolingo," he adds.

Different apps have different methods of teaching. Courses on Duolingo feel like an interactive game. "Lessons are 'bite-sized' which means they can be taken on-the-go in five mi-

minutes at a time and fit anyone's schedule. Everything is free," he says.

There are also many who are utilising this time to get better acquainted with their mother tongue. For example, Saurabh S, who has lived away from his hometown Kolkata ever since he finished school, says his Bengali skills were weakening. He got a friend to help improve his language skills via WhatsApp. "And now I have rediscovered the joy of reading Bengali books such as Satyajit Ray's *Feluda*," he says on a call from Pune.

While English, Hindi, French, Spanish and Korean are the top five languages that Indians are currently learning, in that order, there are plenty of options for people who want to grapple with a unique language challenge.

There is a segment that might excite fans of fictional series. "Certain languages Duolingo teaches didn't exist 150 (or even 25) years ago," says Karandeep, in all seriousness. "These are the constructed language (or 'conlang') courses that include Klingon and High Valyrian.

They enable fan communities of popular shows like *Star Trek* and *Game of Thrones* to learn and converse, till perhaps, they can effortlessly say: *Valyrio muño engos nuhys issa* (Valyrian is my mother tongue) or *thIngan mah!* (we are Klingons).