

What's this fascination with Germanic languages?

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Some people wondered about my fascination with Germanic languages and asked why I didn't branch out to other language families. It's basically laziness. I grew up speaking English (and a little of the Holo dialect, most of which has by now vanished from disuse), then studied German in high school and college, and most recently added Swedish in preparation for a trip there. Swedish was easy to pick up because it nestles nicely between German and English. And that's when I realized that laziness was the key: If you always pick a language close to the ones you already know, it will not be so hard to learn. So my list of languages follows a chain of closely-related languages, so each one can be used as leverage for the next. Except for Icelandic, which strikes me as "like German, before the Germans decided to simplify their grammar" – that has its own appeal. I saved it for last. I have colleagues who speak Dutch and Afrikaans, so learning those languages would allow me to confuse and annoy them. Because that's the main reason for learning a language: To confuse and annoy. (One of my South African colleagues describes Afrikaans as "the language you get when you throw a bunch of Dutchmen into the bush and have them chased by lions for a few hundred years.") I have a former colleague who has since returned to Denmark. We always teased him about his native country and language when he was around, and he was a good sport about it. He's the one who taught me the phrase "En gang til for prins Knud". I removed Danish from the list of Germanic languages partly to tease him from afar and partly because the strange Danish pronunciation scares me. But for now, my pan-Germanic ambitions are on hold. As the Swedes out there already know, I've started studying Mandarin Chinese. Even though I grew up with a tonal language (Holo has seven tones, as opposed to just the four of Mandarin), I never got very good at pronouncing the tones, even though I can hear the difference easily in most cases. So I'm in the embarrassing position of speaking badly and recognizing it immediately.

Update: With some help from my father, I think I figured out the Mandarin third tone, which was the only one I had been having trouble with. The trick: The way the books explain how the third tone works does not match the way people pronounce it in real life. But the way the books explain it is so deeply ingrained in the way people think about the pronunciation of the tone that they continue to insist that's how it's done even though it isn't.

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