

WHAT IS LANGUAGE? IT'S IMPORTANCE IN OUR LIFE. IS LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE DIFFICULT?

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Language is the highest achievement of human mind. It is what separates us from the animal kingdom. It is the basis of thought because it contains the symbols of thought.

We want to go places and do things, own all sorts of gadgets that we do not absolutely need, and when we sit down to take it easy we want to talk. Rights and property, social position, special talents and virtues, and above all our ideas, are what we live for. We have gone off on a tangent that takes us far away from the mere biological cycle that animal generations accomplish; and that is because we can use not only signs but symbols. (Exploring language, 54 – 55 p.)

In the first place, language serves for the expression of content: it has a representational, or, as I would prefer to call it, an ideational function. It is through this function that speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of the internal world of the real world of his own consciousness: his reactions, cognitions, and perceptions, and also his linguistic acts of speaking and understanding.

In the second place, language serves what we may call an interpersonal function. Here, the speaker is using language as the means of his own instruction into the speech event: the expression of his comments, his attitudes, and evaluations, and also the relationship that he sets up between himself and his listener – in particular, the communication role that he adopts, of informing, questioning, greeting, persuading, and the like...

But there is a third function which is in turn instrumental to these two, whereby language is, as it were, enabled to meet the demands that are made on it; I shall call this the textual function, since it is concerned with the creation of text. It is through this function that language makes links with itself and with the situation; and discourse becomes possible, because the speaker or writer can produce a text the listener or reader can recognize one. (Language in the news, 69 p.)

However, while the mainstream flowed on in the structuralist channel, alternative linguistic traditions maintaining contact with studies of culture, society and thought survived. The anthropological linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf advanced a

strong series of claims concerning the variable effects of the structures of different languages on the conceptions of reality peculiar to different speech – communities.

The grammar of a language is no longer an abstract descriptive system, product of the linguist's analysis, but a property of the speaker's mind, a cognitive system: linguistic competence, as he calls it. But although Chomsky may have relocated language in the human mind, there is nothing particularly human about his conception of speakers and speech process. Linguistics is said to be concerned, not with real people using language, but with an ideal speaker – listener, in a completely homogeneous speech – community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (Language in the news, 27 – 28 p.)

It is a popular belief that second language acquisition (SLA) is strongly influenced by the learner's first language (L1). The clearest support for this belief comes from "foreign" accents in the second language (L2) speech of learners. When a Frenchman speaks English, his English sounds French. The learner's L1 also affects to other language levels – vocabulary and grammar. This is perhaps less immediately evident, but most language learners and teachers would testify to it.

It is also a popular belief that the role of the L1 in SLA is a negative one. That is, the L2 gets in the way or interferes with the learning of the L2, such that features of the L1 are transferred into the L2. In fact, the process of SLA is often characterized in popular opinion as that of overcoming the effects of L1, of slowly replacing the features of the L1 that intrude into the L2 with those of the target language and so of approximating ever closer to native – speaker speech.

If in popular opinion the L1 interferes with the acquisition of the new language system, how does SLA research characterize the role of the mother tongue? The research literature reveals considerable disagreement about how pervasive the L1 is in SLA. On the other hand the popular belief is given support:

Taking a psychological point of view, we can say that there is never peaceful co-existence between two language systems in the learner, but rather constant warfare, and that warfare is not limited to the moment of cognition, but continues during the period of storing newly learnt ideas in memory. (Marton 1981 : 150)

In order to understand the early importance that was attached to the role of the first language, it is necessary to understand the main tenets of behaviourist learning theory. Up to the end of the 1960s, views of language learning were derived from a theory of learning in general. There were few studies of SLA based on the actual language that learners produced, and few attempts to examine the process of SLA empirically before this. The dominant school in psychology, which informed most discussions of language, learning, was behaviorism. (Understanding Second Language Acquisition, 18-20 p.)

In animals, communication is expressed by gestures and various sounds, while in humans, it is done with the help of language. Language is important in every field of our life and learning second language other than your mother tongue is also beneficial.

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