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Language and Worldview*

Alvino E. Fantini

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Abstract

Languages are more than mere tools. They are, in fact, paradigms of a view of the world. Knowledge of more than one language holds promise for an expanded worldview, for understanding other people on their own terms, Viewed this way, bilingualism becomes an essential ingredient in the formation of interculturally minded individuals.

Résumé

Les langues sont plus que de simples outils. En réalité, elles constituent des paradigmes d’une façon de voir le monde. Le fait de connaître plus d’une langue nous permet d’avoir un esprit plus large sur le monde et de comprendre les autres sur leur propre terrain. De cette façon, le bilinguisme devient un élément essentiel pour former des individus d’orientation interculturelle.

Resumen

Los idiomas son más que solo instrumentos. Son, de hecho, paradigmas de una manera de ver el mundo. El conocimiento de más de un idioma sustenta la esperanza de una cosmovisión más amplia, ayudando a la comprensión de pueblos ajenos en base a sus propias culturas y costumbres. Visto nsí, el bilinguismo se torna en ingrediente escncial para la formación de individuos de mentalidad intercultural.

¿Mamá, por qué yo nací como nene?
¿Por qué no nací como Dios?
¿O como el sol… como una bola de fuego?

Mamá, why was I born a little boy?
Why wasn't I born like God?
Or like the sun… like a ball of fire?
(Mario, age 5)

We do not usually think about our ability to speak. Most of us simply take language for granted, that is, until we are in situations where we do not share a common tongue. Intercultural contact often raises numerous issues related to language, culture, and one's worldview.

Language: A Worldview

Lack of awareness of our own language and language use arises from the fact that as we master our native tongue, it in turn masters us. Acquisition of our mother tongue provides language not only as a "neutral" system but also as a medium (or paradigm) that directly influences our entire lives. In linguistic terms, this notion is known as "language determinism and relativity." In other words, the language we acquire influences the way we construct our vision of the world (hence, language determinism). And if this is so, then most probably different languages provide different visions of that same world (language relativity).

Considering the words of each language, for example, helps us to understand what this means. English, Chinese, or Russian words often do not directly equate; rather, they represent different systems for classifying, segmenting, and categorizing our experiences. For this reason, they orient their users to particular ways of viewing the world. This notion is the basis for the determinism and relativity hypothesis formulated many years ago by the linguist Benjamin L. Whorf and which is still debated today (Whorf, Language). Although many people do not accept Whorf's idea entirely, it cannot be wholly dismissed either. The influence of each language on a speaker's perception and cognition remains an intriguing question.

Language: A Wondrous Thing

By five years of age, children already demonstrate the ability to use language to formulate profound questions such as the one at the beginning of this article. Unaware of their own amazing feat—mastery of complex patterns of sounds, forms, and grammar—children acquire their native tongue almost unthinkingly. Language acquisition is almost incidental to their efforts to explore, to question, to communicate.

And language appears to be species-specific. It is believed, in fact, that words are what make the anthropoid human. This may explain the biblical statement: "In the beginning was the Word…" (John 1:1). Yet, language has also been termed Original Sin—a lie since word creations substitute for the thing signified. Indeed, as we master words, we sometimes fail to differentiate between the verbal symbol and the reality for which it stands. Yet, words serve only to evoke conceptually what is meant, thereby providing vicarious experiences for both speaker and hearer. Once acquired, words are a powerful influence throughout our entire lives, mediating all that we think, say, and do.

Languages are also liberating. Our ability to symbolize permits us to move conceptually through time and space. We recall and tell of things past, or we move ahead into the future, merely by using words. So great in fact is our faith in words that we often viscerally feel the “reality” of being in the past or future described. Yet obviously we can neither retrieve the past nor ensure the future but can only symbolize about them. We always remain physically in the present moment and space.

The child of three has already learned of such power, as when recounting an unfortunate event at the nursery and crying at the recollection. Or, consider the child of four who speaks of dinosaurs with visible delight even though he or she only “knows” of them through language, the preserver of our collective human memory. Language aids the imagination, the make-believe; hence the child can put into words wild fantasies, as when describing, in exquisite detail and great emotion, an encounter with an awful witch. Real or imagined, language brings into existence even that which may not exist at all!

Language: A Two-Edged Sword

Language not only aids thought but at times also constrains it, even contradicting our experiences. Two examples help to illustrate this: In the first, the child taking a cognitive test in kindergarten is asked to point to one of four pictures best depicting the concept “fastest.” Confronted with choices of a donkey, an elephant, a car, and an airplane, the child points unhesitatingly to the elephant and describes their great speed, which the child has observed in Tarzan movies on television, and then shows by a moving hand how slowly airplanes move across the sky.

Through language, the child will eventually “learn” to invert notions derived from direct personal perceptions. In an opposite case, the child panics when taken aboard an airplane and begins screaming, kicking, and crying. No attempts to ease the child’s fears are calming, until moments later the crying ceases abruptly when the child realizes he or she has neither become tiny nor disappeared, as so often observed of others who boarded planes and flew off into the sky. In each case, language was used to “explain” (or contradict) perceptions (Fantini, Language Acquisition).

So much of learning throughout life is accomplished through Language, augmenting (and sometimes constraining) the possibilities of what we can understand. Through language we can consider the impossible and explore the unknowable, as with the five-year-old quoted at the beginning of this article, pondering death and yearning for immortality. Since language is with us from our earliest years, it is difficult to imagine what life might be like without the ability to symbolize and to communicate with others.

Language as Communicative Competence

Language is not only an ability to articulate but also all that is involved in interacting with others: (1) a linguistic dimension (the sounds, forms, and grammar of language); (2) a paralinguistic dimension (the tone, pitch, volume, speed, and other affective aspects of how we say things); (3) an extralinguistic component (all the non-verbal dimensions—gestures, movements, grimaces, etc.); and (4) a sociolinguistic dimension (i.e., the different ways or styles used to express ourselves in each new situation). Every individual learns and masters all of these dimensions as part of his or her total ability to communicate. By five, in fact, children are so competent in all areas that they can easily judge the correctness or nativeness of other speakers. Moreover, children exposed to two or more systems early on, display the ability to master two or more languages.

Language and Intercultural Contact

It would seem, therefore, that individuals exposed to a second language may develop a differing or an expanded vision of the world. These visions are affected not only by the different constructs of the world inherent in each language system but also by the differing interactional strategies used by speakers of each system. Knowing more than one language allows participation with individuals of differing cultural groups, expanding qualitatively our social possibilities. A simple graph may help to place the bits aid pieces forming this worldview into a cohesive whole:

Interaction among these components (sometimes referred to as form, meaning, and function by linguists) are the basis for one’s worldview. Even more fascinating is that the components vary from culture to culture in all aspects, hence the differing visions of the world held by each group. Thus, the process of learning a second language (or becoming bilingual) is more than mastery of a tool: it may effect changes in the components and cause a reconfiguring of their interrelationships (note the dotted lines)—in other words, an expansion of one’s view of the world as well.

Intercultural experiences provide an injection of another language-culture. Contact with individuals of other language and cultural backgrounds not only opens a door to exploring another worldview but also ultimately provokes questions about one’s own values and assumptions. Intercultural exposure provides opportunities not only for learning about others but also for gaining new perspectives on oneself. It affords an excellent way to understand language and culture as mediators in our lives. The fabled Don Juan recognized this and often chided his apprentice Castaneda, saying: “Who in hell do you think you are to say the world is thus and so just because you think it is. Who gave you the authority? The world is a strange place… full of mystery and awe” (Castaneda, A Separate Reality).

Language and Culture Interrelated

Most persons concerned with language (such as language teachers, translators and interpreters, bilingual educators, intercultural trainers) acknowledge that language and culture are interrelated. Yet they often lack explicit understanding of this interrelationship and how to address it, except in often trivial ways. An example is the teacher of Spanish who shows slides of a bullfight in an attempt to introduce “culture,” or the intercultural expert who deals with generic cross-cultural communication processes but fails to acknowledge the specifics of how a given language mediates those processes. For the language teacher, the issue is rather how to teach language within a constant culture reference of which that language is an expression. To state the problem another way, the task is not simply to teach new ways to say old things (i.e., new symbols for old thoughts) but rather to aid in the discovery that a new language system leads to new ways of perceiving, of classifying and categorizing, of interacting, and to new ways of thinking about the world. For the interpreter and translator, the challenge of how to convey thought not only across languages but also across cultures is a constant challenge. For the bilingual educator, this understanding becomes a source for a renewed commitment toward the development and maintenance of bilingualism not only for the limited-English speaker but also for all children. And for the intercultural expert, the issue may be to integrate language as a more prominent aspect of intercultural orientation, not simply as “tool” but as the system that best reflects and affects culture.

The psycholinguistic distinction of compound and coordinate bilingualism touches on this point. On the one hand, compound bilingualism is a type of bilingualism that typically develops in classrooms where the target language is learned with and through constant reference to one’s native tongue. The student learns new “equivalents” for saying what she or he has always said. Coordinate bilingualism, on the other hand, results from acquiring each language directly, in separate contexts and with no reference to the other (as with so many bilingual children), Each language used reflects different ways of perceiving, conjuring up different configurations of the world, and is communicated through very distinct modes.

Classroom language learners, however, are not always limited to compound functioning, nor are coordinate bilinguals limited to separate functioning. Increased use of a second language in naturalistic settings may move the person toward coordinate functioning. The kind of classroom activities selected may also further or hamper this goal. Likewise, analytical study of language may cause the coordinate bilingual to become increasingly aware of connections across two formerly unrelated codes.

Transcending

For some, second language learning may always be strictly an intellectual endeavor. But for those who want a second language to interact and communicate, it may lead to much more. Acquisition of another language and entry into another culture offer the possibility of transcending the limitations of one’s own worldview. “If you want to know about water, don’t ask a goldfish,” someone once said. Those who have never learned a second language nor entered another culture may be much like the goldfish, taking for granted the milieu in which it has always existed.

As people concerned with languages and cultures, then, we recognize their importance toward entering another worldview. Entry into another worldview most probably will result in developing an appreciation for the diversity and richness of human beings, along with a concomitant shift of perspective. This shift in perspective is

what one writer described as “the greatest revolution in the world—one which occurs with the head, within the mind” (Ferguson, The Aquarian Conspiracy). We may indeed have a significant role in that revolution through our lifelong involvement with languages and cultures—one which leads to greater tolerance, respect, and understanding.
For this to happen, we need the attitudes, awareness, knowledge, and skills that will make us better global citizens, able to empathize with and to understand other persons on their own terms. Exposure to more than one language and one culture in a positive context offers such a promise.

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