

# **FIRST LANGUAGES IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE: THOUGHTS ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

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## **Introduction**

Language has been primarily seen, and given attention, as a tool of communication. It possesses, however, a variety of functions, some of which relate to human development, while others are connected with ethnic identity and nation building (Vasiljev 1995: 697). Especially functions related to human development are as intrinsic to language as its communication function is believed to be, and are equally important.

These can be described as: (1) development of human mind and emotionality, (2) accumulation of knowledge and values, (3) creation of works of art and science, and (4) transmission of knowledge, cultural values and identity through generations. Any language that serves the society of its speakers by exercising all these functions can be considered a developed, full-fledged language.

In a way, “development of human mind and emotionality” and “accumulation of knowledge and values” are even more intrinsic to language than communication itself. It is because these are immediate aspects of ‘language’ in its proper, Saussurean sense, language as a semiotic system, while communication is a function of ‘speech’, which itself is a derivative of language. There can hardly be any speech without language.

Where does language reside? Humans, unlike apes, may well have an implicit, innate disposition for language acquisition, encoded in their genes. However, their true language competence, i.e. “possession of a required skill” Webster’s 1996: 417) that will enable them to produce and understand utterances in a certain language, comes after years of intense training (if the business their mothers, and sometimes fathers, so adamantly engage in may be dubbed so). Language becomes implanted and internalized in the children’s minds in the process.

Implantation and internalization of language in a developing individual usually, and best, takes place as a result of transmission of corresponding information from parents and other fellow human beings that normally belong to the same language community. In this sense, a language resides in a certain human community or society, being replicated in the multitude of minds of the members of such a community.

Though details of this process of internalization still need some clarification, its main factors are known well enough. They are all derived from the fact that language is a system of two-sided arbitrary signs. These are, as explained by de Saussure (1916), twins

of mental images made of sounds of speech arbitrarily connected to other mental images of discrete elements of the outside world received through the infant's (child's or adult's, for that matter) five senses (Vasiljev 1997). The process of language internalization is a process of implantation of such signs as well as of the conventional operational devices connecting the latter into statements, or grammar, into the human brain.

This process has naturally its biochemical and physiological side on the molecular and cellular level, the study of which, first promoted by Wilber G. Penfield (Penfield and Roberts 1959, Vasiljev 1997), is being given much new supporting evidence (Nelson and Bloom 1997, Greenough and Black 1992, Elbert et al. 1995). Thus it can be said that for all practical purposes, cognition and language acquisition (Vasiljev 1997), and the development of human brain, are inseparable (though distinct) processes. The deeper the language competence in a developing individual, the greater his or her chances for advanced cognition, the richer the neural equipment, capacity and potential of his or her brain.

Any individual that can fully express his or her thoughts and emotions through language, who can use language to acquire rich knowledge and cultural values, and to express his or her verbal creativity, is a linguistically full-fledged human being. The role of language competence for human development can hardly be overestimated or overemphasized. Regarding language as a mere tool of communication is clearly inadequate.

## **First language: A socio-linguistic approach**

Acquired in childhood through natural practice in family environment, a full-fledged language in a linguistically full-fledged individual is a phenomenon that can seldom be matched by competence in another language acquired by any means of formal education. Rich and diversified vocabulary and perfect command of the acoustic side of speech are its most obvious characteristics. Moreover, it is remarkable because of the development of what is usually called linguistic intuition, that is “the ability of the native speaker to make linguistic judgments, as of the grammaticality, ambiguity, equivalence, or nonequivalence of sentences” (Webster’s 1996: 1002). This enables the native speaker to achieve factual exactitude and social adequacy of expression, as well as to display verbal creativity.

‘Native language’, or ‘mother tongue’ have been terms traditionally used to describe “a language acquired by a person before or to the exclusion of any other language” (Webster’s 1996: 1280). These terms have also been generally associated with the characteristics of what we have described as “full-fledged language in a linguistically full-fledged individual”. In psycholinguistics and socio-linguistics, the term ‘first language’ has been adopted to describe the language an individual commands the best, partly to avoid the emotional overtones of the other terms, partly to achieve higher terminological adequacy for multilingual environments where individuals become exposed to several languages. This is especially true for the situation of many migrant communities where young people’s ‘mother tongue’ (language of their family) and their

‘first language’ (language that they command the best) are not necessarily the same. In educational practice, the term ‘pupil’s own language’ is also used. ‘Foreign languages’, or ‘second’ and ‘third’ languages, only partly internalized, are usually functionally underutilized: they are used only for communication, which itself may be rather limited.

In principle, the relationship between a developing individual and any given language is arbitrary. Any individual, at the early stages of his or her development, can internalize any language, no matter how different it may be from the language of his or her natural parents or of what is referred to, in Malaysia, as race. This can be observed, for instance, in cases of interethnic child adoption.

However, practically, the choice of language to be internalized is strictly conditioned by the developing individual’s social environment: the language imposed will be the vernacular of the given family or community. This seemingly ambivalent arbitrary-and-mandatory relationship is similar to the limited nature of what is known as the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. It means that while the relationship between the acoustic image and a meaning of a word is in most cases arbitrary (there is no reason why ‘dog’ should be called ‘d-o-g’, in fact, it is called, in various languages, differently), in each language community words normally cannot be replaced, at will, by others. Therefore, usually the same words are being passed down the generations by tradition, allowing very little room for substantial variation. Both phenomena are direct consequences of the social character of language.

Wherever changes of social environment in relation to language are involved, first languages of individuals or groups of individuals can be changed. A child's first language can be easily replaced, under certain circumstances, during its formative years. In isolated migrant families, especially in families involving inter-ethnic marriages in the first generation, the original first language will be normally replaced in the second generation by the language of the new social environment. The original family language will then keep the status of a second language, or loose ground altogether. Disintegrating small aboriginal ethnic communities may show other instances of such a process. However, it is also known that comparatively small linguistic communities have been subsisting for centuries. In general, it can be said that the time frame in which a language community maintains its own language as first language depends on various and multiple factors: on how much the community is compact, how big its size is, how much its members migrate, how prestigious its language (and culture, especially religion) is perceived to be by the members of the community etc. The bigger the variety of factors by which its linguistically compact character is supported, the less likely it is that the community will lose its language or the 'first language' status of its language. In compact communities, 'ethnic processes' or 'ethnic changes' tend to work very slowly.

Finally, in comparatively large linguistically compact populations, such as those in Malay rural areas, or especially in such national environments as Japan, Korea, Vietnam and Thailand (or England, Germany, France, and my own country, the Czech Republic, for that matter), the 'first', the 'native language', is the only language for large masses of people. Being the best-internalized semiotic system, it fulfills all functions of a full-

fledged language in individuals and their immediate social environment, to the extent required by the respective society in its stage of development and to the level of the individual's education. In these environments, though other languages can be taught, with great expense and more or less limited results, an individual's, not to say a community's or even nation's 'first language' cannot be changed. As a Czech poet put it at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when describing the situation of a Czech-speaking mother of a socially up moving son in their foreign-dominated country: "she is not stubborn / she cannot speak otherwise" (Bezruc 1895). It can be added with much justification: nor does this language need to be replaced, as it is a full-fledged language allowing the development of linguistically (and culturally) full-fledged individuals in a culturally full-fledged society.

### **Globalization and human development**

An unprecedented development of communication technologies and growing international cooperation are creating a global environment with fewer technical and political restrictions of international communication flows. If international peace can be maintained, this trend will hopefully continue. But even now, when the gradual implementation of the new European common currency is about to become a reality, the "border-less world" supposed to be in the making is still largely a metaphor. A world without restrictions on movements of goods and people will take much more time to develop. It is possible that more people will migrate to live in other countries and more people will be able to go and practice their trades and professions abroad, although formidable restrictions on international human movements can still be expected to persist

in the foreseeable future. And as far the possibility of massive mingling of populations is concerned, there is little evidence, that regional and global ‘ethnic processes’ may start working any faster.

The existing large compact masses of population speaking their own language are likely to subsist for centuries. Hundreds of languages will continue to be used as first languages. It is obvious that native speakers of certain large international languages, as English, have been, and will continue to be, privileged as to accessibility to a substantial part of the world’s cultural heritage. Although competence in foreign languages will be increasingly desirable for various forms of communication, for the large masses of all nations, the sharing in the world’s cultural values, especially works of art and those of humanitarian sciences, will not be possible without the mediating role of their own languages. Even the daily political, economic and cultural life of most nations would be seriously hampered, if the development of their own language were not given adequate attention. Therefore, the last thing societies will be able, and willing, to surrender control of, except in the (hopefully) unlikely event of them being stripped of their fundamental sovereign rights, is education and culture in its broadest sense.

At the international level, the “global village” will be multilingual and multicultural. Due to easier technical access to quality information, there will be more opportunities for human development, but participation of individuals therein will depend on the level of their education the heights of which can best (and in many cases only) be achieved in their first language.

## **The implications for language policy**

The obvious conclusion is that the “global village” will be more conducive to human development, if the development of the existing first languages is given more priority. The opposite scenario would be that many people would be compelled to give up intellectual excellence in exchange for an ability to maintain relatively rudimentary or simple communication in a foreign language, reduced to a lingua franca or ‘bahasa pasar’, without being able to compete with native speakers of the “bigger” languages in most fields of intellectual activity. The case for the ‘mother tongue’ or ‘first language’ development and education is a case for quality education, for quality human development.

How do we reconcile the priorities of human development with the growing imperative of international communication?

First, it must be recognized, that competence in foreign languages, like most other sophisticated human activities, requires formation and maintenance of a numerous and diversified highly trained professional work force: teachers, translators, interpreters.

Second, all information related to knowledge and skills that have to be imparted to large masses of people, as well as important works of world literature and humanities will

have to be translated into the relevant 'mother tongues'. This will only be possible if some outstanding cultural personalities and scholars who have acquired a deep understanding of one or more foreign languages are willing to engage in such translations.

Is this possible? To take but one example: in my small and strictly monolingual nation of ten million people, 80% of the recently published Random House list of the 100 best novels this century written in English (Book list 15.08.1998) have been translated into Czech, some of them several times. The first translation of Steinbeck's novel 'The Grapes of Wrath' was done from a proof copy provided by the author and was published in Prague in May 1939, simultaneously with the English original in the U.S.A. The early Czech linguists and writers believed, not without reason, that translations of outstanding literary works of other nations would prove that the Czech language, only recently believed to be on the brink of extinction, was becoming as developed and sophisticated as any of the contemporary great European languages: German, French, or English. With this in mind, Milton's Paradise Lost was translated into Czech early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Third, mother tongue education will be highly enhanced if parents are encouraged and empowered to share their 'mother tongue' competence with their children since the age of infancy, through the pre-school and early school age, to implant in them a rich vocabulary and develop in them the power of fine conceptual and circumstantial discrimination and a sharp linguistic intuition. This can be done by most parents, regardless of their social class and degree of material well-being if guided by the recent

findings of cognitive neuroscience (Vasiljev 1997). This process will be helped if “love for books” and reading habits are developed in children since infancy by parents willing to read appropriate works of fiction for their children to listen.

Fourth, learning of a second language should be encouraged at an early age, wherever possible, through natural communication with peers belonging to another language community. It is obvious that, in this respect, multilingual countries like Malaysia have a natural advantage.

Experience shows that a good competence in one’s first language is likely to enhance a good natural acquisition of yet another language, which under optimum conditions can come close to the competence in one’s first language. Meanwhile, the competence in one’s own language, already sufficiently internalized, would not be negatively affected. Anecdotal evidence shows that natural acquisition of two languages at an early age helps the respective individual get good possession of even more languages later on in life. In this way, the command of two or more languages can proceed from the stage of ‘bahasa pasar’ to more cultivated levels.

Thus the case for a sophisticated ‘mother tongue’ education is, in fact, a case for quality in language acquisition in general.

In short, there is every reason for making the ‘first languages’ the number one languages on the agenda of national language-policy makers.

## **Bio-data**

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