

## Where Words Leave Off

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*And speaking the language they speak is not just uttering the words; any more than understanding the language is just 'recognizing' the words. It is carrying on a conversation, for instance; or it may be writing reports, or listening to a play in the theatre. It is being someone to whom the rest of us can speak and get an answer; to whom we can tell something and with whom we can make a joke... All this, and of course immeasurably more, belong to speaking the language. (Rhees, 1970, 67)*

### Perception and language

As language teachers, the above words sound like the ideal goals for the study of a language, but in fact, the words were written by a philosopher. For years, mankind has been fascinated by language, realizing that human thought and language are inextricably intertwined. Sapir and Whorf, linguists and anthropologists, did much to make the study of languages an objective field and one which showed the connection between culture and languages. Sapir went so far as to say that "...humans are very much at the mercy of language concerning what constitutes 'social reality'" (Zerzan, 237). Whorf studied the cultural determinants of language. "To use language is to limit oneself to the modes of perception already inherent in that language" (Zerzan, 237). One example of this is the labelling of colors as here described by historian, Carroll Quigley: We in English label the colors in the rainbow as red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet, but the Bantu in Africa place green and blue in

one category and divide the red, orange, and yellow part of the spectrum into a large number of basic colors with differing names. They see a shore, lake, and sky scene as a boring panorama of a single color. "...conversely, an African view, which to us seems to be a dull expanse of semi-parched soil with dry grasses, may seem to them to be an exciting scene of many different colors" (Fersh, 234). Language is intertwined with culture, and as a result, neither language nor culture can be understood without some knowledge of the other.

"Consider such words as poverty, underdeveloped, hot, cold, democratic, progressive, backward, and the like. Dictionaries carry definitions, but people carry connotations—and it is connotations that influence thinking and rule behavior" (Fersh, 232). Linguists study meaning, and the real search for meaning might begin where words leave off. Consider those studying English as a second or foreign language, for how they learn the positional slots used for adjectives is one very confusing point of grammar. As Whorf suggests, native speakers of English say with ease '...a large black and white hunting dog'. However, the speaker from a radically different language may think that it is perfectly all right to say "...'hunting white black large a dog.' We see the error made by most people who attempt to deal with such social questions of language—they naively suppose that speech is nothing but a lining up of LEXATIONS, and that this is all one needs in order to do any and every kind of rational thinking; the far more important thought materials provided by structure and configurative rapport are beyond their horizons" (Whorf, 138, 139). Thinking about these different ideas makes it imperative for the language teacher to understand the complexity of what he / she is teaching. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the complexity

of language acquisition / learning that goes beyond the words and grammar of the language.

Doi offers one more caution in thinking about thought and language: Without doubt, different languages seem to express different types of awareness of reality, and in this respect a language can be said to condition to some extent, the thinking of those who use it. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to conclude from this that thought depends entirely on language and that thought without language is impossible. The very fact that we can understand that different languages express different worlds of significance is in itself, a sign that thought essentially transcends language (Doi, 68-69).

Doi continues his explanation by defining the word *amae* in Japanese and then explaining that such a word does not exist in Western languages. In his original thinking about the topic, he thought that the reason for this concept and word in Japanese is "...that the Japanese are particularly sensitive to *amae* and set great store by it, whereas Westerners are not and do not..." (Doi, 68). However, in his later writings Doi shows that once Westerners understand the concept of *amae*, they too see it within their own cultures. They simply have not a label for it. ...the American males' imperious 'When is dinner going to be ready ?' ...is an example of the feeling and is a common form of behavior in cultures which do not have a special word for it (Doi, 171).

The content of a language curriculum, therefore, is far more than the teaching of the lexicon, the grammar, the sound system or even the literature of a particular language (although the literature is perhaps more closely connected to the culture and thereby the thought processes of the

people, than the basic framework of the language's structure). Of course, all of these and more need to be included in learning a language—all of these and immeasurably more.

**Analysis of Japanese college students' as language learners sociolinguistically, psycholinguistically, multiculturally**

Japanese students of English are aware when talking about their language learning that the language is more than the subject matter they were taught in junior high school and high school. "I didn't like English in junior high school. I guess I blame my teachers. It was just a desk subject and I wanted to speak it." (See Appendix of interview summary. An original tape of the interview is available upon request). Most of the students when interviewed said that when they speak English with native speakers of English that they feel very tense. When asked to explain their feelings, students talk about a fear of a lack of mutual understanding. They worry about a lack of vocabulary. They worry about making errors that will make the native speaker find it difficult to follow what they are talking about. They worry about their feelings of tenseness, and these very feelings seem to make their speaking English even more difficult. "But when I'm tense I make even more mistakes, and my English simply falls apart."

These students also recognized that they can speak English with more ease and greater chance of being understood if they are speaking to their fellow classmates. When asked how they feel about talking with classmates, students replied as follows: "I didn't feel so tense. I think that they'll be able to understand me anyway." "It's just that my English is like theirs, and I think we'll be able to understand each other if we try

and we do. I make mistakes, but so does she. We want to understand so we try to figure it out.”

Theorists from a variety of fields, related to language learning and teaching in varying degrees, (sociolinguistics, social psychology, and sociology) would agree with the thoughts these young people have about their own language learning experiences. “To understand why individuals speak the way they do, we must know something not only about their descriptive characteristics, but also about the manner in which they interpret ‘the situation’...” (Giles & Smith, 65). The interactive interface between speakers and listeners is a good place to begin to attempt to understand ‘the situation.’ The words are of course a part of the necessary description of this interaction, but also the interpretation of the exchange by both of the interlocutors might also shed some light upon this situation.

Research and theory over the past 20 years has been directed in this area. For many years, language learners’ errors were assumed to be caused solely by interference from the speaker’s first language (NL). “Although no one denies that native language (NL) interference exists, many types of second language variation have now been identified, and there is a growing realization that one of the most important is socially conditioned variation” (Beebe & Zuengler, 195). Thus when students say that they are more comfortable in speaking with their classmates, they are reflecting this “truth” on several levels. 1. Students are speaking the same interlanguage. The mistakes that they make are often understood or overlooked, for their classmates make many of the same mistakes. Some of those errors may be due to NL interference. Some may be due to developmental causes in SLA or some due to other causes, and it is these

other causes that we are now considering. 2. Students using their 'transitional dialects' (Corder 1971) are simultaneously influenced developmentally and sociolectally. "And in addition, the interlanguage continuum might be more appropriately schematized as multiple continua spanning NL social dialects and TL social dialects" (Beebe & Zuengler, 198). In other words, language learners are affected not only by their native language but also by social influences as they learn or acquire a new language. Some of these social pressures will be of a positive nature and some of a negative nature. 3. Students' psychological motivation for learning the language also influence the degree of success learners have in language acquisition. Gardner and Lambert's research (1972) on integrative and instrumental motivation has shown this in the bilingual setting of French Canadians. "Motivation (Gardner's definition) here refers to those affective characteristics orienting the student to try to acquire elements of L2 and includes the desire the student has for achieving such a goal as well as the amount of effort expended in this direction" (Giles & Byrne, 26). Both those who want to integrate with the TL culture and those who have very clear, instrumental purposes (such as using the language in their work) become excellent language learners and have success in acquiring the TL. Many students in most language classes in a foreign setting have neither clear-cut instrumental or integrative goals. Most simply want to be able to speak the language to some extent and to be able to express their own thinking to another person from a different culture. (See Appendix).

Motivation alone is not the only psychological factor as Giles and Byrne suggest. Situational anxiety affects how learners learn the TL. If students feel tension as they learn in the classroom, or the students feel

embarrassed, unsure and awkward about speaking, language learning success is inhibited to some extent. Even with foreign teachers, students show some signs of tension as they speak English. "...with some of them (teachers), I know they can understand Japanese, and I relax and am able to use English without being too tense. But with some of them, I still feel tense, for I don't understand what they say even yet (after 2 years of college work, added by the author), and I think that in detail, they don't understand me either." These words indicate that the student knows that understanding is more than the words involved, although those are important too. Those that understand Japan and Japanese, even if they speak mostly English in the classroom, impart an atmosphere that is picked up on by the students so that a feeling of mutual understanding develops. This same student went on to say that she can really only exchange greetings with a foreigner and remain relaxed. A desire to remain relaxed is there. Students would like to be able to be relaxed and still be able to speak. For them, it seems that speaking while relaxed would be one way of defining language learning success.

### *Sociolinguistically*

Students' language acquisition seems to be influenced by their interlanguage—the degree of developmental acquisition and sociolectal influence they experience. Classroom learning can hopefully help the developmental learning. As students choose to follow the interlanguage dialect or the target language dialect, their future learning of the second language is affected. Teachers need some awareness of this possibility. For whatever reasons, students psychologically might be choosing to become imperfect in their second language mastery.

In addition to this, social pressures from the learner's group and the target language group influences learning. Accommodation Theory perhaps best explains this phenomenon when "...people adjust their speech in order to express their values and intention to their interlocutors...a shifting toward the interlocutor is termed convergence, a shift away is called divergence" (Beebe & Zuengler, 201). An example of this might be a job interview in which the prospective employee will converge his / her speech toward that of those conducting the interview. In our language classes, an example of this might be when students try to adopt English pronunciation with a teacher from Britain and American pronunciation with a teacher from the U. S. Research in this area has found that when children were interviewed in Thailand with different interviewers with different ethnic backgrounds, that the children adjusted their speech accordingly.

We found that the Chinese-Thai children used a greater proportion of Chinese-influenced variants when speaking Thai to the ethnic Chinese interviewer. The interviewer herself, as we pointed out, didn't use the variants in her speech. The Chinese-Thai children, while appearing to linguistically diverge away from their interviewer's actual speech characteristics, may in fact be psychologically converging toward their ethnic Chinese interviewer. ...Converging to a stereotype rather than toward actual speech (Beebe & Zuengler, 208).

With whom students identify also influences their learning. "...the more students identify strongly with their ethnic group and see their own language as a valued dimension of its membership and make insecure inter-



ethnic comparisons, the more they will be reluctant to learn the dominant group's language to anything like native proficiency" (Giles & Byrne, 28). This social psychological aspect is tied in with the "...the linguistic vitality of a culture and its attractiveness to outgroup members" (Giles & Byrne, 31). An example of this was the research done by Bourhis and Giles on speakers of Welsh:

Until fairly recently, many Welshmen felt that an important strategy for securing an adequate social identity was to attempt 'to pass' as an individual into the dominant. English social group—for example by losing their Welsh language skills, assuming an English accent, anglicizing their names, moving into England and so forth. However, for reasons as yet undefined, there has been a sudden awareness in the late 1960s that such individualistic strategies of 'social mobility' or passing (Tajfel, 1974) : in terms of linguistic and cultural assimilation are not the only possibilities open to Welshmen. Nevertheless, the Welsh accent (in English) has come to be a symbol of group solidarity too...Bourhis (1973) found that the 'Welsh accent can also serve as a marker of ethnic identity...the mere possession of a Welsh accent was as effective in eliciting a favourable reaction from (Welsh) subjects as speaking the language itself...' (Bourhis & Giles, 120-121).

Accent divergence, language switching, and changes in the content of what is said are all means of emphasizing one's ethnic identity. As our students feel comfortable speaking their interlanguage with their classmates, a teacher can listen to their accent divergence from the TL norm. Fellow classmates do not complain about this divergence. They seem, in fact, to converge towards one another emphasizing their Japanese-like En-

glish pronunciation. Even if asked to correct their linguistic forms, often students will retain their Japanese-like pronunciation. Perhaps this is evidence of their ethnic identity at work. A teacher can ask for convergence on one level and have students respond, but students may still diverge at the same time, by changing the linguistic form but retaining a Japanese-like pronunciation. Whether this is done consciously or not is not known at this time, but might be of interest for further study.

### *Psycholinguistically*

Students psychological attitudes toward the language and the cultures of the language being studied are also important. When asked what they think about either England or America, students showed many positive signs that they like and admire the cultures of both English speaking countries, as well as other English speaking countries in the world, but they were also quick to point out, that they want to view all countries equally. Words such as these: "I want to go (abroad) again. "I was fascinated by the people." indicate positive feelings for the foreign cultures. "I'm not really afraid of foreigners anymore, although I used to be, for I didn't know any, but now I'm not afraid. I worry that I won't be able to understand or they won't be able to understand me. But I want to be able to talk with foreigners and tell them what I am thinking." This student's ideas indicate a gradual change over time in her own attitudes. Hopefully, with more experience with foreigners, she will continue to broaden her ideas about the world and language usage.

"At first, when I just came from high school, I was very embarrassed to speak English with a classmate. It seemed odd, for I hadn't done it before...Now I think talking with my classmates in English is easier than

with a foreigner. I get too tense still with a foreigner. Talking with classmates, I don't have to use the same level of English that I need to use with a foreigner and that's all right." In thinking about their own learning, students such as the one just quoted show insights which coincide with what researchers and theorists have said about language learning. "There is a regularity in research findings here; non-standard forms attract high ratings in terms of group solidarity..." (Edwards, 167). The interlanguage of the group is perceived positively by the learner even while recognizing that elements exist within that interlanguage which mark it as less than perfect in terms of linguistic competence. Teachers are working to correct the errors of their students. Consciously or unconsciously students of a language battle within themselves to master the language and at the same time retain some sense of their own group identity—marking the learned language via their interlanguage usage.

A study of a native Japanese speaker who has clear integrative reasons for acquiring English for his business purposes and life in Hawaii indicates some of the complexity of success and / or failure in language learning. Wes, as a Japanese "...belongs to a group that is roughly equal (nonsubordinate, nondominant) to Americans, culturally, technologically, and economically, with the two groups having generally high respect for each other. As an individual, he expresses very favorable attitudes toward and liking for Americans" (Schmidt, 141). Wes by his preference and living style participates more in American ways of life than in Japanese ones in Hawaii. He has indefinite plans to remain in the U. S., and his work demands a command of English in order to be successful. Wes's personality is an outgoing one with self-esteem and self-confidence. He did not show a strong desire to study English formally and could not

read or write it at the beginning of the 3 year study. "Wes has been committed to learning English through natural interaction (with friends, shopkeepers, and other workers), while avoiding as much as possible any analytic study of the language itself" (Schmidt, 143). By the end of the study, Schmidt was uncertain himself as to whether or not Wes was a success as a language learner or a failure. The interpretation

"...depends very much on one's definition of language and of the content of SLA. If language is seen as a means of initiating, maintaining, and regulating relationships and carrying on the business of living, then perhaps Wes is a good learner. If one views language as a system of elements and rules, with syntax playing a major role, then Wes is clearly a very poor learner...Several sociolinguists with whom I have discussed his case have given similar evaluations, sometimes proclaiming him a superior language learner...Grammar teachers, on the other hand, generally consider him a disaster...Wes's own evaluation of his English ability is mixed, recognizing both strengths and weaknesses" (Schmidt, 168).

Wes did not have social distance between himself and those of the TL group. He had positive attitudes both towards the language and those who speak it. He also had an interest in and need for meaningful communication. He had good attitudes and a positive personality. All of these factors have contributed to a communicative competence, but all of these positives did not help him improve his grammatical competence. Wes's attitudes about learning grammar were perhaps the most significant reason for his failure. "...the idea that if affective factors are positive then cognitive processes will function automatically, effortlessly, and unconsciously to put together conclusions about grammar is overly optimis-

tic...most language learners would agree that hard work is involved as well" (Schmidt, 173).

This study has been presented in some detail in order that the complexity of the issues might come to light. Language learning is not a straight forward process in which the learner embarks with a clear goal in mind, and after some study and interaction within the TL (target language) finds himself a competent success. Rather the learner brings to the language acquisition / learning situation many attitudes, goals, and personality factors that affect the learner's success or failure. At the same time, interaction with members of the learner's group and interaction with speakers of the TL will also affect success or failure. Perceived attitudes of the NL group and those of the TL group will also affect learning. Sometimes learners will want to converge and speak as much like the TL speakers as possible. Sometimes the learners will want to diverge in order to retain some sense of group identity or personal identity with a group or culture.

### ***Multiculturally***

Often members of one culture use their second language while following the rules of speaking of their own language. An example of this:

A Japanese friend invited me to go to the Student Union for coffee. She started telling me that she was going home to Japan for a visit, then that she was going to go with an American man we both knew, then that she thought her parents would like him, then that he was not a typical American male, then that he understood the Japanese mentality and way of life. After listening attentively for what seemed like a very long time, I said, 'Michiko, are you trying to tell me that

you are getting married ?' With an exasperated glare, she exclaimed, 'Yes !' I realized I had been crass. I did not allow her to follow the Japanese sociolinguistic norm of avoiding a blunt statement and using instead an artful array of sentences that imply the point (Beebe, 29-30).

The social norms that Michiko in the above example was following were ones that she valued and found hard to give up even as she used English with different rules for telling about an upcoming event such as marriage.

In order for communication to take place on a meaningful level, even if both interlocutors are using English competently, if they are from different cultural backgrounds, difficulties can easily arise.

Cultural awareness can be seen as a recognition that culture affects perception and that culture influences values, attitudes and behavior...Language is...a key component of communication, and though the accurate use of linguistic forms is necessary for effective communication, in most communicative situations, the communicators do more than simply talk to each other in grammatically well-constructed sentences; there has to be familiarity with the culture of the language being used by the communicators" (Gaston, 2,1).

For those of us teaching Japanese students, it is necessary that we understand some of the basic premises of cultural perceptions in Japan. We then can be in a more favorable position to teach the differences between these perceptions from those of Western cultures. A study between Japanese and American / international kindergartens in Japan indicates some of these basic differences found in school settings even from a very

early age of the learners. Differences began in the very seating arrangements of the students. For the Americans, students were seated at individual desks or on the floor. All Japanese students, on the other hand, were seated around tables in groups from six to eight. Each group had its own identifying name, perhaps that of a flower, and was the basic unit for all activities in the kindergarten. The teacher gave all of the instructions to the children in the Japanese kindergartens including the instructions for this research. The researchers (including those able to speak Japanese) were allowed to give the instructions in the American / international kindergartens. American children began to draw as soon as they received a piece of paper. In Japanese schools, the children waited until all of the papers had been distributed, and then the groups looked at each other and chatted a bit before they would begin to draw. The order in which they drew what was instructed, members of their families, differed. Japanese children drew in the same, or almost the same order, father, mother, older brothers or sisters and the artist drew himself last. American children drew much more at random. Some drew themselves first. The results were that anyone who looked at the drawings could divide the 100 pictures quite easily into those which had been drawn by Japanese and those drawn by Americans (Condon, 6., 7).

Much has written about the cultural differences between the Japanese and Americans.

...the Japanese are encouraged to think first of being part of the group. 'We' always comes before 'I'. We of this family, we of this nation, or just 'we' who are together in a room talking. One is never fully independent; one must always be conscious of others..For Americans the individual, not the group, is basic. So many of the

values Americans hold dear—equality, democracy, freedom, privacy, and even progress are bound up with the American view of individualism (Condon, 9).

Condon is very clear in pointing out that these differences are not just interesting but are in fact emotional issues. Americans can become upset when they hear Japanese begin with “We Japanese.” They want the personal opinion of the speaker. At the same time, the Japanese can find Americans to be too egoistical and seemingly rude and anti-social, not considering the feelings of the group. Cultural differences, from early education practices to how the language is spoken, the rules of speaking as it were, show that Japanese and Americans have very different ways. Some awareness of these differences is a must for language learners, for teachers of languages, and to include as part of a language learning curriculum.

When students and teachers learn cultural awareness, they come to value and appreciate their own cultural roots and to value and appreciate other cultures as well. It is important that such learners also be able to see strengths and weaknesses in their own cultures and in others.

...when we can see the strengths and weakness of the cultures we embrace, we need a set of skills that can be labelled the ability to respect...It is important to note...that the ability to respect still allows for disagreement and criticism. We can, after all, adopt an attitude of ‘live and let live’ while both showing respect for another way of doing things and questioning whether it is the only or best way (Gaston, 5).



Edwards has gone so far as to say that "...all education worthy of the name is multicultural. It should be part and parcel of education generally to show an awareness of diverse cultures and to develop an appreciation of human difference..." (Edwards, 131). Teaching language is a complex subject including more than the words and sounds, more than the grammar, more than the rules of speaking of a particular culture, more than an understanding of how learners actually take in language and learn it. All of these and more. A learner learns "...however fumblingly, what it makes sense to say. He comes to have some sense of how different remarks have something to do with one another. That is why he can answer you and ask you things and why he begins to follow a conversation or to carry on a conversation himself" (Rhees, 1970, 80-81, in Gaita, 104). What defines what it is to make sense is the shared understanding of those who speak the language. That shared understanding is dynamic. Learning a language can be an exciting process of discovering what it is to make sense.

### Appendix

How do you feel when you speak English with a foreigner? How do you feel when you speak English with a classmate in a conversation class?

I feel tense when I speak with a foreigner. I'm afraid she / he won't understand me. I'm afraid I won't understand him / her. I don't have enough words. I make too many mistakes. But when I'm tense, I make even more mistakes, and my English simply falls apart.

What about with your classmates ?

I don't feel so tense. I think that they'll be able to understand me anyway.

Does that mean you are relying on Japanese then ?

No, not really. It's just that my English is like theirs, and I think we'll be able to understand each other if we try, and we do. I make mistakes, but so does she. We want to understand, so we try to figure it out.

Do you think you learn when you are working in pairs with your classmates ?

At first, when I just came from high school, I was very embarrassed to speak English with a classmate. It seemed odd for I hadn't done it before. At junior high school and high school, English was only a subject to be studied at my desk. I rather liked it, but I wanted to speak it with foreigners and go to foreign countries, so I decided to study English. Now, I think talking with my classmates in English is easier than with a foreigner. I get too tense still with a foreigner. Talking with classmates, I don't have to use the same level of English that I need to use with a foreigner, and that's all right.

Even with your teachers ?

Well, with some of them, I know they can understand Japanese, and I relax and am able to use English without being too tense. But with some of them, I still feel tense, for I don't understand what they say even yet, and I think that in detail, they don't understand me either. This makes me want to speak better so I can understand, but it still hasn't happened.

What can you say if you are face to face with a foreigner ?

Hello.

Is that all ?

Well, that's all I can say and still be relaxed.

Why did you study English ?

I liked it when I was in junior high school. I liked to study it at my desk. I wanted to know more about it, so I came here, but talking all of the time is difficult for me.

Do you still like the reading and translating ?

Yes.

What about you ?

I didn't like English in junior high school. I guess I blame my teachers. It was just a desk subject and I wanted to speak. But then I figured out how to study it and began to like it more and more. I also wanted to talk with foreigners, so I decided to come to this school.

And you ?

I had a good teacher, and he made me interested in other countries and English. I wanted to travel abroad, so in high school I went for a home stay. I couldn't speak at all, but I liked it. The family life was warm and fun. I want to go again.

What do you think about the countries where English is spoken ?

When I was a child, I lived near a U. S. army base. I was fascinated by the people. I wanted to learn English and even tried a conversation class, but it wasn't that easy. Then I decided to go abroad for a home stay. In

high school, I couldn't understand what was said during my time there, but that made me want to study harder. My high school textbook wasn't any help at all for my home stay. I wanted more classes with foreign teachers, so I came here. I am going on a home stay again during this winter. I like the life there. It's an easy place to live. Maybe I can speak a little to say what I want to say this time.

And you, you want to study England, why ?

I've always thought that England and Japan are very similar, both are island countries. I think I will understand the feelings there. I will fit in, and I think I'll like it. I'm worried though that I won't be able to manage my daily life when I first arrive, for I don't think my English is even good enough to do that yet.

And you, what do you think about such countries ?

I think they are the same as Japan. I think there is more freedom to be yourself in America. I think there are more rules to follow in England, but I think the same about all of the countries. I'm not really afraid of foreigners anymore, although I used to be for I didn't know any, but now I'm not afraid. I worry that I won't be able to understand or that they won't be able to understand me. But I want to be able to talk with foreigners and tell them what I am thinking.

A translated summary of interviews with second year English majors at Bunkyo University Women's College, Dec. 1991.

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