
Pro Rege

Volume 14 | Number 1

Article 2

September 1985

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Recommended Citation

Smalley, William A. (1985) "Learning About Language," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 14:

No. 1, 2 - 8.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol14/iss1/2

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Learning About Language

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Language,¹ if we would see it, is one of those utterly tantalizing dimensions of human experience. On the one hand, all normal speakers of a language like English or Swahili or Indonesian, no matter how little education they had, or how much, learned to use their language, and did much of their language learning early in life, before going to school. Included were learning to use a set of systems and structures, a body of social interaction, and a cognitive map of the universe, far more complex than any advanced mathematical system. On the other hand, many such Americans who carry the phenomenal body of knowledge and skills

called the English language around in their heads, and use it constantly, say they are no good at language, and are afraid to try to learn another language.

On the one hand, language is as central to the core of our humanity as anything that we could name, crucial to the transmission of culture and civilization, essential to our social lives and institutions, foundation to our education, fundamental to our religion. As much as anything else, language defines humanity. On the other hand, we take language almost completely for granted, giving it passing notice only when a purist objects to deviation from a minor (often

artificial) norm, or when a student in college displays inability (or carelessness) in handling spoken varieties appropriate to adult formal usage.

On the one hand, millions of people in Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe, the vast majority of them with very few years of education, use anywhere from two to five languages regularly, even daily, and consider them essential to normal existence. On the other hand, many typical Americans consider that to learn another language is not only impossibly difficult but also somehow unpatriotic, if that language is street Spanish in the American Southwest or in Miami. P.B. Pandit, an Indian sociolinguist, once remarked to me that the challenging phenomenon to be explained in the world is not multilingualism, which is the norm, but the monolingualism of middle and upper-class Americans and some other groups.

Why do we find multiplicity of languages so strange, when so much of the world sees them as a normal part of life?² Part of the reason, perhaps, comes from the insular chauvinism of the upper-class British who modeled much of the mores of the new country in its early years. Part of it comes from the oppression exercised during the period around the first World War, when loyalty was equated with English. Part of it comes from younger generations rejecting the languages of their parents and grandparents so as not to stand out as different in school. Part of it comes from the heavy-handedness of school systems charged with bringing uniformity to the diversity of the American scene, and insisting to generations of native speakers of English that their natural English was bad, incorrect, even subversive, by some standard, the justification for which was and is not too clear. Part of it comes from the fact that many Americans do not find any use for any other language than English in their daily lives.

Like the fish living in water, and therefore knowing nothing about water because it does not know non-water, we live in

language. We know very little in a conscious way about that enormous complex of systems which we tap moment by moment in speaking, writing, and thinking. What we do know is haphazard, folk theory from our culture and school system, self-verifying. We assume that a people like the Hmong refugees from Laos, speaking a language which has not been written long, not having had much opportunity for school, will therefore have a limited vocabulary. Our assumptions are verified when we ask them for translations into Hmong of English words, and we find in many cases that there are none. So the old folk theory that preliterate people must have a primitive language is reinforced. We do not stop to look at Hmong vocabulary to see how many Hmong words have no corresponding word in English.

The "Mathematics" of Culture

It is useful to think of the relative places of language and mathematics in American culture.³ Reading, writing, and arithmetic are the traditional core subjects in our elementary schools. The SAT test and others like it have one section for verbal and another for mathematical skills. Language and mathematics are both fundamental, and both feared. "Language anxiety" does not go by that name, but it is just as real a phenomenon as "math anxiety." And the general population sees both language and mathematics as tools. You learn to use mathematics to solve problems; you learn to use language to persuade.

There is, of course, a much deeper dimension. Mathematics is a highly abstract, highly codified communication system essential to certain kinds of knowledge in our culture—that which we generally call scientific knowledge. Physics, chemistry, geology, and the other sciences draw from mathematics, depend on mathematics for some of their most profound assumptions, models, and codes. Mathematics has been refined and honed. Its growing edges are be-

ing tested and verified.

Language, too, is a highly abstract, highly codified communication system essential to knowledge of most aspects of culture. Even mathematics itself is based on language capacities. A major difference is that we do not have a refined and honed body of theory, with which to make our language knowledge explicit on which to draw for intellectual and pragmatic purposes.

It rarely occurs to us that the relations between our thinking and our language, our culture and our language, our religion and our language may be reflexive, that each helps mold the other, not deterministically, but nevertheless powerfully. Scientific thinking includes defining, characterizing, classifying, abstracting, metaphorizing, developing taxonomic systems based on less or more generic categories, etc. These are all language activities.

Theology is language activity *par excellence* (Smalley, 1985), whether exercised by professionally trained "theologians" or by the church-pew believer. In addition to the kinds of language activities listed (above) as illustrative for science, Christian theology is based on a book, a language text, as one of its major starting points. Its constant task is to re-metaphorize the language of that book, the language through which people spoke of their experience of God in the past, so as to express experience of God in the present, in the metaphors of the present. Some of the metaphorization is banal: "the man upstairs," "Jesus is my lover." Some of it is remotely abstract: "the Ground of Being."

Theological history is peppered with arguments over metaphors: "Mother of God" vs. "Mother of Christ," "transubstantiation" vs. consubstantiation." Today there is a struggle between those who would keep a hierarchical metaphor-model of social relations between men and women in the church, and those who would adopt an egalitarian one.⁴

Because they are different symbol systems, art and music are perhaps not as completely reflexive with language as are

science and theology. They are different manifestations of human symbol-making and symbol-using abilities. Together with language, they draw on a deeper store of semiotic capacity in the brain, the capacity to symbolize, the capacity to communicate through rhythm, balance, repetition, intensity, gestalt, contrast, position in space and time, etc. But even so, art and music could not be what they are without language. They are reflexive with language to the degree that we talk about art and music, transmit them, build theories about them, and help to incorporate them in our larger culture, through language.

Language is itself capable of artistic use, of course. Many poems evoke musical metaphors in our discussion of them. Advertisers seek to present written language artistically in the layout of the page. But we know that language has its own artistic dimensions as well, not just applications of the other arts. Language art is at its greatest when the myriad cognitive and interactional systems which provide for its functions are woven together within its structural systems in ways which delicately yet powerfully reinforce each other. *Le mot juste*, the exact word for which the literary artist searches, which she seeks by writing and rewriting, inverting, reorganizing, rephrasing, is not "exact" in any absolute sense, but it is that which most powerfully harmonizes with the messages conveyed in all of the other systems and structures of the work.

Thus we create our worlds, in varying degrees, through language, through the "mathematics" of language. We do so as ordinary citizens, creatures of culture; we do so as Christians; we do so as academicians; we do so as artists. And we pay no more attention to the construction materials in creating worlds of reality than we do to the wood out of which we build our houses. In neglecting to do so we ignore an important difference. In the case of language, the "wood" is part of us: it is built into our heads; it is part of what distinguishes us from the rest of God's creation.

But as teachers of language, and other language professionals attempting to be exceptions to this generalization, we face a theoretical model of language adequate to provide a solid foundation for our work in the sense that mathematics is for science. Language is still too big, too complex, too changing for us to grasp it whole. We therefore fail in relating one application of language to another. Unfortunately, also, we are often content not to seek that holistic view.

Motives for Learning

Probably it is in the learning of "foreign" languages that the anti-language sentiment of American middle class cultures is most intense. The word "foreign" epitomizes the attitude. These were the languages our ancestors with their funny accents spoke. These are the languages used in dangerous ghettos in American cities. These are the languages spoken by the great unwashed, the underprivileged world out there which, in our view, is clamoring for the blessings of American political philosophy, American religion, and above all, American technology. And so we have created of ourselves another Rome, to which all roads lead, another Chinese "Middle Earth" from which all culture flows and to which all tribute comes. In this type of American view of reality we are surrounded by a world full of barbarians, mitigated in various degrees to the proportion they are like us. Let them learn English.

While I would insist that this description of American attitudes toward language is true, it is obviously not the whole truth. There are people who do want to learn about language, or to learn language, some of them superficially, some of them deeply. Such people have many different motives.

To avoid offense. Etiquette⁵ is a part of language use. To write a poorly typed and poorly spelled business letter to a client is in about the same category as picking your nose while you try to close a sale. Unfor-

tunately, the consequences of linguistic nose-picking are not felt until doors are closed economically or socially or in other ways because of it. So some students do not take the language etiquette issue seriously through high school and college.

Unfortunately, also, the teachers drumming on students all this time, trying to make the case for etiquette, make it bigger than it is. Students do not end up seeing the inappropriate use of language as analogous to nose-picking; instead they seem to feel that teachers find their use of language in some respects morally *wrong*, that it is *evil*, that students are less valuable persons if they use non-standard English. None of this makes any sense at all to such students in terms of the role models whom they know, and who use the condemned forms. This is especially troublesome for students brought up in a macho world for whom the standard forms have feminine overtones. To compound the problem, relatively minor offenses in etiquette (like split infinitives) are lumped together with major ones (like four-letter words for sexual activity used as profanity) into the same indigestible prohibition.

A less common, but growing type of etiquette, has been the effort by some people to try to understand the sexist implications of some English usage in order to avoid giving offense. With many it goes farther, of course, into opposition to what is felt to be an oppressive social system fostered, in part, by language use.

Power. Some people want to learn about language in order to communicate better. When students tell me this is why they are taking one of my classes it often leaves me with an uneasy feeling, wondering what unwanted communication I might be contributing to. Hitler and Jesus were both powerful communicators; somehow I would have preferred for the latter to have enhanced his language power in my class than the former, not to speak of a certain president of the United States, who is sometimes called "the Great Communicator."

But one reason for bucking the tendency to ignore language in our culture is to learn to use it for utilitarian purposes beyond our present capability. So we learn Eskimo because we want to sell refrigerators to Eskimos, or Japanese because we want to teach the Japanese about art, or Hindi because we want to teach spirituality to Hindus. Or we study speech communication or writing in our own language in order to communicate to Americans more powerfully about becoming a more glamorous person through using our toothpaste.

Identity. Most language learning goes on outside of language classes, and a lot of it

of Christianity in the USA because they talk like people in a particular group.

There are some identities which people are quite willing to acquire, adding to their repertoire of language varieties to do so. Other identities they may not be willing to take on. Even people who learn another language often do not want to sound like a native speaker so as not to be mistaken for one. It is okay to learn Spanish for power reasons, but if you speak Spanish with an American accent you will not really run the risk of being taken for a Latin. Thus the *power* motive and the *identity* motive may be in conflict.

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stems from establishing and refining identities for ourselves. Students enroll in a course in a discipline to which they have not been exposed, and they start hearing a new variety of English with its vocabulary and usage partially different from that of every other academic discipline. They become majors, and they "fit" within the discipline. Their success is judged in good measure on their ability to use the appropriate variety as they write and talk. You know someone is a doctor if she talks like a doctor, that someone is a linguist if he talks like a linguist, that someone is a police officer if she talks like a police officer. You even know where people stand along the spectrum of the sub-cultures

This is part of the predicament for many lower-class blacks. They are told that they need standard English for power, to get a better education, to get jobs, to get ahead in this white American world. But to sound like a honkey—no way! And conversely, for many white Americans, to sound like a black, to be taken for a black on the telephone.... There is a test for all who think they are racially, ethnically unprejudiced.⁶

Culture. This is either the upper-case culture of the humanist or the lower-case culture of the anthropologist. Both tribes insist that you cannot really understand another culture except through the language, and in important ways they are right. So

some people study a language or about a language in order to learn about French art or Russian history or Greek philosophy or Thai Buddhism or Zulu marriage structures. In all but rare cases the language learning is so superficial that it contributes only superficially to learning about the culture. So people frequently become discouraged; they find they have to learn too much language before they can begin to learn much culture. They decide they can learn all they want to know in English anyhow.

Deparochialization. Some people learn about language, or learn another language in order to better understand the diversity in the world, to better appreciate other peoples' perspectives. The reality which we have constructed in our own language meets up against other realities very quickly in language study. Second person pronouns in German and French illumine relationships of power and solidarity in English because they express them more overtly in the grammatical system. Differences in the ways in which the universe is segmented and/or metaphorized by vocabulary begin to emerge when people find cases like English, French, and Thai overlapping semantically in different ways:

| English | French | Thai |
|------------------|------------------------|--------|
| know (something) | savoir | rúu |
| know (someone) | connaître | rúucak |
| know/recognize | connaître/reconnaître | cam |
| remember | se souvenir/se rappler | cam |

Some people begin to realize that there is more than one valid way to express oneself, more than one valid way to organize life and thought. On the other hand, for some the differences simply underline the presupposition that foreigners are strange, and provide evidence for that belief. And valuable as the commonly learned European languages are for deparochialization purposes, they are still very much like English in many ways. Learning Quechua or even learning about Quechua and other radically different languages might have more deparochialization effect.

*Dealienation.*⁷ A very few people learn other languages to enter into another people's life, to become less alien in another world. Here learning *about* language alone will not do. That can only lead to deparochialization. Dealienation requires involvement.

Sometimes dealienation is not the initial motive for such people. That may have been power or culture or something else. But occasionally dealienation ultimately takes over. Some people reach a point where they are learning or using a language not to preach or to sell or to propagandize, but to be a friend, to participate.

Self-understanding. A very few people learn about language or learn another language to understand themselves better, to understand better what it is to be a human being, a language-using creature. These rare individuals are asking the questions implied earlier about how we create our theories, our theologies, our realities, through language. Or they are asking how our brain works, or how our social structures are built on language. A few of our students are briefly interested when we talk about some of these things, but most quickly get over that nonsense in favor of conventional rationality. Not being academics, they cannot afford the luxury of spending time in thinking about issues for which they see no payoff.

The Language Professions

I have recited a somber litany of the general lack of interest in language in our culture, in keeping with the mood in the language disciplines (except for speech-communication, which is usually doing just fine, thank you). Our tendency is to blame the callow student, the shallow culture. But the language professions are at fault, too, none more than linguistics.

In linguistics we have paraded a series of theories of language across the horizon in the past years, some of them making great claims about revealing the inner recesses of language reality, only to have them turn out

to provide relatively minor increases in our limited insights into the seeming infinitude of language complexity. The most promising of these theories, or those that claimed the most, have examined only tiny parts of the elephant, which makes the claims sound hollow to anyone who stands back a bit and looks at a larger piece of the beast.

But the fascination remains. We glimpse language through the mists, and it calls like a Siren for us to discover its elusive nature. The nature of language is like the Loch Ness Monster. We are sure it must be there, but we cannot find it. And furthermore, every time we use language, to some degree and on some level, we change it. And in so doing we change ourselves, because our language is an extension of ourselves. It is our mental telepathy, our extra-sensory perception; through language we think with someone else at a particular time and place.

What can we do to help others to learn about language? For one thing we can and should continue doing what we try to do now: help them learn to write movingly, help them learn to read with perception, help them learn to speak with eloquence, help them learn to think so that they have something to write and say. We can do this both in our idiom (which we feel the students need for many reasons) and, more challengingly for us, we can learn to do it in their idiom (which in some cases they need for identity).⁸ Beyond that, to the limited degree we are able to do it, we can try to help them see the bigger picture of language, language as the "mathematics of culture," language as one of the primary thinking systems of human beings, language out of which so much knowledge is built. This is the language to which all of our useful little parts relate.

But for the most part, we cannot induce most students, with their present value systems, convincingly or powerfully. When we ask them to examine a particular detail of language which is illustrative of the fascination of the whole, they ask, "How does that help me get a good job?" and we know that

in itself our little fascinating tidbit is economically worthless.

Or, when we ask them to gaze through the mist with us, ask them to listen for the voice of the Siren, ask them to strain their eyes to see the Loch Ness Monster, they give us a funny look, and turn back to the real world: to *General Hospital* and *The Price is Right*.

Endnotes

¹This paper was presented to a summer seminar of the Language and Literature Division, Dordt College.

²Two recent descriptions of the presence and development of English and other languages in the United States are Ferguson and Heath, 1981, and Conklin and Laurie, 1983.

³Lois Malcolm contributed importantly to these thoughts on the analogies between mathematics and language.

⁴Helen Westra pointed out in discussion that some of the most memorable theological remetaphorization has been done in literature: works of C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland."

⁵I owe this metaphor to my colleague, Donald N. Larson. Another of his colorful contributions to this type of discussion is the term "monolingual myopia."

⁶I am not implying that Whites should indiscriminately learn Black English. In light of the history of race relations in this country Whites who want to do so should earn that honor first.

⁷The term *dealienation* in connection with language learning was introduced in Larson and Smalley, 1972:29-36. See also Larson, 1984:59-64. Larson, 1984 also stresses the concept of *involvement*.

⁸This point was stimulated by comments made by James Schaap of Dordt College.

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