D. Terence Langendoen

Interference Between Language Patterns

In the first two articles in this series, I have argued that certain aspects of language—the universality of its design and the redundancies or expectations that are built into it—are good. They can be of enormous help to the language learner, particularly to one who has been trained to notice them. Now I wish to argue that these very same aspects of language are bad, in the sense that they also serve as enormous obstacles to the acquisition of another language by an adult. According to the Genesis account, the diversification of human language at Babel was viewed as a curse upon mankind. Now let us examine a little more closely the nature of that curse.

In the first article, we maintained that the universality of language design follows basically from the overall similarity of human nature and of human experience. But obviously human nature and human experience also differ in countless details. The fishermen of the South Pacific islands share a range of experiences which differ quite markedly from the rein-

D. Terence Langendoen is Assistant Professor of Linguistics at Ohio State University, 216 North Oval Drive, Columbus, Ohio 43210, USA. This article is the third in a series of four articles based on lectures presented at the Toronto Institute of Linguistics and the Missionary Orientation Center, Madison, New Jersey, in 1966. The first two articles appeared in the previous two issues of PA

deer herdsmen of the European tundra. We may, therefore, expect that their respective languages are streamlined to communicate most effectively about matters of greatest importance to each of them, so that even if the Laplander were able to talk about life in the tropical isles in his own language, it would take extraordinary effort on his part to do so; conversely for the South Sea islander. Languages are adapted to the communication needs that they are called upon to fulfill.

Languages also differ in ways that are not related to cultural, social or geographical differences. The fact that all languages have a means of expressing denial or of obtaining additional information, does not imply that the way in which these functions are carried out will be identical from language to language. In fact, if you compare even very closely related languages, the differences of detail in the expression of the same function can be quite overwhelming.

Focus and background

Let us consider one other function that all languages are designed to fulfill in one way or another, and that is the function of providing a distinc-

tion between focus and background. This is not the distinction with which we as speakers of English are somewhat more familiar, namely, subject and predicate, although the two sets of terms are somewhat related.

In English we have a special device for providing focus on certain sentence constituents, and that is to put them in the frame:

It is/ was . . . who/ that . . .

as in the sentences:

It is John who is always wearing those crazy hats.
It was decent working conditions that the strikers were after.
It is in Toronto that you'll find good Estonian bread.
It is because I'm sleepy that I'm not able to study.

Ordinary English sentences, however, do not specify which, if any, of the constituents are in focus in the speaker's mind. The distinction between focus and background, we may maintain, is marginal in the English language. We can make the distinction, but do not have to; to make it, we generally need to use a very special grammatical construction.

For other languages, however, the distinction between focus and background is not marginal at all. In Japanese, to focus a constituent, one needs only to attach the particle wa to it and put it at the beginning of the sentence. In certain languages of the Philippines it can be said that the focus/background distinction is used in every sentence, just as for us the subject/predicate distinction is made. From our English grammatical perspective, we will be prone to view the sentences of such languages as making a subject/predicate distinction, when the distinction, in fact, is quite different. This is not to say that we cannot learn to become sensitive to the distinction as it is made. It is just that we will have to overcome our native grammatical orientation, or "set" as it is sometimes called, to do so.

Form and function

One other important point needs to be made concerning the function of such universal grammatical features in language as denial, interrogation, etc. We have been talking all along as if it were the case that when you want to deny something, you use a negative sentence form; when you want to obtain information, you ask a question; when you want to tell someone to do something, you issue a command, etc. But in actual fact this is not true.

If I am eating in a restaurant and I wish to have my coffee cup refilled by the waitress, I am not likely to tell her to do so by issuing a command:

Give me another cup of coffee.

Rather, I will either make a statement, such as:

I would like another cup of coffee.
or ask a question:

May I have another cup of coffee?
The waitress would not do well to interpret my statement or question literally. The statement is not merely a report of my inner physical or emotional state, nor do I expect her to reply to my question with a polite
"Yes," and then go on her way without pouring me any coffee. The question and the statement function as the commands in this situation, a fact which hopefully is known by waiters and waitresses throughout the English-speaking world.

Many such examples can be given, in which the form of an utterance is quite different from the function which it serves. Sometimes, of course, it is hard to know whether or not someone is using a form in a way which is different from its function. We have all at some time been confronted with the problem of interpreting the statement, "No, thank you. It's very delicious, but I don't want any more right now." Does the person literally mean what he is saying or is he being what we call "polite"—refusing for the sake of refusing, but not meaning it at all? Probably, too, we have all experienced having said something in such a context which has been misinterpreted by another, and in the context, it is impossible to do anything about it! The moral of these remarks is that even if we know the way in which things are expressed in a particular language, we may not know exactly if the same statement will mean the same thing in different contexts; and, in fact, something may sometimes function as its own denial.

Expectations in Language

Let us now consider this matter of redundancies or expectations in language. In our second article we observed that these expectations are a necessary thing; without them effective speaking and comprehension is impossible, and the task of the language learner is to seek them out and to master them as he goes along. But the difficulty with this is that he already has in his mind a different set of expectations, namely those of his native language, and these are necessarily going to interfere with his attempt to learn the new set. The very thing which insures communication among speakers of one language acts as a formidable barrier against communication between them and speakers of a different language.

An interesting thing often happens in a given culturally, economically, or politically unified area in which a variety of languages are spoken, and that is the development of so-called lingua franca which is understood by everyone in the area for the purposes of commerce and trade and possibly also for administration. It usually is a grammatically simplified version of one of the languages, with words adapted or borrowed from the various others spoken in the area. It is characteristic that a new language is developed or chosen for the purposes of serving as a lingua franca. None of the already existing languages is suitable because each is tied up too much as a system of expression for only one of the ethnic groups in the area. The current language crisis in India can be understood in light of these observations.

Let me return, after this little digression, to the point at hand. One of the reasons for missionary trainees’ receiving phonetics instruction is to make them acutely aware of their own present phonetic expectations and of the possibility that the other
languages have different sets of phonetic expectations. Realizing a problem is perhaps half way to overcoming it, but still the overcoming of the barrier imposed by the clash between phonetic sets of expectations is not easy. It's not usually a problem of not knowing how to make a particular sound—velar fricatives and trilled r's may cause some to want to quit and go home, but with patience and fortitude fluency usually manages to come—but of how to arrange sounds in different patterns and in making such subtle modifications as not drawling one's vowels or aspirating one's voiceless stops, or adjusting to syllable rather than stress timing.

It is interesting to observe that sometimes it is easier for speakers of Language X to learn the phonetic pattern of Language Y than the other way around. Consider the hypothetical case of two closely related languages. For certain words of one language which end in consonants, the other language has words which are identical except that the final consonant is missing. Suppose the following is a partial list of the correspondences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language X</th>
<th>Language Y</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rup</td>
<td>ru</td>
<td>bread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sikit</td>
<td>siki</td>
<td>bird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fulas</td>
<td>fula</td>
<td>noise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sufan</td>
<td>sufa</td>
<td>water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sufak</td>
<td>sufa</td>
<td>spoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pilu</td>
<td>pilu</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notice how easy it is for a speaker of Language X to learn these words in Language Y. All he has to do is to leave off the final consonant of the word, if any, and immediately he has the corresponding word in Language Y. Speakers of Language Y, however, cannot predict the related word in Language X, since they do not know which consonant will appear at the end of the word in Language X, or, for that matter, whether there will be a consonant.

A dramatic illustration of how a set of expectations makes the job of speaking and comprehension easier for a native speaker but more difficult for a learner is provided by the phenomenon known as vowel harmony. Consider the following examples in Turkish:

- evinize 'to your house'
- köyününize 'to your village'
- arkadasınız 'to your friend'
- solumuz 'to your left'

The words ev, köy, arkadas, and sol by themselves mean 'house,' 'village,' 'friend,' and 'left' respectively. The suffix ini/üniz/ini/ünuz means 'your' and the suffix ela means 'to.' To the Turk, the form of the vowels of the suffixes is completely predictable from the rules of vowel harmony in the language. Pronouncing these forms gives him no difficulty and in listening, the patterns of the vowels in the suffixes gives him a number of clues as to what the vowels of the noun stem are. To the outsider learning Turkish, however, the vowel harmony pattern is a considerable obstacle to fluency. It is easy for him to make mistakes and he often has to think consciously about his vowels in order to get them out correctly.

There are a host of similar obstacles confronting the language learner as a result of conflicting grammatical and
meaning expectations. We have commented on some of these earlier—for example, the problem it is for an English speaker to become attuned to a language concerned more with the focus/background distinction than the subject/predicate one. I will mention one other serious obstacle now.

Translational equivalents

I stated in my first article that thanks to the universality of language design, the beginner could immediately obtain words for objects and for events, words that might be considered translational equivalents to words in English. But you should not conclude from this that all one has to do to build up one’s vocabulary is to continue obtaining such translational equivalents. It is a trap that many learners fall into, to think that to speak in Language X, one needs only to consult a good English-X dictionary and to plug in the Language X words which are found there for the English words in an English sentence. That will not do at all.

The items in the vocabularies of all languages are interrelated in complicated ways. Part of the structure of the vocabulary of a language is hierarchical. In English, for instance, we have many words for specific animals: trout, dolphin, mouse, skunk, pelican, gorilla. We also have words for particular groups of animals: bird, fish, rodent, mammal, ape. Some words, like cat, are used both ways—to indicate a particular species and also a genus of animals. Finally, we have the very general word, animal, which is used as a cover term for the whole class of animals as we know them.

The arrangement of these words is hierarchical. A mouse is simultaneously, to us, a rodent, a mammal, and an animal. The term animal is used on a par with other very general terms like insect, plant, which together comprise the class of “living things”—although actually there are holes in this classification. To me, at least, a worm is neither an animal nor an insect; it certainly isn’t a plant, so where does it fit?

Other languages may classify the world of living things in quite a different fashion. They will have hierarchical terms, just as we have in English, but it will be a different hierarchy. For a very useful discussion of this point, I highly recommend Eugene A. Nida’s book Toward a Science of Translating. He has many excellent examples.

There is nothing sacred about our English way of classifying things. Even Aristotle was aware of the fact that there was no real reason why in Greek there were separate words for bird and fish, since it is not difficult to make a functional description of their anatomy which shows them to be identical in design except for the fact that one moves in air and the other in water.

As a result of the different hierarchical classifications of the things in the world, it is generally almost impossible to give translational equivalents for many items in the vocabulary of another language. One language may have a word that lumps men, animals, insects, and heavenly bodies

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into one category, and rocks, plants, water, etc., into another. Roughly the classification would be into things which (in their mind) move or do not move of their own volition. Obviously neither category is translatable by a single English word, while the expressions "things which move/don't move of their own volition" lose the flavor of the expressions in the other language.

The same principle applies to the vocabulary of event words or verbs. You often used to hear it said that a given tribal language has no "general" or "abstract" vocabulary items because while they have different words for carry on the head, carry on the shoulders, carry in front of oneself, carry on the back, carry in one hand, carry by tying around the waist, they have no general word for "carry." What was being said by such people is that the language has no general word corresponding to the English word "carry." There may be a general expression covering these activities (or some of them) together with some others—a word comparable to English "transport," perhaps. It's always nice to turn the argument around, incidentally, and show that English lacks some general words. The primitive tribesman may well wonder why we "roast" beef but "bake" ham, when the two processes are identical; we have no general word for "cooking by heat in an oven," but that's because the term that covers this, "cook," applies to other activities as well.

While we are on the topic of vocabulary items in various languages, we may mention one other difficulty in second-language learning which has to do primarily with the vocabulary. That is the fact that particular items of the lexicon take on additional dimensions of meaning which do not have to do, strictly speaking, with their reference in the "real" world. We sometimes speak of what a word connotes, as opposed to what it denotes; particular words may have associated with them feelings of grandeur, ostentation, or degradation. Some words are considered so vile or dirty that they should not be used in polite company. The word "nigger" was used recently in an essay appearing in a public high school publication in Columbus, and immediately the issue was taken out of circulation even though the word in the context of the essay was used descriptively rather than pejoratively. In some cases the use of a particular word is seen as the privilege of some segments of society, but is absolutely forbidden to others.

Words are often thought to exercise power of their own. Naming a disease may be thought to be sufficient cause for getting it, or inflicting it on another party. Obviously the language learner is in a precarious position, since he won't know in advance what words are loaded and which are not, or in what contexts a word may be used freely and in what ones they must not be uttered at all. Here again, having a sensitive person as a guide and teacher is of great help. He will in general know what problems can arise and will most likely be looking out for your welfare in this regard. In some cultures, the problem of connotative meaning is
much less serious than in others, so that simply the warning to be on the lookout will be sufficient.

Let me take the opportunity now, in closing, to review the main point of this article. The very aspects of language which enable it to function effectively are the barriers you face in learning it. Just as good cannot be separated from evil, so the aids and the detriments to language learning cannot be viewed separately. With dialectic skill, time, and patience you will hopefully be able to make the most use of the assistance which the internal structure of another language can give you, and to minimize the hurdles which they also pose.