

Overview of Human Language

Very much of an overview – that's all I can do in 5 classes

Why language? My history

Started French in 5th grade

Went through 12th (French V – advanced)

Took Latin – but why (mostly used French)

Took 2 French classes in college (1st and 4th semesters), but not really interested in literature, which is what advanced language study is in the U.S. – and maybe also other places

Took “Baby German” in college – I don't remember why, but I guess it was intuitive because I wanted the language part, not literature

Really good instructors, with a really good program

When I took it, no book – all printed sheets

They published the book later

I did not think their method would really work, but it really did!!

Went to summer school at Midd – they insisted – it was graduate work, and I did amazingly well

Junior Year in Munich:

When I got to Germany, I spoke German better than the Germans spoke English, mostly, so my German got to be very good [one guy insisted on speaking English, so he spoke English and I spoke German!] Not so with many of my classmates, so they didn't learn much

Some classmates spoke German well, having lived in Germany, but did not read or write well – I was lucky that I did that, too. They tended to lose interest quickly

For most people, learning a foreign language is for a particular purpose – for work, to live in the country, whatever

For me, I just liked it! But apparently only up to a point.

I was happy to study Korean full-time for 2 years

But when I got to Afghanistan with no language training, I lost interest and relied on my interpreter

The difference between Interpretation and Translation – not AT ALL the same thing!

Two different skills (explain)

I learned French, German, Korean, and whatever without translation [maybe that's why Latin didn't “take” for me!] from or into English

It made me a good speaker, but a crappy interpreter or translator

I can translate better than I can interpret because I can take more time and use a dictionary

When you translate, you need to look the word up both ways, so you don't end up with the wrong definition

When you interpret, you don't have that luxury!

For me, it is a lot easier to say what needs to be said without trying to use someone else's words; e.g., in Germany and Austria with Harmony Travel Chorus

Think about a dictionary – there are multiple definitions for the same word, perhaps more in English than most languages, but also in others so you have to check both ways to see if it makes sense – unless you have a native speaker sitting around you, in which case you can ask that person!

For millennia, language was oral only

To remember things, or to compile “history,” people had to memorize

As a general rule, people without writing are far better at memorization

How you are raised also affects your ability to memorize

Whether or not you have an alphabet affects it, as you tend to use phonics (sounds of letters and words) more than concepts

This is one reason dyslexia was only “discovered” recently – it didn’t used to matter!

Now if you can’t sound out words, you are left behind in our reading system

Most languages use an alphabet, though some (especially Semitic languages like Hebrew and Arabic) use primarily the consonants and rely mostly on context for the vowels.

That sounds crazy, but in English, many if not most “vowel sounds” are “schwa” sounds, which means they are not actually pronounced with the vowel that is written, but with a kind of “uh” sound

That’s one reason English is so hard to learn to speak like a native, or without an accent

We know what the schwa is and where it goes, but it’s not written that way, so people trying to learn English as adults don’t necessarily get it!

The only widespread language that does not use an alphabet (if it is written at all) is Chinese. Why? Mandarin is one language; Cantonese is another language; Fujianese is another language; etc. Although they are called variants of Chinese, they are not really. The only way to have one writing system for all is to have the writing system based on meaning rather than sound. So a character has a meaning, though it may secondarily have a sound, which is usually based on the meaning, too. Although I have never studied Egyptian hieroglyphics, I believe this is what they are – a mixture of pictures with meaning, and sounds based on those pictures/meanings.

The Rosetta stone

Childhood language acquisition

One of the things that linguists consistently try and fail to figure out is why and how little kids acquire language – ANY language – so easily. You can place a child born in any country of the world in any other country, and as long as you move him or her within about the first 5 years, that child will be totally fluent in the new language, without any accent. This sometimes even works for kids up into their teens, but it gets harder and harder, and if they have passed puberty, it is almost impossible for them to learn a language so completely as to have no accent.

I am personally convinced that language acquisition and musical exposure are probably connected, though I have never read anything about this. I have always been able to pick up accents very easily, though I’m not sure I’d be able to do it now, I did it around age 50 when I learned Korean. And I have been involved with music all my life. I have never learned a language with tones, but I’m guessing it would be easier for me than for most people; I sometimes wish I had done that, just to see. But it’s like when I was applying for college... (story)