

Wolfgang Butzkamm
Learning the language of loved ones.
On the generative principle and the technique of mirroring

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Practising communication is an important classroom activity, but communication is not everything. Learners must also learn to divide messages into their component parts, otherwise each new message would have to be taken over from others and memorized, in which case there would never be any really new messages. Language only comes into its own when the learner discovers its sequential combinatorial system. Intuitively, parents have always taken pains to assist their children in this task. In language learning and teaching, the generative principle is just as important as the communicative principle. The two should be seen as companions rather than opposites: techniques are available to breathe communicative life into structural exercises.

Understanding what is meant

Language acquisition begins when we are addressed in an understandable way. However, we are not vessels into which language is poured. Healthy humans are active problem solvers who take the initiative and risks. They do not acquire language merely by listening; they also explore, in dialogue, how far they have managed to make themselves understood.

But to be able to join in properly, we first have to understand what is being talked about, and what others want from us. That is why *comprehended input* is the prime requirement, the essential precondition for our participation in dialogue, in which and through which language acquisition takes place.

Understanding what is literally said

In many cases it is not sufficient to understand just what is meant. That might be enough for tourists. Communication functions, and communicative needs are satisfied for the moment. However, if we really want to learn a language, we also have to understand what is actually – and quite literally - said.

In the case of foreign languages closely related to our own, these two types of understanding - let us call them functional and formal - are often confused. Let us consider them with respect to the French *s'il vous plaît*. From an English point of view, functional meaning and formal meaning differ: when someone hears *s'il vous plaît* for the first time, they might think that, like its English equivalent, it is a single word, but with three syllables instead of one. Only when seen in writing does it become clear that the French word for 'please' consists of four parts:

s(i)	il	vous	plaît
if	it	you	pleases

Do we need to know this? Not if all we want to do is ask for something politely. We understand the expression correctly and we can use it correctly. It is sufficient to know the functional meaning of the formulation. Its structure – its formal meaning - is only of interest if we want to acquire a good level of fluency in the foreign language instead of just making ourselves understood at the present moment. Then we can apply

our insight into the form and create utterances which follow the same pattern such as '*si l'hôtel vous plaît*', 'if you like the hotel'; '*si le vin vous plaît*', 'if you like the wine'.

Language teachers in the past who recognised the learner's need for understanding both what is meant and how it is said, sometimes included two types of translations in their teaching arrangements. Robertson (1858) provided an interlinear translation as well as a fair English version of his French texts ('Literal translation'; 'The same in good English'). Modern Assimil coursebooks give full idiomatic parallel translations with occasional literal translations given in brackets.

A digression into first language acquisition

Parents talking to young children want to be understood. But 'parentese' (also called 'motherese', 'caretaker speech' or 'baby talk') is not only a means to ensure a situational and functional understanding, it also helps the child to decode the language forms by breaking the utterances down into their constituent parts. The strategies include slow and clear speech, emphasis of new lexis to raise it from the surrounding flow of speech, repetition, and simplification of the following sorts:

smaller average length of utterances
less complex sentences, fewer subordinate clauses
fewer functional words, instead nouns designating concrete, visual content
lots of questions and statements referring to here and now

Parents seem to be aiming for a dual understanding, by which children will not only understand what others want from them right now, and how the conversation is supposed to continue, but also where the things talked about are located in the sentence. In this way, we make it easier for them to register where words belong in a sentence. Thus, decoding of language patterns goes hand in hand with the decoding of the message.

A young child has to get by without the visible segmentation provided by written language, which often clarifies both meaning and structure. 'Give me the ball', a mother might say, and the child hands her the ball. There is no doubt that the little girl has understood her mother. But to learn language, she must do a lot more than that. To make this task easier for their child, mothers quite instinctively say 'Give mummy the ball.' 'Mummy' is unambiguous, while 'me', with its changeable referentiality, is more difficult to grasp. In this way, the child can more easily recognize the equivalences between the arrangement of actions and the linguistic arrangement. It is not surprising that children who pick up English in the street should sometimes interpret 'give me' as one word 'gimme', thus making 'give me the ball' structurally equivalent to 'throw the ball'.

Once children have grasped the nature of the relationship between situative and verbal arrangements, they can begin to make comparisons, draw analogies, recognize language rules - and for the most part, they do all of this unconsciously. Utterances become grammatical when the child is able to assign the segments of content one by one to the segments of form, and thus to crack the code.

For complex patterns, this does not happen in one go but in stages, as evidenced in half-analysed such as:

Mother: Don't argue.
Hugh (3;0): I don't arg me. (Chrystal 1986: 108)

Hugh has misunderstood argue as *arg you* or *arg Hugh*. What he actually imagines *arg* to mean is anybody's guess. Children have to work hard to effect plausible segmentations, and it will take repeated finer analyses of language chunks before they eventually extract the kind of units which can enter into novel combinations.

The mirroring of foreign structures in the native language

Imagine a young man who has fallen in love. He cannot speak the language of the girl he loves and asks us how we say *I love you* in her language. We tell him, and he repeats it several times, and after drilling it into himself, is eventually able to achieve some success, communicative or otherwise. Since *I love you*, *Ich liebe dich* or the Russian *ja lubliu tiebja* are identical in structure, any English native speaker who has understood these utterances communicatively will also grasp their formal structure. But what about other languages, especially when we have to do without the help of written language in perceiving the divisions?

Lithuanian:	aštavemyliu
Chinese:	woaini
Spanish:	tequiero
Greek:	seagapo
Polish:	kochamcie
Dutch:	ikhoudvanje
Urdu:	mujehtumsepiarhä

Without an understanding of the structure, these formulations remain mere vocabulary drill. They provide no less but also no more than holistic signals and gestures of affection, greetings, farewells, requests or thanks. Such gestures are also possible for some sorts of animals. However, the essential feature of human language which differentiates it from all animal languages is the way it divides and combines. Meaningless phonemes combine and recombine into meaningful words; words endlessly recombine to make up novel sentences, and on yet another level of organization, sentences are strung together into entirely different texts.

Anyone wants to learn the language of their dream partner, therefore, must not only know what to say but also how to put the message together. Writing things down can be a great help:

Lithuanian:	as tave myliu
Chinese:	wo ai ni
Spanish:	te quiero
Greek:	e agapo
Polish:	kocham cie
Dutch:	ik houd van je
Urdu:	mujeh tum se piar hä

We can also elucidate the foreign structure for the beginner in a very easy, clear and elegant way, by mapping it onto the native language of the learner:

Lithuanian:	I you love
Chinese:	I love you

Spanish; Greek:	you (object case) love-I
Polish:	love-I you
Dutch:	I love of you (I think (highly) of you)
Urdu:	for me with you love is

This contrastive procedure, which transfers the foreign language form into the native language, is an excellent way to render further grammatical explanation redundant. The foreign language appears to be nothing more than an eccentric aberration of the native language. However, there is no trick which works equally well in all cases. To make the Spanish version transparent to English children, we either need an additional grammatical explanation or we switch to 'him loves-she' or 'her loves-he'.

Let us now compare:

wo ai ni	I love you
ni hao	real meaning: Hello; good morning / afternoon; literal meaning: you good.

'Ni', which we now recognize as the word for 'you', is no longer part and parcel of a fixed formula, since it has been freed and can be used as a separate component for any number of new sentences. The structural transparency of the greetings phrase, as well as of the declaration of love, brings a range of further possible utterances within reach of the learner: you (are) happy / sad / rich / poor etc. This is where language starts to develop its productive potential.

Language as productive potential: the generative principle

Language is not only communication. It is an instrument of our thinking. It makes ideas available for variation and manipulation. It provides scope for free thinking and fantasy, because its combinatory nature allows us to arrange and rearrange words again and again. With language, not only adults, but children, too, can fantasize and improvise with great enthusiasm. Three-year-old Gisa, having just learned to sing *A bird comes flying*, will spontaneously turn the phrase into *A horse comes flying* or *A daddy comes flying*. The never-ending game of grammatical combinations and recombinations makes this possible.

I have been able to dig up a few references to the generative principle, the first of which concerns the teaching of Latin:

“The usual way, I presume, is to give the Learner sentences of several formes, and put him to the varying of them. I condemn it not; it hath its use, its profit. But the Practice, that I would recommend, should be upon his daily Lessons: the Master first, by a line drawn underneath, noting to him what words and phrases, are capable of such variation, as he hath Rules for, and then causing him to vary those words and phrases, according to his Rules, still informing and helping him in what he fails through want of memory or understanding. After he is a little experienced, he is to be put to find out of himself what words or phrases in his Lesson, are variable, and accordingly to vary them. This exercise with a competent understanding will in a short space produce a strange alteration to the better in all the Latines of the Scholar.” (Walker 1669)

“If properly selected, a few sentences will afford him an incredible variety of expression, and he will not fail to speak grammatically...A highly disciplined phalanx of two or three hundred useful words, arranged in well-chosen sentences, comprising every construction of the language, and under the perfect control of a faithful memory, will be of far greater service to a traveller, than two or three thousand words, untrained to active co-operation.” (Prendergast 1864: 26f.)

“But words...have another power, which they also lose when they are isolated, namely the power of breeding new connections in the image of old ones. If I have often reproduced a certain type of word-formation or sentence-construction, then this becomes a part of my mental mechanism in such a way that I unconsciously make something new (coin a new word, construct a new sentence) after the same pattern, after the 'analogy' of what I know, whenever I need it... “ (Jespersen 1904: 116)

All these authors fail to mention the fact that the manipulation of structures implies the manipulation of ideas (which, of course, they somehow took for granted). In fact, Prendergast (1864:19) does mention this once: 'Sentences have within them a principle of vitality, an inherent power of expressing many different ideas by giving birth to new sentences.' But his examples do not give the impression that he was aware of the didactic significance of this aspect.

Structural drills should be devised so that the learners can consolidate their hold on the formal mechanisms of the language. But they should not just run through sentence patterns mechanically. Drills should have a dual focus. Changing contents, and focusing on ideas which the learners might find interesting, should also be an aim. Variations in sentences should be variations in meaning, where we probe possibilities of experience and expression. We must not regard the different lexical substitutions as mere fillers, if we are to exploit language as a productive potential. Humboldt saw both these sides when he spoke of the 'identity of the power to produce both *thoughts* and *speech*.'

Anyone who learns to say *I love you* will soon discover many more ideas are now within his reach. A well-devised pattern drill, preferably using native language cues, can easily elicit the following variations:

I love Eva
I love Annemarie
Annemarie, I love your name
I love you
You love me
I love my mother
I love my village, the village green, the city, the river, the sea...
I love my liberty
I love books, green books only (what a silly idea)
I love my dreams (which ones? All of them?)
I hear your voice (Is it a pleasant voice? Then say it!)
I see you, a child
I sing you, Annemarie (why not?)
I sing myself
I celebrate myself (think of Walt)
I, too, sing America

Conclusion

Anyone who has tried to learn an unfamiliar language will be easily convinced of the great advantage of mirroring structures in the native language. However, in many school books we find no trace of this highly effective instructional strategy. This is because we have acquired the habit of contemplating methodological questions from the perspective of foreign languages with which we are familiar. When we learn a language that bears little resemblance to our own mother tongue, we might benefit from taking a fresh look at established procedures.

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