

Speak like a Diplomat

By: Larry Bachus & Dr. Clara Mojica-Díaz

Imagine that your dentist tells you that you need some oral surgery. Then you're thumbing through the pages of this magazine and you see an ad stating, "Root Canal In 6 Easy Lessons" for only \$49.95. And you think to yourself, "Wow, I could study this course over the next few weeks and then give myself a root canal with my electric drill, and save the cost of the oral surgeon and all those sterilized instruments." Comical isn't it! No one in his right mind would try to become an oral surgeon in 6 easy lessons!

So, why is it, that when a business executive learns that his company will open a new foreign office in the coming months, the executive thinks he can buy a set of tapes and learn a foreign language in 6 easy lessons. Comical isn't it! Or, maybe not so comical.

We've been conditioned to think that we can buy some tapes or a self-study computer course to learn a foreign language and 'speak Spanish, German, or French like a diplomat' after 6 easy lessons. I mean, after all, any child can learn to speak a foreign language, right?

Yes, children learn to speak the language of their parents about the time they take their first steps. And, when the child learns the language of his parents, whether Japanese, German or American English, that language is a foreign language to the child. Also, children can learn to communicate in numerous foreign languages before the age of 6. The reasoning is, if a toddler can do it, then a business executive with a university education should be able to master a foreign language relatively easily. Not so.

The Language Acquisition Device

It has been proposed that humans possess a "Language Acquisition Device". The "Device" is credited to Dr. Noam Chomsky, who hypothesized that children are born with a special ability to process language through an innate language acquisition device. Other linguists, as scientists, either support Noam's hypothesis or work at disproving it. The device contains the principles that are universal to all languages. This device is centered in the frontal left hemisphere of the brain, called "Broca's area", although the entire brain participates in language functions.

This language acquisition device is activated in an infant's brain when in the presence of parents, guardians and siblings. A baby doesn't learn a language by conjugating verbs or memorizing dialogues. No one holds grammar classes with the infant. Instead, the device is activated by language input, meaning listening and attending as the parents, family and others speak and interact with the child.

When the child begins to listen to his parents, he will unconsciously recognize the language he is dealing with. The tot will set his parameters to the correct one. He knows intuitively that there are some words that behave like verbs, others like nouns and objects. The child already knows that there is a limited set of possibilities as to their ordering within any phrase. This knowledge is contained in the child's language acquisition device because the adults in the child's life either don't teach, or are incapable of teaching this information to the child.

A tot's ability to learn a language in the early years is fascinating. At about one year, children are able to understand words, and shortly afterwards are able to speak individual words. At around 18 months, their vocabulary begins to grow impressively, and their grasp of simple syntax is demonstrated in the form of two-word and three-word sentences. By 3-years, they can grasp relatively complex rules of grammar.

At around four years of age the soft spot in the child's skull solidifies as the brain's metabolism begins slowing. As the child reaches puberty the brain's metabolism assumes adult levels. This accounts for the apparent decline in the ability to learn a second language after childhood. The language learning circuitry of the teenager is no longer as plastic as in childhood.

Children can learn a second language, or recover first language ability when the left hemisphere of the brain is damaged or even surgically removed (though not quite at normal levels), but comparable damage in an adult usually leads to permanent language loss. Many explanations have been advanced for children's first and second language superiority. They can exploit the special ways that their mothers talk to them, they make errors unselfconsciously, they are more motivated to communicate, they like to conform, they are not set in their ways, and they have no first language to interfere.

Successful acquisition of language typically happens by 4-to-6-years of age. From 6-years to puberty, the ability is steadily compromised. By the teenage years, changes occur in the maturing brain, with the decline in metabolic rate and number of neurons. With adulthood, the language device is mostly dormant. There is a neurologically determined "critical period" in childhood for successful language acquisition.

The ability to comprehend, produce, and manipulate language is probably the single distinguishing characteristic separating humans from other primates. Observing excavated pottery from burial and ceremonial sites, archaeologists suppose that primitive man probably used language as long as 100,000 years ago.

Baby Talk

The authors propose that spoken language began with primitive “cave-kids” who may have taught the first words to their parents. It is believed that babies begin to learn in the womb. We know that they react to their mothers' voices from birth. The first vocal activity begins at about 8 weeks when the baby begins to coo. Later, the infant strings the vocal activity into a rhythmical pattern. Then, at maybe 5-months, the baby starts babbling. The child begins producing the whole gamut of sounds used by human beings in the production of speech. Bit by bit, however, the range of sounds used narrows down, and the child concentrates more and more upon the sounds used with and by parents, (or guardians) and siblings.

Almost all babies become intrigued with the sound of their own voices at about 8-months of age. They probably notice that crying results in their parents' picking-up the baby or giving it food in an effort to calm the child. Many a parent has heard his child humming or maintaining a sustained vocal sound in its crib. The easiest sound would be something like, Uuuhhhhhh, or Aaahhhhhh.

As the baby continues its vocal practice it may even add a basic consonant-type sound to its sustained vocalization, something like Puuhhhh, or Paahhhh, Muuhhhh, Maaahhh, and Daaahhh. The primitive Neanderthal baby might have first named its parents by saying Maaahhh as its mother attended to the child, and Paahhh or Daahhh to its father.

This may account for so many modern language interpretations of these basic sounds for the mother and father. In so many languages the maternal parent is called Mother, Ma, Maw, Mama, Mamá, Mawmaw, Mom, Oma, Mutti, Mere, Maman, Mor, Matka, Haha, Mitera, Mum, Madre, etc. Likewise, words like Dad, Otec, Papa, Tata, Papi, Vati, Oto, Papá, Vater, Pateras, Babbo, Opa, Daddy, Pop, etc. abound in modern languages. Primitive adults may have been exchanging grunts and huffs as they reacted to thunder, fire, food, wild beasts, and other stimuli. They might have learned from their babies that they were called Mom and Dad respectively.

So did the adults teach the children to use language, or did primitive tots, with their active language acquisition and production devices, teach their parents to use language? Did

primitive parents learn to speak from their children? The authors propose that the original definitive language was composed of parental huffs and grunts, combined with the original vowel and consonant sounds emitted by the cave babies.

This may explain the almost universal tendency for adults to use “motherese” or baby talk with infants and toddlers. It may be a stretch, but maybe the children originally taught “motherese” to the parents. We are born with a set of rules about language in our heads. The child does not learn the language, but creates it.

Through the Mouths and Minds of Babes

Children acquire their primary, secondary and tertiary languages with apparent ease. This is because children are exposed to very little correctly formed language. When people speak, they constantly change their minds, interrupt themselves, make slips of the tongue, and stutter. Yet, the children learn their parental language all the same.

Children do not simply copy the language that they hear around them. They deduce rules from parental talk, which they can then use to produce grammar that they have never heard before. Children use this grammar to generate an infinite combination of new sentences and thoughts.

If beings or entities from outer space should attempt communication with earthlings, they would most likely deduce that there is only one language, with a number of local variants. Likewise, if the adult language acquisition device is mostly dormant, the authors believe that our best option to communicate with extraterrestrial intelligence may be through the mouths and minds of toddlers.

Most adults never master a foreign language as a native speaker would. To an extent, an adult who changes professions must learn the vocabulary of his new work. And, adults who immigrate to another country must learn to communicate and survive in the new country. However, the adult language student will have a permanent foreign accent or handicap. Their development often fossilizes into fixed error patterns that no instruction can correct. There are great individual differences, which depend on amount of exposure, quality of education, attitude, effort, and plain talent.

The authors, who are both educators, stress that any education program will produce positive results if the student uses his talent and applies the correct attitude, and effort to learning. A

business executive who wants to improve his accounting or management skills would probably take an accounting or management course at the local university. The executive would probably not respond to an advertisement promising management or accounting skills in 6 easy lessons. Likewise, taking a few foreign language courses at the local university is a more logical approach to learning a foreign language than hoping to speak like a diplomat in 6 easy lessons.

The parent who recognizes the advantages of a foreign language would be well served to encourage their children to learn a second or third language while still in kindergarten or elementary school, even if it means dropping the violin or karate lessons. The doors are open to learning karate as a teenager or adult. But with learning and dominating a foreign language as an adult, those doors are mostly closed.

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