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Language, Bilingualism and Culture

1. Introduction

Language is one of the greatest human achievements, and it is a crucial and primary carrier of culture. The problems with language itself and culture in general have continued since before the dawn of civilization up to the present. Conflicts between different hordes of ancient people had started not only because of the scarcity of food, territory, etc. In order to survive, every member of a horde had to cooperate with other members. In this way, notions like 'we' and 'they' or 'others' became a part of those people's views on the working of the world: we – meant good, and they – a (possible) threat. The logical outcome of this kind of thinking was a dislike or even hate of other people which led to persecution, killing and bloodshed. On the other hand, the same language, the same religion, customs, dress, ornaments and many other elements of culture bound people together. This trait of people's nature – aggression – has been their instinct inherited from their primeval ancestors. This instinct is shared by the whole animal world and is called survival instinct; in the case of people, its term which has been introduced comparatively recently is intolerance¹. People are not driven only by instinct, but hopefully, by reason and should tolerate the fact that other people are different, unless these people are intolerant of us.

Many people believe that the barriers separating peoples may be lowered, and even demolished, if they could understand better other peoples and learn more of their culture. This could be accomplished by learning foreign languages but, as everyone knows, the difficulty of mastering foreign tongues becomes more grave when we consider the number of languages and dialects

¹ Animals are also not tolerant – dye a sparrow blue, or any other colour, and release it. The sparrow's chance of not being killed by other sparrows is null.

in the world. Specialists agree that the estimates of the number of languages and dialects found in the world vary, some say that there are more than five thousand of them [Horsley 1986, p. 489], others claim that there are about three thousand [Encyklopedia Powszechna PWN, p. 359] or only 2796 (Pei 1964, p. 359). Everyone can appreciate the tremendous frustration and difficulties in the attempts to communicate with people speaking other languages. Not without some reason ancient Poles called Germanic people 'dumb' [Niemcy] when they could not understand their language. Another, humorous example of this kind of dislike of everything which is foreign, has been provided by Mark Twain, when Huckleberry Finn, a character in his book had a conversation about different languages with a friend, Jim, a runaway slave. When Jim learnt from Finn that Frenchmen speak differently from the way that he and Finn spoke, he refused to believe it. He argued that a Frenchman **was** a human being and, therefore, in Jim's opinion, he **should** speak a human language, i.e. English.

The earliest beginnings of teaching of foreign languages may be found in ancient Sumer – a highly developed civilization flourishing in the area between the two big rivers in Asia: Euphrates and Tigris. About two thousand and five hundred years before Christ, the Sumerians were invaded by Akkadians – a Semitic tribe [Titone 1968, p. 5].

Sumerian civilization was more developed than that of the invaders'. Sumerians had invented their own system of writing – one of the earliest in the world, had been excellent builders and, in general, their culture was superior to the culture of the Akkadians. Fortunately, the Akkadians recognized the superiority of the Sumerian culture and they adopted Sumerian writing system, absorbed their culture and studied and learnt the Sumerian language. In this way, many of the important people became bilingual in the two languages, although the Sumerian language later became dead.

An interesting example concerning natural acquisition of a foreign language, even in comparatively recent past, is our first king, Boleslaus I the Brave. At the age of seven he had been 'invited' to the German Emperor's court as a hostage who could guarantee his father's loyalty to the Emperor. He returned to his father's principality as a grown man who spoke German like a German, who declined a chance of becoming a next German Emperor and a person with the knowledge of diplomacy and government.

The rulers of all kinds, just like the governments of our time, needed clever individuals who spoke foreign languages and were capable of managing foreign diplomatic affairs, spies who could inform their bosses about important activities of both hostile and friendly states and people who could be sent to various provinces to govern the local people in their sovereign's name. These people had not been taught the language, or languages, which they had to master for doing their job successfully. Instead, in their early childhood, they were sent to live

and acquire the local languages in the places where they were expected to work in their adult age [Titone 1968, p. 6].

It is a norm that a country which is technologically, economically, culturally, militarily and politically superior to other countries in the area achieves such a high status that its language also becomes the dominant one in that area. This was in the case of Sumer, Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Rome and, more recently, France and now Britain and the United States.

English is now the principal language of communication practically in all areas of life; in politics, medicine, literature, arts, technology, the Internet, to mention only some examples. This evidence means that there is no doubt that the English language is a world language and it has a chance of continuing to be so for years to come.

In this situation, it is a sensible assumption for our country to create conditions for allowing its citizens to become bilingual in Polish and English [Krakowian-Płoszka 2008]. It is important to remember that nowadays the level of knowledge of English by citizens of a country may determine the level of its economic growth. This has been confirmed by Kumoch [2008] who has found that European Union members like Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Slovenia and Estonia, where the knowledge of English is higher than in other EU countries, the rate of economic growth has been also higher than in the rest members of the Union.² One has to agree that ...[C]ommon culture and common language facilitate trade between people (ideas).

2. Towards an international, auxiliary language for the world

The longing for having a common language for all people of the globe is not new and it has stayed with us until now. It seems that this feeling had first been expressed in the biblical story of the Babel Tower. Among the numerous, early inventors of artificial languages there was a nun, Hildegard von Bingen, who lived in the 12th century German convent and who, supposedly, invented a language called 'Lingua Ignota' [unknown language] [Atherton 1993]. She was a very intelligent woman. In that time women were not expected to be educated as men did, but she herself managed to acquire a great amount of education. In the convent she sang Latin songs, attended masses in Latin and heard homilies in German. She read the Bible in German and, by comparing the homilies with the biblical stories and the songs and psalms she managed to master Latin [Atherton 1993].

The estimated number of artificial languages which have been created so far, ranges roughly between six to seven hundred, which shows how interesting this issue is even now. Pei [1964, pp. 379–384] lists some more influential people of different walks of life who attempted to construct such languages: Francis

² Note that the data were gathered before the financial crisis.

Bacon, Descartes, Comenius, Schleyer, Zamenhof and others. Monsignor Johann Martin Schleyer was the first, successful maker of an artificial language called Volapük. Since 1879, the date of the birth of this language, it enjoyed a measure of success until 1887, when Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, a physician born in Poland, launched his Esperanto – the most successful artificial language so far.

The main defect of all artificial languages was that their construction was based solely on the European languages. The simplicity and ease of learning and easy understanding of both written and spoken texts in these languages did not in any way help the majority of the speakers of other languages which were not Indo-European ones.

One has also to keep in mind that having a common, global language would be very advantageous for everyone. Pei [1964, p. 372] summed it succinctly:

(International language) ... would at one stroke do away with all linguistic difficulties encountered not only by diplomats, but by technicians, scientists, missionaries, immigrants businessmen, tourists and students. It would place within the reach of all, without linguistic restriction, the world of science, literature, political thought, channels of trade and general population. It would mean an end to the innumerable difficulties and delays by which men are beset as soon as they set foot beyond their own borders.

In the late thirtieths of the last twentieth century, there appeared a new candidate for the international language called Basic English. This language does not resemble any other simplified language, either an artificial or modified dead one. This language, British American Scientific International Commercial, devised by C.K. Ogden [1968, p. 12] and his associates before the Second World War, is a simplified version of the ordinary English language. It is a living language in the sense that its grammar and vocabulary are identical with the ‘mother’ language. When spoken or written it looks just like ordinary English; the difference lies mostly in the number of the vocabulary which is used in Basic.

Ogden (beorth. b1) advertises the ease with which this language can be learned by pointing out that the learning load of vocabulary and grammar is extremely low:

it is clear that the problem of a universal language would have been solved if it were possible to say all that we normally desire to say with no more words than can be easily legible to the naked eye, in column form, on the back of a sheet of notepaper. The fact therefore, that it is possible to say almost everything we normally desire to say with the 850 words on the frontispiece insert, which occupy about three-quarters of the space on the back of an ordinary sheet of business notepaper, makes Basic English something more than a mere experiment in simplification.

Basic English caused quite a stir when it was made public. Many important personages were delighted with it and supported the idea of making it an international auxiliary language. Two of these enthusiastic people were Sir Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt. Supporting the case of Basic English Churchill [1985, p. 588], wrote: *'The matter has become of grave importance, as Premier (sic!) Stalin is also interested'*. Stalin did seriously considered the idea of creating Basic Russian.

3. Mario Pei's road map to a common world language

In chapter six of his book – *An International Language* – Pei [1964, pp. 368–401], analyzed all earlier proposals for adopting a language for international communication and concluded that they were all based on wrong assumptions. Learning a foreign language by adults is a very hard task; they have to work diligently, systematically, and the process of learning usually takes a lot of time. This, however, does not refer to young children who learn their native languages all over the world with the same ease and speed. In bilingual or multilingual societies they become bilingual and/or multilingual speakers. Logic suggests that the international language, if agreed upon, should be first taught to little children, the future benefactors of this policy.

After the international language has been chosen, the next step would be the training of teachers who would later teach it to children in the first grade of the kindergarten. At least two to three years of training would have to elapse before the teachers could be ready to teach. Every year a new batch of young children would start acquiring the second language and every year they would be more and more proficient in both languages. Pei [1964, p. 399] calculated that *'where the plan we outline to be initiated in the 1960's, the universal tongue would be a living, powerful reality by A. D. 2050'*.

4. A realistic proposal for success

Mario Pei had a very good idea; one could say, a vision. Unfortunately, at his time this vision had no chance of being turned into reality. At that time the English language had not yet achieved the status which it enjoys now: everybody wants to know English. In addition, television was at its infancy, there were no videos, CD-ROMs, personal computers, the Internet etc. Now we have all these tools which may provide learners with what Krashen [1985] calls optimal input.

The rule leading to success in the acquisition of a foreign language is 'the earlier the better'. Authorities such as Piaget [1992] and Montessori [1972; 1994] assume that the age of three is the best for sending children to kindergarten. At this age they develop very quickly and they acquire knowledge like a sponge soaks water. The regular exposure to a foreign language should start at this age, not only because the earlier exposure to a foreign language might harm younger children, which is not true, but because at the age of three the child can

also look after herself/himself [e.g. in the toilet], can concentrate on what the kindergarten teachers want her/him to do and is eager to participate in various activities organized by the teachers. They also have a feature of their character which allows them to watch with interest TV programmes or listen to a story even if they do not understand everything that is said or/and shown³. Older children become bored if they do not understand everything.

In the view of the author, the easiest, cheapest and most successful acquisition of English can be obtained from watching television or video, from operating a computer, using CDs and CD-ROMs with English texts and surfing in the Internet⁴. These media can provide the learners with the optimal input.

The author has collected much anecdotal evidence showing that children can acquire a foreign language from watching television. There are also some documented cases confirming what the anecdotal evidence claims. One is an A. M. thesis by Król [1999], where she observed her younger sister's progress in acquiring English from watching television programmes for children. It was a shock to Król when she became aware that her sister understood what was shown on TV in English without having been taught that language. The author of this article also heard a similar story from a very reliable source. This time, a mother of an eleven old boy asked a language teacher to check the boy's competence in English. The teacher spent an hour talking with the boy and she found out that his listening comprehension was very good, his speech was fluent and his language, although with some minor errors, was fully understood.

I, myself, had been a subject in an experiment conducted by my father. He started to talk to me in English from my birth so that I could acquire that language the easy way. The experiment has been successful: I, with time, reached quite a high level of listening comprehension but, for years, refused to speak in English. I started to speak after a visit to Britain where I could not communicate in Polish. After that my development was speeded up and, somehow, without any tuition, I also learnt to read, and later, to write. I then polished my English at the University. My brother, three years older than I, was excluded from father's experiment. However, to father's delight, **he** not only learnt to understand English, but he also began to speak. His situation was psychologically differed from mine. He acquired English by casually watching and listening to what father said to me and how both of us behaved. **It was for him just like watching television**: there were two actors and there was a specific situation which was directly linked with what was being said and done. Since the time when foreign television became accessible, both of us – teenagers, spent a lot of time watching, the then not scrambled, Sky Television.

³ The exposure of children younger than three years old to English may be treated as a preparation for the future acquisition of the language.

⁴ Of course, little children are not expected to use all these aids.

Many psychologists and parents are against allowing children to watch television because they are afraid that the children may become addicted to it. In addition to this, they argue that television programmes show violence, negative role models etc. A study in America [Winston 2002, p. 299] reveals shocking data concerning violence. It shows that

[T]he amount of violence in the media has led to a new field of research examining whether this is a cause of violence in society or a trigger for underlying violent tendencies. In one study, the American Psychological Association estimated that the American child sees more than 100 000 acts of violence and 8 000 murders on television.

Does this mean that we should stop using television? After all, there are also programmes without violence and bad characters, programmes tailored to the age and children's interests, like Mini Mini or Disney Channel.

Parents should monitor what their children watch and disconnect unsuitable channels. Television, just like many other tools, must not be outright condemned as evil; after all, a knife may be used both for killing and for slicing bread, a car is a useful means of transport but it may also kill or maim, and yet, nobody thinks that knives and cars should be banned! Likewise, television may be used for wrongdoing, but it may also be an excellent tool for education.

5. Conclusions and suggestions

The limited space allocated to this article, prevented the author from a more detailed presentation of the most important issues. For this reason, a number of suggestions and some conclusions will be just listed here.

- There is strong evidence that a foreign language may be acquired by little children through watching television programmes in such language [Krakowian-Płoszka 2008],
- State educational institutions should see to that the state television shows programmes/channels for children in English, appropriate to their age,
- This will not be costly because the programmes bought from Britain are always originally produced in English,
- Very young children should be exposed to the input contained in television programmes,
- Some children watching English television programmes, after a time, may learn only to understand English; others may also speak in this language and, when all of them start learning English at school, they may quickly reach a high level of English language competence,
- This way of learning English by children will be fun, not work,
- This approach to teaching English may gradually result in a growing number of bilingual speakers in our country,

- When our country has enough money, and obtain financial help from the EU, it might, perhaps, be possible to start teaching children English from the first grade of the kindergarten. This teaching should be correlated with TV programmes.

Abstract

The main issue discussed in the article is concerned with the importance of language as an element of human culture and a tool for communication. The author argues that all attempts to introduce one, common language for the world, e.g., Esperanto, have failed and shows that the most important language in the present world is English. In this situation, it is crucial for Polish citizens to master it. Traditional methods of teaching a foreign language are not very efficient; the learners need years of hard work to succeed in this task. The author presents a quicker and a successful way of turning young Poles into bilingual speakers. Her main thesis, directed towards the future, states that children of three years of age, when proper conditions are created for them, can acquire the English language from watching English speaking television programmes.

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