

Prudence Phillips

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Professor Boylan

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Essay 2.3

The Language We Speak

How exactly does the human mind come to understand language? This question is not easy to answer because a series of complex procedures go on in the mind for a person to relate a group of words to their surroundings. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, language is the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way. Language is what distinguishes us humans from other living creatures.

In Nigeria, my country of origin, though the official language is English, three hundred different tribes and each boast of their own language. It is usually seen as a major achievement when a millennial can speak the language that is identified with their tribe. Due to the social and cultural pressure, most parents tend to speak to their children in their native tongue when they are home. However, this practice comes with side effects though as children from these homes tend to be slower to adapt to speech. When the children eventually do, it pays off because then they can speak comfortably in both languages.

In my own home, Igbo language is the native tongue of our tribe (also called Igbo) and my mother is one of those parents who have the strict in-house language rules. Whenever she

is home, we are not allowed to speak in any other language other than Igbo especially to her. She would pretend she was deaf if you tried to speak in any other language other than Igbo. Though it seemed like quite a pain at the time, I have come to really appreciate it because being able to fully understand a language other than English gives me a kind of satisfaction.

Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries and because of this, we are also made to learn French language from preschool level to junior high school levels. All I recall ever learning from the times I took the French is how to conjugate various verbs and a few words used in day-to-day speech. Though I spent about ten years in the classroom learning this language, I am still unable to carry a casual conversation with a native speaker. I can understand some words and phrases here and there, but I cannot beat my chest and claim that I can speak French. Recently, I took interest in Korean language and culture and decided to try my hand at learning it. Learning Korean is a different experience from learning French. This is because Korean language uses different characters from the English alphabets I'm familiar with. Naturally, the first step to learning the language is getting to know the characters. This step was easy to get past. It was just being able to recognize the characters and relating them to how they sound. Just like learning that the 'a' in 'car' sounds like 'ah' and the 'a' in 'cake' sounds like 'ae', but a bit less confusing because each character has its own sound.

After getting through the stage of learning what character makes what sound, the next step is knowing how a group of sounds which form a word relates to your surroundings. So far,

I have been able to learn the characters and I can pronounce the words, but I can't seem to make the connection between the word and what it relates to in real life. In some cases where I manage to understand what the word means, I probably took a moment to translate it to English first, before coming to totally understand what the word meant.

While trying to find articles that could enlighten me on how the human mind can understand language, but my search repeatedly turned up the sentence "...the way the human mind understands language is not an easy process to understand...". That point was already clear to me which is why I began searching on it in the first place. I decided to tailor my search toward robots and artificial intelligence machines. When I did this, I found that scientists have tried to replicate the learning process of the human mind and attempted to build robots that understand language.

According to a research carried out by the Institute of Cognitive Science and Technology, the goal of making robots understand language has not yet been achieved, but they hope to achieve the goal in the near future. Robots can of course be pre-programmed with a given set of responses. This way, they can listen to what the user inputs and respond using the pre-programmed responses. An example is the simple assistant *Siri* that comes with the iPhone. She is not a robot, she is an AI¹ assistant and is a good example to cite. You can tell Siri to do simple tasks and ask her some questions and she would respond with answers she has

¹ AI – Artificial Intelligence

been programmed to fit appropriately. It may seem like Siri has mastered language, but I don't think that is the case. Just like my experience with Korean characters and the language in general, Siri is only able to pronounce the words based on what she has been told to do. If you try to carry a casual conversation as you would a human with her, you would probably get an answer like "sorry, I didn't seem to understand that". This is simple proof that the process of understanding language is not an easily explainable occurrence. It is more than just knowing how to pronounce the words because this is basically what Siri does.

There are a lot of social and psychological factors that go into understanding a language. Because of my extensive use of English Language, it has become only language I am completely comfortable with and thus unconsciously do the translation thing with Korean Language. Language to me is still a mystery and the ignorant part of me is telling me to follow Einstein's conclusion for every inexplicable thing and believe it's all God's doing, but I know there's more of an explanation to it.

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