

The Learning of Ancient Languages as (super)Human Effort

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Abstract

Problems around teaching ancient languages are discussed. It is suggested to assume that learning and teaching of languages require some superhuman effort. Author's experience of teaching ancient languages and producing electronic educational tools both for text version and for Internet in Faculty of Theology in University of Latvia is described. Problems around cognitive models of reasoning and place of languages there are discussed.

Key words: ancient languages, Biblical languages, teaching of languages, learning of languages, Internet tools for education, cognition

Introduction

Main effort of teacher of languages is to persuade learner to find motifs of why he/she should exercise some efforts in order to progress in his/her attempts to acquire sought-after skills in particular language usage. In not so ancient times (before oil was pumped from beneath earth in great amounts) ancient languages were taught exceedingly by successful motivations for hard work necessary for language digestion. We have beautiful examples of this not far past, see Hale's article [5]. Methods suggested in this article seem incredibly drastic for present times, and nowadays we have computers (!!!) to make all effort easier and most easily surmountable. Computers we mention because they have great impact on all what concerns language teaching nowadays. But computer may be ranked as negative aspect too and in many senses as well, as we know. What we want to get from learner of language, it is his/her attention, and not only attention, but even effort, and not only simply effort, but superhuman effort, effort as if necessary for insurmountable hardship from side of human being.

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On superhuman effort of the teachers to persuade the learner of language to learn

One of most hard thing in this world is to learn a new language. To learn language requires incredible concentration of forces and many other efforts. Of course, other sciences require the same, e.g., as mathematician I would say the same for mathematical subjects. People use to say that they do not talents, say, for mathematics, but they were to say that they do no see ways to get motifs for incredibly arduous work that the thing requires. The same applies for languages. My students often say that they do not have aptitude for languages. Why they say so? They do not see motifs for hard work, for superhuman effort I would say, it would require. Nobody taught them this rule. But who knows this rule? Teachers themselves know this? Well, partly they know because they have done this necessary arduous task to become teachers of languages.

But more interesting thing turns around some very gifted students, in particular, students with excellent memory and other gifts, they very easily go forward in language, but in the end they loose interest and go astray, away from started studies of particular language. Why? Answer is very simple but not trivial. They do not see motif to exercise some effort because all comes to them too easily. And in the end they are to be counted among losers. I would say that crucial aspect here is that they can't go over some critical amount of necessary superhuman effort. But here we see as if contradiction. Why they need superhuman effort if they can gain all in more endurable way? But now, see, here we get the point. It turns out that superhuman effort is more primary than its as if application.

To be specific about what we conjectured, I repeat. Superhuman effort would suggest its necessity to learn language. In case we had easier way to come to knowledge of language, we didn't had necessity for any form of superhuman effort. But it turns out that reality, by unknown for us reasons, behaves other way, and superhuman effort is necessary in any case. Thus, we are forced to conclude that superhuman effort is primary with respect to its usability, i.e., to compensate lack of aptitude, gifts or talents of learner or so.

And now we are to come to some concluding sequel, namely, teachers must too exceed superhuman effort but in what? In to persuade learner of language to learn? Or in to find new and new contrivances to support learners weak motifs or descending interest? Or in to find ways to arouse anew and anew enthusiasm that for reason of too long run needed in to acquire language skills one get too tired and may be tempted to abandon once initiated efforts in half accomplished undertaking? Alas, we know too well that all this is necessary in even more amount than we would be able to enumerate. If there are exceptions, then in persons of some students which according words of Tomas de Kampen [14] were preordered by divine providence, or, more precisely, *secundum divinae ordinationis sapientiam et aequitatem*.

On my experience in exceeding (super)human effort to teach languages

Everyone who learns and teaches languages knows the efforts needed for that affair. When I started to teach ancient languages in theological faculty, I decided to write article for students to motivate them for learning and in the same time to narrate how I myself have come to learn and teach them. In this paper [19] “How to learn (ancient) languages” I tried to persuade one to find positivistic approach in what actually are most negative conditions where we come in the completely new and unknown world of the new language. I advocated for what I called *starting journey paradigm* where our attention is not turned to the remaining (undone) part of started journey but only to present and already done. We exclude future in order to think positively about present. Just future would rise in us negative attitude when always before us the way in too far and unknown goal seen, and for that reason we should build temporary habitation equipped with all necessary tools, what we call journey start paradigm. We may recall Descartes decision for necessity of temporary habitation building for his new philosophical system [4]. This my article was indented to be given students for reading when starting to learn languages. But I never much advocated my students for reading of this article, because I saw that much exercise of the sort done in start may turn students weak motifs for running away rather to rouse their interests. I always must recall myself that I wrote article after, but they must read it before. That is that big gap which divides us objectively. The same mystical gap that divides the one who have come to knowledge from the all unenlightened ones.

The next what I found out was to find some retreat in case my effort were unproductive. For that reason I elaborated two principles. First was *live language principle*, what stated that in all my classes students should be in contact with language they are learning and this contact should prevail. That means that I can't much time waste for explanations about language, but language should almost without interruptions sound in the ears of my students and in mouths in my students. The second retreat principle was to give students some positive side effect compensation. What I mean by it? In case I am bad teacher of languages because I myself am mathematician with physicist's education and with bad marks in whatever linguistic subjects in the school and I have been unsuccessful in my undertaking to enlighten theological students in Biblical languages, then at least I teach them to think logically, I explain logical structure of languages and thus highly logically organized building of our cognitive ability, I teach them to formulate thoughts in organized patterns, I teach them to discover that whatever worth of reading in the past are written according such patterns.

The next step I started to prepare electronic tools for support of my teaching. First tool was simple tutorial for Biblical Greek [20]. To distinguish myself from other similar tutorials I supported all original Greek text with parallel Latin text. Why Latin? The

course was for students of Biblical Greek. But that was my invention in favor to overcome mystical language study threshold.

Then I recalled in my mind that I do not know anybody who has learned ancient Greek unaided only with book in hands except myself. I had learned the ancient Greek from Anna Rāta's book "Short course of ancient Greek", and when I met my external teacher, when I was through with the book and became her intramural learner, I learned that I was the only person who has studied her book successfully without previous knowledge of that language. What I did with my recollection of this kind? I decided to give to my students just such sort of tutorial that would have been mostly helpful me in that period when I was struggling with Greek language without help of anybody except with book in the hands. The result was the book "Exercises in New Testament Greek. Tutorial for students of theology" [21]. In this book one type exercises are used where text form New Testament Greek should be translated into Latvian, and reversely too, but before that short phrases and subclauses are to be translated or only partly translated, where some parts of already present translations are exceptionally hidden. For this method I wrote master's thesis "On a type of exercises in teaching ancient languages" [22] and got the degree in 1995.

Then Internet era started, and I discovered that I am in exception position next to my philological colleges because of my first profession of mathematician and I had some experience in writing efficient programs for graph-theoretic algorithms. My first Internet product was "Reading exercises in Latin" where about 40 fables of Phaedrus are electronically presented in hypertext technology. I used in these fables Smelter's excellent book [12] with rendering of Phaedrus fables into simplified Latin prose text that are excellent for pedagogic reasons. Here I used William Whitaker's electronic dictionary [16,17] to generate hypertext technically, using complicate computer program. I think that elaborators of Perseus system [7] from Tufts university know what I mean. About my effort I told in 2nd World Congress of Latvian Scientists (2001) "Electronic Exercises Make Alive Ancient Latin for Students"[26]. See my links [23, 24] and [25] where I tried to use the method for text of Tomas de Kampen.

My next and largest Internet product is "Latin Dictionary Tools Page" [28]. It is based on database that uses W. Whitaker's dictionary's word set in complete amount. In this product I tried to find some new approaches in what we could gain from building electronic environment. About this I told in [30].

From many other electronic texts I have chosen to name are Home Reading in Latin [30], annotated texts for Daniel and Ezra in Biblical Aramaic [31], annotated text for psalms in OT Hebrew [32], and lexical key to some books of Syriac NT [33] and parallel Syriac-Greek readings in NT [34].

After naming all that one would think that I must feel as many or at least something achieved in overcoming superhuman threshold of hardness in teaching ancient languages. The only possible answer "yes" would be in sense that teacher as myself in

this way may prove in retrograde (back in time) way that he has done what has done, similarly as Jahve of OT names himself "I am what I am". Otherwise nothing may be reached, at least with help of computers, in order to increase number of persons that God may have chosen as exceptional for acquiring ancient languages.

Learning of (ancient) language as cognitive human activity

In process of learning languages we discern some grades or steps that alternate periods of monotone work interchange with flashes of enlightenment like transitions to new level of understanding of the language. What goes on actually in our consciousness we do not know, but we know that these transitions as flashes should come sooner or later.

What are these flashes? Actually it is very simple to answer this question, because we all time live in such flash of enlightenment when we are in alert and conscious mind except we have become so used to this state that we finish to recognize this as something exceptional. Only in situations where new form of enlightenment comes over us or we come to contact with it we distinguish that something extraordinary has occurred and we enjoy within this new state in direct sense of these words. When we say a speech to public and we realize that words necessary for our subject of talk come in our mind, then we feel this emotional uplift. What is this? We could live all time in this uplift of mind when our mind is filled with whatever thoughts, but we do not; there seems some mechanism of defense switches in in order to defend us from eventual short circuit. This self-defense system of our organism is for keeping us alive in long terms, but it in the same time make more difficult for us to see how our mind works. At least some common sense would us suggest that just like this way or similar in most general lines our brain and consciousness works. But this common sense picture might give some insight in what goes on at learning languages.

But what is language in its structural unity, that it so closely comes to our consciousness and cognition? If we see from side of their outer structure that we discover via grammatical forms and structure, language seems something very rational, and for that reason language arising theories are mainly very trivial and rational, but lack this almost mystical connection with cognition itself. We could more gain in our imaginative insight if we suggested that language lives somewhere outside of human beings in some realm of platonic ideas and is common for all humans, but such insights are not supported by contemporary science. In this case we would suggest that learner of language is getting in contact with language in some gradual process until it gets this connection as permanent state and the process of learning has come to positive outcome. Thus, according this model language would be something outside, that we come in connection with it in process of acquiring it. Following this idea we would even say that we should not be too specific about where this supposed

realm of language might exist, for us it would be more important to use this mechanism of connection to as if something existing.

Superhuman effort

How we could come to understanding or at least some minimal insight, why superhuman effort is required to get connection to new form of enlightenment in form of new language? This eventual connection requires some measurable amount of form of motion in us that it seems that it does not depend of what we do, but how many we do. If so then we may only conclude that we completely are ignorant about how our cognition works, and the only what we may say is that, if we want new language knowledge, higher realms of our cognition require some extra work to be done to get rights to this new language acquiring.

ὑπερ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους οὐδεὶς ἦτοι θεὸς ἢ ἄγγελοι or Gurdjieff's **superhuman (insomniacal) effort**

What is in the realms above human beings? Science does not answer or even allow to make inquiries of this sort. We should try to find somewhere in direct proximity of science. One way would be to listen to Benjamin Lee Whorf who suggested to look on language as form mind that is more closely related to reality than we are used to understand in our rational way of thinking [18]. But it is all or next to all. We should use more flexible forms of thinking to come closer to touch these hard questions and in the same time not to lose contact with rational way of thinking at all. Another option is to follow Georg Gurdjieff who is the main philosopher who uses super human effort idea in his thinking [6]. But Gurdjieff suggests to read all his writings three times and after this we would reach new level of consciousness. Is this triad reading extra effort to get closer to Coming Good for what advocates Gurdjieff? But up to now we are to acknowledge that irrational way of thinking of Gurdjieff comes closer with mystical fact of superhuman effort necessary for language studies than our rational way of arguing.

Conclusions

Since story of Babel, Genesis 11:1-9, we have not heard many stories about linguistics and where languages come from. We ourselves are too weak to understand nature of languages and our ability to acquire and to use languages is too weak also. Some thinkers, which traditional science tend to classify as mystics, are closer to suggest us fruitful ideas, but nevertheless we are far from coming to reasonable models of cognition what concerns languages. It seems superhuman effort is needed here too to overcome insurmountable hardship that would lead us in realms of

cognitive mechanism understanding from where we could see better ways how to learn languages ourselves and how to teach them to others.

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