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 seam incredibly drastic for present times, and nowadays we have computers (!!!) to make all effort easer 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 a negative aspect too and in many senses in addition, as we know. What we want to get from a learner of a language, it is his/her attention, and not only an attention, but even an effort, and not only a simply effort, but a superhuman effort, effort as if necessary for an insurmountable hardship from the side of a 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 cognitive 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 have talent, say, for mathematics, but they were to say that they do not see ways to get motifs for an 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, do they know this, do they acknowledge this? Well, partly they know, because they have done themselves this necessary arduous task before to become teachers of languages.

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

To be more specific about what is conjectured, I am to repeat. Superhuman effort suggests or admonishes about its necessity at learning of languages. In case we had an easier way to come to the knowledge of language we didn't had necessity for any form of superhuman effort. But it turns out that the reality, by unknown for us reasons, behaves other way, and a superhuman effort is necessary in any case. Thus, we are forced to conclude that superhuman effort is primary with respect to its application, 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 too must exceed superhuman effort but in what? In to persuade learners of language to learn? Or in to find new and new contrivances to support learners weak motifs or descending interests? 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 the 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/or teaches languages knows the efforts needed for that affair. When I started to teach ancient languages in the theological faculty of the University of Latvia, 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 languages. In this paper [19] "How to learn (ancient) languages" I tried to persuade one to find a 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 the started journey but only to the present and already done. We are to exclude future, mostly unknown, in order to think positively about present. Just the future, and fear along with it, would rise in us negative attitude when always before us the way in too far and unknown goal is unseen, and for that reason we should build temporary habitation equipped with all necessary tools for study, what we call *journey start paradigm*. We may recall Descartes decision for necessity of building of a temporary habitation 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 to read this article, because I saw that much exercise of the sort done in the start may turn students' weak motifs for running away rather to rouse their interests. I always must recall myself that I wrote the 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. The first was the *live language principle*, what stated that in all my classes students should be in contact with the language they are learning and this contact should prevail. That means that I can't too much time waste for explanations about language, but language should almost without interruptions sound in the ears of my students and from the mouths of my students. The second retreat principle was to give students some positive side effect compensation. What I mean by it? In case I am a bad teacher of languages because I myself am a mathematician with physicist's education and with bad or mediocre marks in whatever linguistic subjects in the school and supposedly 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 the language 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 excessively highly organized patterns.

The next step was 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 Ancient 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 the mystical language study threshold.

Then I recalled in my mind that I do not know anybody who had learned Ancient Greek unaided only with a book in the hands except myself. Indeed, I had learned the ancient Greek from the book of Anna Rāta "Short course of the Ancient Greek", and when afterwards 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 had 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 the Ancient Greek language without help of anybody except with the book in the hands. The result of my efforts was a new 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 my master's thesis "On a type of exercises in the teaching of ancient languages" [22] and got the degree in 1995.

Then Internet era started, and I discovered that I am in an exceptional 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 too well what I have in mind. 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 the text of Tomas de Kampen.

My next and largest Internet product is "Latin Dictionary Tools Page" [28]. It is based on a 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 an 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 Syrical-Greek readings in NT [34].

After naming all that one would think that I must feel as if achieved many or at least something in the overcoming the superhuman threshold of hardness in the teaching of ancient languages. The only possible answer "yes" would be in a 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, my experience showed that nothing might 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 of the 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 an eventual short circuit. This self-defense system of our organism is for keeping us alive and alert in long terms, but it in the same time makes difficulter 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 try to see from the 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 the 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 the connection with, in the 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 exists, for us it would be more important to use this mechanism of connection as if something existing.

Superhuman effort

How we could come to the understanding or at least some minimal insight, why superhuman effort is required to get connection to a new form of enlightenment in the form of a 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 a new language knowledge, higher realms of our cognition require some extra work to be done to get rights for this new language acquiring.

ὕπερ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους οὐδεὶς ἤτοι 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 this out somewhere in the direct proximity of the science. One way would be to listen to Benjamin Lee Whorf who suggested to look on language as a form of mind that is more closely related to the 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 a contact with the 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 just this 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 credible 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 that 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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