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HSS1B

3 October 2018

### The Language Addict

How does it feel to speak before one learns to read and write? How does it feel to think before one learns to speak? It's easy to take language for granted after learning it, and remember the process of learning to speak and write as trivial. In William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, the interactions between characters at different stages of language learning give a perspective into how language evolves with a person in stages: from understanding the concept of language, to understanding speech, to understanding written language, at every stage forgetting the difficulty of the previous understanding.

In the play, Prospero is the most knowledgeable of his language. Next are the well-educated royalty from Italy and the advisor Gonzalo. Still young are Ferdinand and Miranda, and least advanced is Caliban. While it may seem that the characters are very diverse, the education of the entire cast is comparable because they are all aristocrats, or raised by aristocrats (as Prospero teaches Miranda language, and Miranda teaches Caliban language), so each person represents a different stage of the same education.

Caliban is a special case because Italian<sup>1</sup> is not his first language. It is unclear whether or not Caliban knows a "language" before Miranda's arrival and her lessons. The only other intelligent life Caliban could communicate with prior to the humans' arrival was Sycorax, and it is unknown if Caliban had been old enough to learn language by the time she died. Because of

1. Because the language spoken by the Milanese and Neapolitans is not specified, it will be assumed to be Italian. While it is likely that the royalty is educated in Latin and some of the dialogue take place in Latin, the distinction is irrelevant to the claim.

the ambiguity of Caliban's background, it is only safe to assume that Caliban did not have any *spoken* language recognizable to Prospero and Miranda before the arrival of the two— Caliban remarks that Prospero “[taught] [Caliban] how \ To name the bigger light, and how the less, \ That burn by day and night” (Shakespeare, I.II.334-6), confirming only that he was taught *names* to objects. While Prospero and Miranda believe that Caliban is stupid before they taught him and that he should be grateful for the education, there is no indication that he is new to the concept of language. Miranda similarly declares that she “Took pains to make [Caliban] speak, taught [him] each hour ... when [he] didst not, savage, \ Know [his] own meaning, but would gabble like \ A thing most brutish. I endowed thy purposes \ With words that made them known” (Shakespeare, I.II.354-8). Both of these declarations agree that Caliban is taught how to *speak*: *spoken* words are imputed to objects like the sun and the moon to allow Caliban “know [his] own meaning.”

But it is likely that Caliban's prior gabbling was some form of language, especially if he was able to teach Prospero and Miranda. He must have had some system of communication in order to show Prospero and Miranda around the island before he was taught speech; it may have been this gabble-talk or some system of gestures. The OED defines language primarily as “a system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure,” but also as “an unsystematic or informal means of communicating other than by the use of words, as gesture, facial expression, etc.; non-verbal communication.” Caliban's language likely fits the latter description, “unsystematic or informal” means of “non-verbal communication,” a language simpler than Italian, and one that does not register as a language to Prospero and Miranda. He curses, “The red plague rid you \ For learning me your language!” (I.II.364-5). The wording hints that there is a distinction between *your language* (i.e., Italian) and his own— Caliban

doesn't regret being taught language in general (in fact, he confesses previously that "and then I loved thee" (I.II.336) when he was first taught speech), but rather is most likely hostile for one of two reasons: having the Italian language be imposed on him when he already has a language, or being forced to learn to speak.

So despite Prospero and Miranda's berating of Caliban as a monster and a savage, Caliban is already aware and capable of the concept of language; he is only new to speech.

All the other humans starkly contrast against Caliban in that they are all fluent in Italian as a first language.

Of these shipwreck victims, Ferdinand, Stephano, and Trinculo are the less mature (in age and attitude) of the group. They all act surprised, unsurprisingly, when learning that the islanders speak their speech. Stephano's first reaction when hearing Caliban speak his own language is to present him as an exotic gift to an emperor—he sees Caliban's ability to speak Italian as a keepsake-like trait. Ferdinand's reaction when he first recovers Miranda is different: "My language? Heavens! \ I am the best of them that speak this speech" (I.II.429-30). To be surprised that somebody else speaks the same language is interesting, but to immediately boast with respect to his language ("speech") is a strange reaction. Of course, meeting a monster and meeting a beautiful maiden warrant different reactions, but in both cases the idea of language is simply a worthy attribute of a person. Caliban is a monster *that can speak Italian*, and thus he is emperor-gift-worthy; Ferdinand is the best of the people *who can speak Italian*, which qualifies him as a civilized man. This perspective of language holds it as not any more a skill or weapon or study any more than a property. These characters are comfortable with speech, and they view the basic understanding of language (that Caliban has) as an elementary fact of life.

Also interesting is that in Ferdinand's speech, the word "speech" is used as opposed to "language," as if the ability to speak is a skill inherent to language. Because Italian involves speech, the skill is taken for granted.

The second group of Italians comprise the Neapolitan king Alonso, his brother Sebastian, his advisor Gonzalo, and the false Milanese duke Antonio. The dialogue between the members of this group are highly rhetorical. Gonzalo jokes about ruling the island and Antonio persuades Sebastian to overthrow Alonso by projecting his view of the future on him— both speak in terms of hypotheticals. This contrasts with the language of the younger people, whose dialogue focuses often on simple information transfer (e.g., Ferdinand declaring his love for Miranda, and Caliban describing the nature of the island's sounds to Stephano and Trinculo). This more advanced discourse, also in the form of dialogue, is common in modern literary education as well.

Prospero is arguably the most intellectual of the cast. What sets him apart is that he is the only character infatuated with the written language as well as the spoken one, evident by his books. His magical power is a manifestation of his books, a metaphor for the fact that the ability to store language in writing is much more potent than the ability to simply relay it.

And then it collapses.

Caliban understands the fundamental use of language. Ferdinand takes for granted speech as the standard means for communication. Gonzalo speaks with reason and humor. Prospero has gone through all these stages and more: for, as Caliban plots with Stephano and Trinculo: "Remember \ first to possess [Prospero's] books; for without them \ he's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not \ one spirit to command" (III.II.90-93). Without his books (and without his magic), Prospero is powerless ("but a sot"): no shipwreck would have occurred and Caliban could still be master of the island; having books is Prospero's only advantage over Caliban ("not one spirit to

command”). These books were also the cause for Prospero’s overthrow (too captivated was he by the liberal arts to lead), the cause of mourning on Ferdinand and Alonso’s behalf, and the cause of great confusion on the part of Caliban, the shipwrecked crew, and the king’s consort returning to Italy. These books are both the cause of the problem that leads to the plot of *The Tempest* and the catalysts for Prospero’s return to the throne.

This idea of obsession can be explored in terms of other long-term skills or hobbies, and finds a pretty direct parallel in the study of mathematics. The first step is to establish the fundamentals: arithmetic by counting fingers. Like Caliban before Miranda’s arrival, the idea of arithmetic is understood, even without a formal system to describe it. When math is taught in class, a sort of mathematical fluency is developed, and expressing basic expressions as a system of sums and differences is trivial; a person forgets even that math (like language) is an artificial construct, and it becomes taken for granted. If the student chooses to pursue it further, then the study of written literature (and the creation of written research) in the field gives access to knowledge spanning history and distance. But invest a life’s worth of careless, fanatic toil, and a Frankenstein is created.

Prospero becomes such a Frankenstein, mindlessly applying his magic. He and Miranda are ignorant to the fact that Caliban has a difficult time understanding speech, and Prospero is so focused on his study of books that he becomes oblivious to the emotions of others. The answer is mindfulness—when Prospero takes a moment to think about the effect his magic has on Gonzalo, he immediately relinquishes his magic. If Caliban thinks about the larger picture and how speech will advance his speech, his suffering will be mitigated. Time spent reflecting on and being satisfied with the pains one has taken to master language (in speech or writing) will keep language under control.

Works Cited

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