

The Language Addict: Revisions from the Initial Draft

Cover Letter to the Second Draft

On the day we submitted the essay (unknowingly as the first of two submissions), I went to a writing center appointment and discussed my draft. The writing center associate first asked me if I could state the topic and claim of my paper. I couldn't. Worse, it was difficult to find direct textual evidence of the thesis in each major paragraph: many of the thoughts are not explicitly tied back to the main idea. The claim the paper followed was therefore too windy, too loosely-followed, and too non-applicable to draw meaning from the text.

The major revision process involved simplifying the claim (in the form of a thesis) and creating more explicit links from each major subtopic to some part of the central idea. This leads to a more cohesive paper that is easier to follow, while maintaining the complexity of the argument. If asked about the claim again, I can more easily state that humans go through a natural progression of stages in language learning, advancing through stages slowly and subtly (and dangerously so). (This claim is written, more clearly now, in my thesis statement.)

The previous version also had a missing conclusion: I didn't take the time to come up with a thoughtful culmination of the claim, so it was essentially omitted in the first draft. I tried my best to explain what exactly "mindfulness" means in this situation, and what happens when one is not mindful (in terms of Caliban, Miranda, and Prospero).

Minor grammatical changes were made, and small parts of paragraphs were moved around to improve the paper's logical flow.

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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 to perceive the learning processes of speaking and writing as trivial in retrospect. 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 the mastery of the concept of language itself, to speech, and finally to writing. And this process happens slowly and subtly enough that the importance of either evolutionary phase (i.e., from concept to speech, or from speech to writing) is lost upon the learner.

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 Italian¹ 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

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” (1.2.334-336), 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” (1.2.354-358). 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.” He makes the first transition.

The transition implies that Caliban already has a grasp of language prior to the humans' arrival. He was able to teach Prospero and Miranda about the island; his language 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!” (1.2.364-365). 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" (1.2.336) 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 new only to speech. But he downplays the significance of his new ability, debasing it to frivolous cursing, even while he uses that speech to argue against Prospero and plot with Stephano and Trinculo.

All the other humans stand in contrast with Caliban in that they are all fluent in Italian as a first language, but most view language likewise unappreciatively.

Of the 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" (1.2.429-430). 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.

The second group of Italians comprises 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 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).

In Ferdinand's words to Miranda, the word "speech" is used as opposed to "language"— as Italian involves speech, language and speech are considered the same skill. This is not an uncommon perspective, as virtually all human languages are verbal. The senior aristocrats might find greater use in dialogue as a result of their rhetorical ability, but they too are stuck without a bigger picture of the significance of being able to speak, and speak so easily and eloquently.

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 of 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” (3.2.90-93). 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.

There is no inherent evil in language (like power), but the abuse of it.

Prospero and Miranda are ignorant of the fact that Caliban did not previously know language and has a difficulty with eloquent speech. But when Stephano and Trinculo meet Caliban, they treat him like a human because he can talk; they haven’t the same preconception of him as speech-less and monstrous. Prospero becomes so engrossed with his books that he

becomes oblivious to the emotions of others. His books (i.e., his magic, the ability to control two souls as slaves and manipulate an island-full of people) are not natural in the slightest— yet his conscience does not flinch.

The resolution is a step back, a step away. Had Caliban taken the time to realize the immense accomplishment of transitioning from a wordless world, he may realize that rhetoric can defend himself against and influence Prospero and Miranda, much as it influences Trinculo and Stephano. Had Miranda and Prospero realized Caliban's progress towards speech and intelligence, perhaps their relationship would be much improved. Had Prospero realized what disasters his studious zealousness would wreak— which, as mentioned before, precipitate much of the drama in the plot— he may have held back on his studies, taken time to rule Milan and care for his family, leading to a happier life without the mess of usurpation and sorcery.

Language is no small feat, however natural it may feel. Without an outside view, what feels natural (or normal, or right) may be far from it. A more mindful life is often the more content one.

Notes

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.

Works Cited

“Language, n. (and Int.)” *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2018,
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Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Edited by Peter Holland, Penguin Putnam, 1999.