

Jonathan Lam

Professor Germano

HSS2-K

6 May 2019

### Languages have Layers

There are several stages to the learning of a language. I discussed in a previous essay how a person advances in their study of a language (“The Language Addict”), growing from a babyish, unappreciative stage, to the average, “take-for-granted” perspective, and finally to a cynical, unappreciative stage for the characters in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. In that essay, there was a discussion of people of all range of language proficiency, but for now the focus is on the most ignored one from *The Tempest*: that of Caliban, the man-beast.

Caliban’s Italian-learning adventure is not described in depth in the play, given only by the vague knowledge of his being meticulously tutored by Prospero and Miranda. In the real world, Caliban’s image closely resembles that of a slave, forced to be in servitude and learn the language of his captives. We get from Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* what was missing from Shakespeare’s: the roller-coaster of emotions that accompany the journey. Is it love for the new language? Hate for the forced captivity and labor? Unlike Caliban, Equiano is fairly generous in his appreciation for new language. Once some of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s philosophy about the origin of languages is considered, there are many similarities between Equiano’s acquisition of a language and society’s acquisition of language. Equiano gives an insight into some ways a person may naturally respond to learning new parts of a new language, namely: the joy of learning the idea of a word before the words; the frustration of learning the

words before the idea; and the general confusion and lack of hope when trying to rationalize naming procedures.

Especially at the beginning of his captivity, Equiano is met with a sense of curiosity that allows him to overcome his (nontrivial) fear. This is observed both when he has the acquaintance of people who speak similar languages to him, and, as is the case more and more frequently, when he is only around strangers. An instance of the former is when he “ask[s] how the vessel could go? they told me they could not tell; but that there were cloths put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked in order to stop the vessel” (Equiano 57). The words he uses here are very different than those that he uses later, after he gains experience sailing. It is not only that he is young and that he hasn’t yet seen the technologies that are at play here (i.e., the words “sail” and “anchor” or perhaps even the idea of a large waterborne vessel, the “ship”), but it’s likely that these kinds of words don’t even exist in his native language, because even the idea of oversea travel and the technology to start and stop a boat using wind and water forces is unknown. Thus, when he learns these words (“sail,” “anchor,” and “ship”), he is not learning only the *word*, but the *idea* itself.

When Rousseau discusses the invention of language, he postulates the opposite direction: that “general ideas can be introduced into the mind only with the help of words, and the understanding grasps them only by means of sentences” (Rousseau 24); but Equiano grasps the ideas that were so unknown to him by the profound human power of observation (seeing the sails and hearing from others what their purpose is) and using prior understanding (“magic” is a sort of understanding), without the help of their given words. If we were to interpret Rousseau’s definition less strictly, so that the “help of words” does not have to be the correct term for a

phrase, and rather the ability to use a circumlocutory phrase to describe an object (which in turn helps a person to understand the correct term when they do learn it), then it seems like *general ideas* and *words* are a sort of circular term because words are required to discuss the general idea behind other words, forming an interdependence rather than a one-way cause-effect relationship.

For Equiano, this means the source of numerous miracles along his sometimes-miserable journey. After this first discovery of the ship, there are numerous other moments. An exemplar moment is that in which he discovered two prominent aspects of the European world (emphasis added):

“One morning, when I got upon deck, I saw it covered all over with the snow that fell over-night: as I had never seen any thing of the kind before, I thought it was salt; so I immediately ran down to the mate, and desired him, as well as I could, to come and see how somebody in the night had thrown salt all over the deck. He, knowing what it was, desire me to bring it down to him: accordingly I took up a handful of it, which I found very cold indeed; and when I brought it to him he desired me to taste it. I did so, and I was surprised beyond measure. I then asked him what it was? he told me it was *snow: but I cold not in any wise understand him*. He asked me if we had no such thing in my country? and I told him, No. I then asked him the use of it, and who made; he told me a great man in the heavens, called *God: but here again I was to all intents and purposes at a loss to understand him.*” (Equiano 67)

Here we see both orders of words and the idea behind it: once again putting ideas before words (seeing the cold salt and afterwards associating it with “snow”), but also learning about the great entity called God. Then, God still had no meaning to him, as words do not inherently give meaning.

But this is only fair, as God is the first important word from European culture that is not something he would realize and immediately assign a word to. If God could be summarized into one sentence, He would be the abstraction of a whole church of morals resting in a person's head, and Rousseau acknowledges that "abstractions are irksome and rather unnatural operations of the mind" (24); but God cannot even be summarized as a single abstraction, but perhaps an abstraction of an abstraction of this church, or some more deeply-nested entity that lays in the collective minds of billions of people. What is God, or religion, but the agreement of many like-minded people decided to form into a single word to express? And since religions were born, how many biblical stories, how many religious miracles, how many arguments and beliefs have been sprung up in the name of that *God*, that word that has since become so riddled with connotations and controversies that it is no longer any single idea?

In other words, while Equiano can describe (by means of circumlocution) the sails ("cloths") and snow (in appearance like salt, in touch cold), there is no possibility that he could stumble upon the idea of *God*, in an encompassing sense in any setting after its establishment. A person raised in complete ignorance of God will never discover such a large, yet particular, idea as God and his rules, because there are no physical manifestations which can kindle the same image; and, indeed, even as the idea is unified, there cannot be total (dis)agreement amongst any two people about God's nature, as opposed to something quite corporeal like snow or salt. The difference between the two is that while the latter is something pure and invariant derived from nature, it doesn't require a word to keep the idea together. On the other hand, "God" doesn't have meaning without a society to maintain its complexity.

Another part of language to take into mind are names, especially those for humans and other intimate objects. Rousseau actually points this out as the first part of speech of language,

because they can be mapped one-to-one to other objects; they are a subset of the non-abstract items. The inherent problem is that “each object was given a particular name, without regard to genus and species, ... and all individual things presented themselves to their minds in isolation” (24). This is the opposite of abstracting, for since every object is assigned a different word, a different *name*, without regard to classification or to the names other people give to it. But they are still a representation of a real-life object in the same form as the more abstract ideas, so it can be thought of as the lowest level of abstraction of an object into the realm of language.

What is then fascinating about names is that people can easily disagree on them. Equiano discovers the ephemerality of his own name, for “in this place I was called Jacob; but on board the African snow I was called Michael” (63), and later on Pascal’s ship “my captain and master called me *Gustavus Vasa*. I told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus” (64)<sup>1</sup>. His given name is lost to the forceful bullying of the Europeans, and a name is placed upon him, as if he were some object he himself were foreign to, much like the snow or cloth, and it were obvious. As if his name wasn’t the correct one for himself, nor was any of his other past names bulldozed over his given one.

Equiano tends to take all these forms of new language with grace. He encounters his name changing; he observes in world certain new phenomena and learns their translations; and he is introduced to abstract ideas and absorbs them, becoming a devout Christian. But from his detailed chronology, the parts of this language learning that cause frustration and grief can be separated from the parts that are most pleasant: namely, the latter is when a person is allowed to embrace some representation of the idea with the word, immediately and delightfully finding

<sup>1</sup> "What's in a name? That which we call a rose \ By any other name would smell as sweet." (Shakespeare, II. ii. 1-2)

new context and meaning — here, learning a new word is merely adding to current knowledge, and not having foreign ideas or language in particular be maliciously forced.

This analysis can be extended to other situations which involve foreign language-learning, and contempt or love for the assimilation. Consider again Caliban, and perhaps an straightforward reason for his anger is discovered. He spends his whole life couped up on a tiny island, and, while taught by well-educated people, finds great dissatisfaction in the feeling of being forced upon him a very abstract, foreign representation with no apparent worth. Unlike Equiano, who learns many words through his first interaction with them, thus fusing a word with experience and the joy of first encounter, Caliban is stuck with the frustration of attempting to rationalize an abstract without the same kind of experience. It makes sense that the motivation for a tool like words be learnt at least before the learning of the word, or else it's an endeavor in vain.

Works Cited

Equiano, Olaudah, 1745-1797. *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. New York

:Penguin Books, 1995. Print.

Lam, Jonathan. "The Language Addict." N.p., 2018. Print.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, Alan Ritter, and Julia C. Bondanella. *Rousseau's Political Writings:*

*New Translations, Interpretive Notes, Backgrounds, Commentaries*. New York: W.W.

Norton, 1988. Print.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Edited by Peter Holland, Penguin Putnam, 1999.

THESIS TIME!!!

What the heck is this

I am so doomed

Talk about how language can change someone

Rousseau and the formation of language

Something about the discovery of language

“The languages of the different nations did not totally differ, nor were they so opious as those of the Europeans, particularly the English” (51)

“The language of these people resembled ours so nearly, that we understood each other perfectly. They had also the very same customs as we. There were likewise slaves daily sported with our darts and bows and rows, as I had been to do at home. In this resemblance to my ormer happy state I p[assed about two months ... “ (53)

~~“I asked how the vessel could go? they told me they could not tell; but that there were cloths put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked in order to stop the vessel” (57)~~

“They at last took notice of my surprise; and one of them, willing to increase it, as well as to gratify my uriosity, made me look through it ... This heightened my wonder: and I was now more persuaded thn ever that I was in another world, and that every thing about me was magic” (59) — first technologies

“I did not know what this could menan; and indeed I thought these people were full of nothing but magical arts” (60)

“I now totally lost the small remains of comfort I had enjoyed in conversing with my countrymen ... I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest o my companions; for they could talk to each other, but I had no person to speak tot that I could understand” (62)

“I was much astonished and shocked at this contrivance, which I afterwards learned was called the iron muzzle” (63)

“In this place I was called Jacob; but on board the African snow I was called Michael” (63)

“By this time, however, I could smatter a little imperfect English; and I wanted to know as well as I could where we were going” (64)

“While I was on board this ship, my captain and master named me *Gustavus Vasa*. I told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus; and when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and by which I have been known ever since” (64) — putting a name to that which is known is undesirable

~~“One morning, when I got upon deck, I saw it covered all over with the snow that fell over-night: as I had never seen any thing of the kind before, I thought it was salt; so I immediately ran down to the mate, and desired him, as well as I could, to come and see how somebody in the night had thrown salt all over the deck. He, knowing what it was, desired e to bring it down to him: accordingly i took up a handful of it, which I ffound very cold indeed; and when I brought it to him he desired me to taste it. I did os, and I was surpsied beyond measure. I then asked him what it was? he told me it was snow: but I cold not in any wise understand him. He asked me if we had no such thing in my~~



country? and I told him, No. I then asked him the use of it, and who made; he told me a great man in the heavens, called God: but here again I was to all intents and purposes at a loss to understand him” (67)

“Its prodigious height, and its form, resembling a sugar loaf, filled me with wonder” (73)

“I could now speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood every thing that was said. I now not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them; to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners” (78)

“Upon this Captain Doran said I talked too much English, and if I did not behave myself well, and be quiet, he had a method on board to make me” (94)

Joseph Clipson (121)

Two white men (159)

“Obstacles to the origin of languages” (22)

“The first ... is to imagine how languages could have been necessary, for since men had no dealings with each other, and a need of any, it is impossible to understand the necessity for inventing languages or even how they became possible, if they were not indispensable” (22)

-> domestic intercourse

“Observe further that since the child has to explain all his needs and, consequently, has more to say to the mother than the mother to the child, it must be the child who makes the greatest efforts to invent language, and that the language he uses must be largely of his own making; this would bring into being as many languages as there are individuals to speak them; the wandering, vagabond life, which gives no idiom the time to become consistent, contributes to this multiplication” (22)

... art of speaking as communication

“Man’s first language, the most universal, the most energetic, and the only one he needed before it became necessary to persuade an assembly of men, is the cry of nature” (23)

-> not very useful in ordinary life

“It must be assumed that the first words men used had, in their mind, a much broader meaning than do those used in languages that are already formed, and that, ignorant of the division of discourse into its constituent parts, they at first gave each word the meaning of a whole sentence. ...” “abstractions are irksome and rather unnatural operations of the mind” (24)

“At first, each object was given a particular name, without regard to genus and species, which these first founders were not in a position to distinguish, and all individual things presented themselves to their minds in isolation, as they are in the spectacle of nature” (24)

~~“Moreover, general ideas can be introduced into the mind only with the help of words, and the understanding grasps them only by means of sentences. This is one of the reasons why animals can neither formulate such ideas nor ever acquire the perfectibility that depends upon them” (24)~~

“Whatever the origin of language may be, it is easy to see from the lack of care nature has taken to bring men together through mutual needs or to facilitate their use of speech how little it has prepared them to be sociable, and how little it has contributed to all they have done to establish social bonds” (25)

“He had in instinct alone all that he needed to live in the state of nature; he has in cultivated reason only what he needs to live in society” (26)

Words to describe it before the things created, or things before words to describe it

Wonder in creating languages from a (more ignorant?) state, but less from the perspective of someone who already knows the language

In *The Interesting Narrative*, a man named Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, recounts the adventure that spans a lifetime