

**'BATS' AND 'BALLS' : BELIEFS ABOUT TALK
AND BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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Résumé

De grandes différences culturelles existent dans le domaine des croyances et des représentations sociales relatives au langage et au discours, comme pour les croyances et représentations relatives à l'apprentissage des langues. Cet article présente et discute plusieurs études récentes sur les représentations des apprenants. Les conséquences de celles-ci pour l'apprentissage auto-dirigé sont importantes. On montre ici que la prise de conscience par l'apprenant de ses propres représentations constitue un élément essentiel de son autonomie : cette dimension culturelle de la compétence d'apprentissage de l'apprenant doit être intégrée dans les contenus et les procédures d'apprentissage auto-dirigé.

The topic of this paper is what people believe about language and language learning. When I say 'people' I mean ordinary people, not linguists and language teachers : people like your students and my students. I am particularly interested in how their beliefs influence their behaviour, both in everyday life and in specific kinds of language learning contexts, such as self-access systems. So in its simplest form, the question I will be addressing is "How does what I as a student believe about language influence my learning of a foreign language ?" But, of course, some of the simplest questions to ask are often the most difficult to answer.

I will be referring to these beliefs under two headings, for which I use the acronyms BATs and BALLs. BATs are *Beliefs about Talk* and BALLs are *Beliefs about Language Learning* and there is often a dynamic relationship between the two, cause and effect, with BATs setting BALLs in motion, though as we shall see later, metaphors of this kind need to be taken with a pinch of salt. I will be arguing that it is important for learners (and for teachers and counsellors, too) to have some awareness of, some access to their beliefs, their BATs and BALLs, especially, but not exclusively, in the context of self-direction or self-access. And I will be discussing a number of recent research projects which support and illustrate this view.

The expression 'Beliefs about talk' (BATs) is borrowed from a recent article by Giles, Coupland and Wiemann (in Bolton and Kwok, 1992). They describe BATs as "...beliefs about the social act of talk itself ... (including) the evaluation of language behaviours ...(and) the fundamental functions of talk and silence ... (they are) general, relatively context-independent belief structures that are widely held within, or perhaps across, cultural entities ..."

This definition calls for a number of remarks. The first is that BATs are clearly very closely akin to, or form a subset of, what are known as 'representations' elsewhere in the linguistic and sociological literature. This can be seen from the following

two quotations : one is from the beginning of this century and is taken from the work of Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of modern sociology. The second is taken from this end of the century : Jodelet is an eminent social psychologist. It is interesting to note that there is a clear continuity between the two, in that they both see representations as part of a group's commonsense world of social reality, its shared or intersubjective meaning, established in and maintained through our daily life and conversation. We use our representations both to interpret and to organise and manage the world around us.

(Representations are) group ideas which are widely shared and socially forceful because they are collectively created through the interaction of many minds. (They are) the result of an immense co-operation ... to make them, a multitude of minds have associated, united and combined their ideas and sentiments. (Durkheim, 1912)

Forme de connaissance courante dit <<de sens commun>>, caractérisée par les propriétés suivantes :

- 1/ Elle est socialement élaborée et partagée
- 2/ Elle a une visée pratique d'organisation, de maîtrise de l'environnement (matériel, social, réel) et d'orientation des conduites et communications.
- 3/ Elle concourt à l'établissement d'une vision de la réalité commune à un ensemble social (groupe, classe, etc.) ou culturel donné.

(Jodelet, 1993, p. 668).

Let us have a look at some BATs and BALLs. I think it is important for us to do this in order to grasp just how varied and widespread these kinds of beliefs are, and how complex their ramifications can be. When I say 'us', I am presuming that almost everyone present here is a language professional of some kind - teacher, researcher, counsellor, theoretical linguist and so on - and we tend to think that the only important beliefs about language are those enshrined in linguistic theories or technical grammars by Chomsky or Halliday. So because we think that our students do not have this kind of technical, linguistic, theoretical knowledge, we tend to discount or minimise the importance of their popular beliefs. Yet as we

shall see, BATs and BALLS form a wide-ranging, detailed and deeply-held set of convictions which influence learning behaviour powerfully.

Of course, from a strictly scientific point of view, we professionals can show many of these beliefs to be 'wrong', but in any approach which tries to centre on learners, the issue is not one of finding objective reality, *the* truth, but subjective reality, *their* truth. What *they* believe will influence their learning much, much more than what *we* believe, because it is their beliefs that hold sway over their motivations, attitudes and learning procedures. And obviously if there is a misfit between what learners believe and the beliefs embodied in the institutional structure in which they are enrolled, there is bound to be some degree of friction or dysfunction.

BELIEFS ABOUT TALK : SOME EXAMPLES

The aim of this section is to illustrate informally the nature and range of BATs and BALLs.

1/ Girls are better at languages than boys are (Cf. Bailly, 1993).

English has no grammar.

The Dutch are very good at learning English.

Italian is the most beautiful language in the world.

To learn a language, you have to have a teacher who is a native speaker and who knows how to make you speak/work.

French is clearer and more logical than other languages.

Young children learn languages much more easily than adults.

Russian is difficult to pronounce because of the Cyrillic alphabet.

When you learn your own language, you speak first, but when you learn a foreign language, you have to read and write first.

Writing has to be more grammatically correct than speech.

Oral English is easier because mistakes are tolerated more readily than in writing.

Oral language is more flexible than written language.

(Learners' statements quoted in Riley, 1994).

Remark :

My point here is a very straightforward one : if I as a language learner, subscribe to any of these beliefs, it will have direct repercussions on the way I learn, whether in terms of attitude, motivation or strategy. If I believe, as many Europeans do, that Italian is the most beautiful (the most musical, the purest) language in the world, that belief will impinge on my whole approach to learning that language. If I believe that in learning any foreign language, writing has to be given priority and that it is 'more grammatical' than speech (and, again, this is an extremely common belief), then that belief will influence how I will try to learn a language : it will determine the most basic components in my learning programme, including my objectives, materials and techniques. And if I believe that you can only learn a language in the presence of and under the supervision of a teacher, whose responsibility is to 'make me work,' that, too, will influence my approach to how I envisage my learning a language, my role as a learner, which in turn will have a crucial impact on how I behave : for example, it is likely that my reaction to any kind of self-directed work will be extremely negative and that I will in consequence achieve poor results.

We will return to this particular area of beliefs about self-direction and autonomy, a little later, but first let us continue with our wider examination of BATs and BALLs.

2/ "The Anang value speech highly and the young are trained in the arts of speech, while for the Wolof, speech, especially in quantity, is dangerous and demeaning. French children are encouraged to be silent when visitors are present at dinner ; Russian children are encouraged to talk. Among the Arucanian, there are different

expectations of men and women, men being encouraged to talk on all occasions, women to be silent - a new wife is not permitted to speak for several months."

(Coulthard, 1977 p. 49)

3/ Scollon and Scollon (1980) studied the social and communicative relationships between English-speaking Americans and Athabaskan Indians. They drew the conclusion that the reciprocal negative evaluations were in large part due to beliefs about the value and function of discourse : the English speakers "talk to strangers to get to know them," whereas the Athabaskans "get to know someone in order to be able to talk".

4/ The French find an exchange of differing points of view stimulating and enjoyable, whilst for peoples as different as the Finns and the Japanese (Kunihiro, 1975) "language as an instrument of debate and argument is considered disagreeable and is accordingly avoided."

5/ "In many informal situations which offer relatively more discretion to participants as to quantity, timing and constitution of talk, how people accomplish it can be affected in part by their beliefs about the functional appropriacy of talk... Goffman (1967) suggested that North Americans are obligated to appear spontaneously involved when conversing with others, an observation which is only reasonable if fundamental beliefs about talk are *shared*. Different cultural value systems are associated with variations in conversational performance. For example, for the Rotinese (in the Indonesian archipelago), the pleasure of living is embodied in the act of talking (Fox, 1974), whereas the Danes are reported to 'nourish' silence in informal gatherings, with many native American groups being reluctant to speak except when absolutely necessary... Since the Ancient Greeks, westerners have tended to celebrate talk and rhetoric, construing it as a vehicle for the discovery and expression of truth (Pearce and Cronen, 1980)"

(Giles, Coupland and Wieman, 1982 p. 219)

Remark :

Examples 2 - 5 all- illustrate the fact that BATs vary considerably from one culture to another. Both the quantity and prestige of discourse can vary. This means that learners have beliefs about what they are learning a language for which are in a sense far profounder than those identified by needs analysis. Such beliefs form the bedrock on which relationships between the self and others is established in discourse and take precedence over relatively detailed matters such as topic or genre. This includes the self as learner and the other as teacher or counsellor. Scollon and Scollon (1995) have done some extremely insightful work on the role and quantity of discourse in different cultures and have shown (I am over-simplifying) that whereas in some cultures "it does you good to talk about it" - so that you even get television shows like Dr Ruth or Donovan, where people discuss their most intimate problems with complete strangers - in other cultures, revealing one's self in this way is dangerous. As I have argued elsewhere (Riley, 1996), the implications of this state of affairs for counselling and for the ways in which we manage, distribute and legitimate knowledge are very far-reaching indeed. It is true that self-access necessitates access to self, but the ways in which that can be done in discourse are subject to considerable cultural variation, as these examples show.

6/ "Standardisation is a complex of belief and behaviour towards language which evolves historically : it is a social behaviour towards language deeply integrated into such historical factors as the development of literacy, the growth of nationalism, and the evolution of centralizing states. A standard language is a social institution and part of the abstract, unifying identity of a large and internally differentiated society."

(W. Downes, 1984)

Remark :

This passage refers to an area of representations about language that is so vast and powerful that we are largely unaware of its existence, and this time I am including most language professionals. Standardisation is the process by which one variety of language is selected, codified, and

functionally diversified so that it is accepted by speakers of other varieties as *the* language, legitimate, prestigious and symbolic of the nation. This process can, of course, be described in terms of the political and social contingencies which influence selection or the linguistic theories which determine the nature of the grammars and dictionaries providing the description for codification, the development of printing, the rise of capitalism and new informational economies. But the final product of that historical process is, as this quotation makes clear, a set of beliefs and attitudes which directly influence the way in which people behave. Notions like prestige and correctness, value judgements justified by appeals to aesthetics, logic, purity and clarity, maintain the genres of the standard variety like jets of water holding up table-tennis balls in a fairground. And above all, it is the standard language which is taught and learnt, both as a mother tongue and as a foreign language, because it is useful and prestigious, because it has a written form, because its dictionaries and grammars make it teachable and learnable. For understandable reasons, when a language programme of any kind or level is planned, it is extremely rare for a non-standard variety to be chosen or even considered, such is the power of these underlying beliefs and attitudes.

7/ In a parent-teacher meeting held in a French secondary school to choose a second foreign language for pupils aged thirteen, all participants used a systematic and deeply-held set of representations about language to frame their discourse. These included :

Language X is more or less beautiful than languages A,B,C,

Language X is more or less difficult than languages A,B,C,

Language X is more or less grammatical than languages A,B,C,

Language X is more or less useful than languages A,B,C.

None of the participants spoke more than one of the foreign languages in question, but there was a very high level of agreement in these judgements (Riley, 1995). At first glance,

beliefs of this kind might seem trivial, but when we remember that the actual choice of which language was to be studied depended on them, we begin to realise just how crucial they are.

I do not need, I am sure, to labour the point I am making. If a learner subscribes to any specific BAT or BALL in the examples I have cited, that belief may directly influence or even determine his or her attitude or motivation or behaviour when learning the language in question.

SOME RECENT STUDIES ON BATS AND BALLS

I would like now to look at some specific studies of learners' beliefs about language and language learning, particularly in the areas of self-direction and self-access. This is still a rather untidy area, as no single list or taxonomy of representations of this kind has yet been generally accepted. Nonetheless, some suggestions have been put forward. For example, Wenden (1987) concentrated on immigrant workers' 'prescriptive beliefs', that is, what those learners believed one ought to do when learning a new language : very generally, she established three main categories of these beliefs, a classification which has reappeared in a number of subsequent studies. These are, in order of numerical importance :

- 1/ Beliefs concerning the use of the target language
- 2/ Beliefs concerning 'learning about the language'
- 3/ Beliefs about the social and affective aspects of foreign language learning.

In her ground-breaking article on "Surveying student beliefs about language learning", Horwitz (1987) presented an inventory which has also been used directly or as a source of inspiration by numerous other researchers in the field. It assesses student beliefs in five major areas :

- 1/ Foreign language aptitude
- 2/ The difficulty of language learning
- 3/ The nature of language learning
- 4/ Motivations
- 5/ Strategies

Another instrument which has been proposed (Riley, 1989) is a framework for discourse analysis (i.e. for the analysis of what learners say about language and language learning) based on Kreidler and Kreidler's "cognitive orientation model" : in this approach, beliefs are categorised under four headings :

1/ General beliefs

To learn a language, you need to follow a course with a good textbook

You have to start at the beginning, with the simple parts.

2/ Beliefs about self

I sound childish when I speak French

Some people have a good ear for languages, they just pick them up, but I'm not one of them

3/ Beliefs about norms and rules

French doesn't vary like English does : you speak like you write and there aren't so many accents.

The French get easily offended if you make mistakes, and they look down on you.

4/ Beliefs about goals.

I just want to be able to make myself understood.

What they make us do is learn to read, but really I want to speak more.

This approach has the advantage of being simple, so that it does not impose heavy discourse analysis machinery on teachers or counsellors whose focus is their learners' beliefs, rather the discourse as such..

More recently, Sara Cotterall (1995) has published a paper on learner beliefs in a study which involved the development and administration of a questionnaire about language learning to 139 EFL students. Rather than imposing pre-established categories on her data, Cotterall subjected them to factor analysis, to identify the underlying constructs around which the various responses could be organised. She states that "Factor analysis of subjects' responses ... revealed the existence of six dimensions ... Language learners hold beliefs about the role of the teacher, about feedback, about themselves as learners and their role, about language learning and about learning in general."

There is nothing particularly surprising about this analysis, but it is important to have our intuitions empirically verified as this area of research is developing extremely rapidly. Moreover, Cotterall takes each of the factors in turn and examines them most instructively from the point of view of self-directed learning. She concludes :

...these beliefs will affect (and sometimes inhibit) learners' receptiveness to the ideas and activities presented in the language class, particularly when the approach is not consonant with the learners' experience... By exploring (these) beliefs, learners and teachers can hope to construct a shared understanding of the language learning process and of the part they play in it. This awareness is an essential foundation of learner autonomy.

We will return to Cotterall's point about awareness in a few minutes, but first I would like to look at a group of three very recent articles : I say "a group" partly because they were all published together in the same book (Elspeth Broady and Marie-Madeleine Kenning, *Promoting Learner Autonomy in University Language Teaching Association for French Language Studies in association with CILT*, 1996), partly because they form a nicely complementary whole, since they all deal with the learner's perspective on languages and language learning. The first deals with learners' experience, how they live, perceive and react to self-direction. The second studies learners' attitudes to self-access systems. And the third deals with BATs and BALLs.

The three articles in question are :

Maria Fernandez-Toro and Francis R. Jones

Going Solo : Learners' Experiences of Self-instruction and Self-instruction Training

Elspeth Broady

Learner Attitudes to Self-direction

Marie-Christine Press

Ethnicity and the Autonomous Language learner : Different Beliefs and Learning Strategies ?

I should point out that all three of these papers are very heavily data-based and make use of sophisticated statistical models. This means that it is very difficult to do justice to their methodology or findings in just a few words - which is, of course, precisely what I am now going to try to do.

The study by Fernandez-Toro and Jones was carried out in two stages. In the first, a learner experience survey, the links between independent learning and achievement were examined and a number of key independent learning strategies recommended by the learners themselves were isolated. The second, a longitudinal case-study, looked at what happened when a second group of learners were trained in some of the techniques that their peers recommended. The results of the first study are very striking :

		Overall	Learning	Mode
		self-instruction only	class only	mixed means
Command	beginner	33 (77 %)	49 (52 %)	16 (20 %)
	intermediate	9 (21 %)	39 (41 %)	37 (46 %)
	advanced	1 (2 %)	6 (6 %)	28 (35 %)
Total		43 (100 %)	94 (100 %)	81 (100 %)
Chi-square test		Chi ² 54.68. d.f. 4. p < .001 (highly significant)		

The table shows that most SIO (Self-instruction only) do not get beyond beginner level, whereas most class-only learners get to Beginner or Intermediate. With mixed-means, there is a much more even spread across levels, with a much higher percentage reaching an advanced level. As the authors say :

These differences are highly significant...though class-only appears more effective in Command terms than SIO, mixed means are still best of all.

This seems clear enough, but we need to be extremely careful in explaining these statistics. What are the respective contributions of the different means to the mixed-means results, level of command on the one hand and dropping out on the

other ? What are the factors involved : Is classroom work simply more effective ? Or are learners, for example, getting the affective and social support from classwork which motivates them to continue ? Is it a problem of materials: it is notoriously difficult to find materials which are appropriate for beginners in self-access. Is it a question of the perceived difficulty of the language being learnt, since in this study SIOs were more likely to be studying "exotic" languages, with all learners being more likely to attribute their perceived failure to the intrinsic difficulty of certain languages ? In other words, is it mainly a matter of beliefs ?

Or is it, as I am sure many readers must have been wondering, a matter of individual learning style, with some individuals just being better (i.e. having and adopting appropriate strategies) for self-directed learning. The authors did find that learning style "is the single most important (factor) according to this data... in determining quality of autonomous language learning" although it is only one of nine complex factors they identified. And if that is so, can the positive aspects of learning style be acquired through training : can we, to use the title of Ken Willing's excellent book, "teach how to learn" ? Can we help learners achieve an awareness of their own learning process, of the unconscious beliefs on which they base their learning behaviour ?

That, of course, was the question asked by the second part of this research project, the longitudinal case-studies. This was a much smaller-scale study than the first, with a population of seven as against seventy (randomly chosen from 1,500). Bearing this in mind, the training, which focussed on goal-setting and strategies, does seem to have been perceived as highly or fairly successful by the whole group. This is extremely encouraging, as the general approach - observe the strategies used by learners, extrapolate to a similar group of learners - does seem to have built-in safeguards against ethnocentric assumptions, with teachers and researchers imposing their cultural or personal preferences. However, a final point which also comes out strongly is this :

...learners do not appear to acknowledge the adoption of new strategies presented to them by the

tutor. Most often, tutor-initiated strategies may well be used in addition to the learners' own repertoire... but learners are not explicitly aware of adopting them. In contrast, learner- and peer-initiated strategies are more frequently acknowledged, as well as those suggested by external native-speaking informants(Ibid. p.211).

At first glance, this might seem very discouraging for counsellors. We do not expect our students to fall on their knees in gratitude for our advice and suggestions, but we do not like to see them having no seeming effect whatsoever, like water off a duck's back. However, there is a far more encouraging interpretation of this phenomenon, which is that taught strategies (i.e. our advice, suggestions, etc) are only recognised as being useful if they correspond to actual learning needs of which the learners have already become aware themselves. When learners do not take up specific suggestions it is because they do not believe they have the problem that particular strategy might help them solve. Although much more research need to be done on this topic, this interpretation does seem highly plausible and, if true, would be a major argument in favour of learner-training. It also confirms yet again, the importance of explicit awareness.

The second study, by Elspeth Broady, reports on a questionnaire designed to elicit university students' attitudes to self-direction. Broady begins with a frank admission of the paradox

... that an approach to education predicated on empowering learners should fail to find favour with the learners themselves. (p. 214) although she does also quote a number of counter-examples, cases where self-direction has been enthusiastically adopted.

Broady summarises the results of her questionnaire as follows :

- 1/ The group in question generally recognises learner responsibility in learning.
- 2/ The group is open to the idea of independent work and collaborative work.

However, there is also evidence of widely held beliefs that might limit capacity for self-direction :

- 3/ There is a widespread desire for classes based on detailed teacher explanation, while just over half see the teacher as important for progress.
- 4/ There seems to be a lack of confidence in self-assessment... and significant value placed on external assessment as a source of motivation.
- 5/ Only 20% feel confident they can solve their language learning problems.
- 6/ Only 22% feel they know what's best for their learning.
- 7/ The overwhelming majority compare themselves unfavourably with their peers.

These results are useful but also, I would suggest, fairly predictable, given that these learners were first-year students who had had no previous experience of self-directed learning and had received no kind of preparation or learner-training. (I say 'predictable' on the basis of personal experience, but also on the basis of two other excellent pieces of research which give solid empirical support to this expectation : I am thinking in particular of Alison Piper's 1994 article in *Language awareness*, whose title speaks for itself : "The assumptions, expectations and strategies of modern languages students working in a self-access learning environment for the first time" (Piper, 1994) as well as the work by Sara Cotterall (1995) which I referred to earlier.

However, as Broady notes, there is another aspect of her data which seems much more interesting. It is this : answers to a number of questionnaire items which seem to produce neutral, balanced, 'fifty-fifty' statistics proved on further investigation to be highly polarised. The 'balance', that is, was the result of averaging out of strongly contradictory opinions. As Broady says, " (this) suggests that there may be distinct sets of beliefs within the student group". Examples include :

I expect the teacher to tell me exactly what to do.

If I get a good answer on a test, it doesn't bother me if I still have questions about it.

I would enjoy learning a language on my own.

I don't feel I could improve without a class.

*You cannot learn a language without teacher supervision.
The best way to learn a language is by teacher explanation.
Grammar has to be explained by an expert, you can't learn
it on your own.
Cassettes and videos are bets used by individuals rather
than on a language centre.
Exams are what motivate me to work hard.
An exercise is only worth doing if it's marked by a teacher.
A language exercise is only worth doing if it is marked.*

Now what seems to be emerging here, far from being bland and neutral, is a marked contrast between two distinct sub-groups : one, representing about one-third of the population, whose attitudes favour strong reliance on the teacher the other holding attitudes that favour self-direction. Furthermore, her data clearly bring out an important distinction (important in terms of the students' beliefs, that is) between the two concepts 'class' and 'teacher'. Broady comments :

This acts as a reminder that a language class should not be reduced to "a meeting with a teacher"; it is also a context for social interaction between learners themselves which has the potential to be both positive and negative for learning (p.221)

This means that we have to recognise a transversal factor, cutting across the simple divide between those who are highly reliant on teachers and those who are not. They are learners who are not particularly reliant on the teacher, but who nonetheless prefer to work in a classroom because of the social and interactive benefits they believe are to be found there. This is a good example of one set of beliefs taking priority over another set in determining the choice of learning conditions.

The third article in this group is by Marie-Christine Press. She set out to investigate whether there could exist some correlation of national origin or ethnicity with different beliefs about language learning. She developed a questionnaire, which was administered to 100 students at the University of Westminster School of Languages. The principal statistical instrument used was the one-way analysis of variance (one way ANOVA) which enables the researcher to see whether

variability between different groups in the population in question is greater than variability within each of the groups. She also called on work being carried out under the heading of Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory, using Giles and Byrne's Intergroup model to measure how the students perceived various language communities.

Broadly speaking, what Press found was that although there were clear differences between the beliefs of the four ethnic groups represented in her population, these beliefs did not correspond in any simple or systematic ways to other factors, such as motivation, affect or the use of metacognitive strategies. For example, she reports that

...the Asian group declared stronger beliefs than the others in the importance of memory and rote-learning, and rule-based study. But another dimension emerged, showing that the Asian group also believed more than most others that speaking with native speakers and practice in the country of the target L2, were important. Thus the Asian students did declare a lively interest in communicating in the target language in naturalistic situations, as well as a strong belief in more traditional language study.

Again, Press notes that the Asian students tended to use consistently a specific set of learning strategies 'compatible' with their beliefs (visualisation, and memorisation, dictionary use, planning to focus on selected L2 features) but that they were also the most motivated by praise and the most eager to ask for help, which are not necessary consequences of those beliefs. Similar combinations of factors were found for all the groups in the study. Press concludes that no causal relationship between ethnicity and beliefs could be established : rather, we have to look at the learning conditions in which the learners found themselves. For example, both the beliefs and the behaviour of the Asian group are much easier to understand once you know that members of this group had the strongest degree of motivation in terms of family ties with the L2 country : they were learning their parents' language for the purpose of going 'home'.

We will return to the relationship between beliefs and 'ethnicity' or 'culture' later. First, though, I would like to briefly illustrate a recent development in the field which is helping us identify and analyse learners' belief systems: the study of learners' (and teachers') metaphors... This approach takes its inspiration from the pioneering work of Lakoff and Johnson in the 1980s. In their seminal study, *Metaphors We Live By* (1982), they showed that individuals frame and express their experience on the basis of largely unconscious 'conceptual metaphors', such as :

ARGUMENT IS WAR

Opponents on different sides defend points of view, attack positions, challenge, undermine, demolish or defeat their opponents' arguments. They dispute, wrangle or contend, go in for cut and thrust in a war of words where they shoot an opponent's argument full of holes with a knockdown argument that leaves him without a leg to stand on, etc.

By identifying these underlying metaphors, we can do two things. We can explain how dozens of seemingly disparate expressions, traditionally dropped into a wastepaper basket marked 'idioms', are in fact systematically related. Secondly, these metaphorical domains can themselves be regarded as belief systems. Here are two recent examples:

Cortazzi and Jin (1996) present an analysis of large quantities of metaphorical data, both spontaneous and elicited, from teachers' and from learners' discourse. They found an extremely rich range of metaphors for the teaching profession or activity, for example:

TEACHING IS A JOURNEY
TEACHING IS COOKING
TEACHING IS PLANT GROWTH AND CULTIVATION
TEACHING IS (AN OCCUPATION OTHER THAN TEACHING)
TEACHING IS SEARCHING FOR TREASURE

Each of these overarching metaphors generates dozens, sometimes hundreds of metaphorical expressions.

Cortazzi and Jin also looked at why people use metaphors. For one group of student teachers

... using metaphors may enable them to verbalize what is unknown or difficult to describe in other terms. The metaphor serves to frame a problem by putting it into words, thus defining its parameters ... metaphors may express the meaning more concisely than prolix, non-metaphorical equivalents. At the same time, metaphors capture multiple meanings in experience ... metaphors have a function of organizing systematic concepts in teachers' cultural-cognitive models of learning.

Metaphors, that is, help learners both to organise their beliefs and experience and to make them explicit: that is, metaphors help them learn.

Hélène Piquard (1996) investigated French teachers' metaphors when they were discussing their pupils. She showed that metaphors actually provide the mechanisms for categorising pupils, categorisations which determine decisions such as whether pupils will go up a class at the end of the year, or the future orientation of their studies. To take just one example from a very detailed analysis, learners are often compared to growing plants:

il a mûri par rapport à l'année dernière
elle s'épanouit
elles est très ouverte
il est fermé
il est très replié sur lui

Those pupils who are blossoming, growing up nicely, are much more likely to go up at the end of the year. The relationship between beliefs and behaviour could hardly be clearer.

Many, but not all, of the conceptual metaphors identified by Piquard are identical to those of Cortazzi and Jin and both pieces of work insist on the importance of cross-cultural comparisons. This brings us up against a major problem: if beliefs and metaphors vary from culture to culture, is it not

possible that the set of beliefs for which we use the convenient shorthand 'autonomy' might not also be culturally specific or biased in some way ?

IS 'AUTONOMY' CULTURALLY BIASED?

Over recent years, parallelling the increase in autonomous or self-directed learning programmes, numerous doubts have been expressed about the wisdom or feasibility of introducing such programmes in certain cultural contexts. It is important to note that amongst the people voicing these anxieties are to be found some of the most enthusiastic champions and practitioners of self-directed learning: so it is not *just* a matter of resistance to change, of pedagogical inertia, a refusal even to contemplate innovation (although, of course, that can happen too !).

In simple terms, these anxieties are based on the recognition that there may be a misfit or contradiction between certain of the tenets, values and practices associated with autonomy and those associated with the group in question. To put it even more simply, that there may be a clash between European and non-European cultural values and practices. I say 'European' rather than 'western' because interestingly enough the self-directed approach to language learning has never really caught on in the USA, despite the fact that much of the inspiration and justification in terms of educational philosophy, psychology and second language learning has in fact come from the States.

Nonetheless, it is incontrovertible that in the vast majority of US tertiary educational institutions there is no provision for self-directed language learning, no resource centre, no counselling service, whereas in Europe the majority of universities do have language self-access centres of some kind, albeit sometimes very modest. I mention this not in order to score points over our American colleagues (as I've said, we are in fact indebted to them) but in order to knock on the head from the very outset simplistic equations of this kind: "Autonomy is just capitalism and individualism applied to language learning".

Were that to be the case, one would expect a society that frames its very identity in terms of those two -isms to be in the forefront of developing self-directed learning programmes and centres, which is simply not the case: this state of affairs is even more remarkable and complex when one considers that in Mexico and in certain other Central and South American countries and in Cuba, such programmes are developing very rapidly indeed.

In an article published in last year's special issue of *System* on autonomy and self-direction edited by Les Dickinson and Anita Wenden, the following historical factors were identified as having variously contributed to the emergence of the ideas of 'autonomy', 'self-direction' and 'self-access' :

Minority rights movements
Shifts in educational philosophy, linguistics and psychology
Wider access to education
Increased internationalism
The commercialisation of language provision
Easier availability of educational technology
(Gremmo and Riley, 1995)

This is not the right moment to repeat that discussion, obviously. The point I wish to make here, though, is that although these factors may have been to some extent limited to the Western world in the 1940s, -50s and -60s, that is certainly no longer the case. In different ways and mixtures, these factors are to be found all over the world now, including South East Asia, so that many of the contingent pressures pushing language teaching provision towards autonomy and self-direction are just as present here and certainly not exclusive to Europe.

A second line of argument against the idea that "autonomy" is just a Western ideology which is being foisted on other cultures around the world has been put forward by researchers working in the fields of the history and philosophy of education and, more generally, in the history of ideas. They say that to see such ideas as new, and see them as the original creations of particular culture cultures or countries is both historically inaccurate and ethnocentric. They have demonstrated, through quotations and through the analysis of a wide variety of

pedagogical traditions and practices that the ability to think, act and study independently has been highly regarded by most, perhaps all of the world's societies, even if such independence has usually been the privilege of an elite, because of the power it generates and bestows. Herbert Pierson quotes the words of Chu Hsi, a twelfth-century Sung dynasty scholar :

If you are in doubt, think it out by yourself. Do not depend on others for explanations. Suppose there was no-one you could ask, should you stop learning ? If you could get rid of the habit of being dependent on others, you will make your advancement in your studies (Quoted in Pierson, 1996, p. 56).

Examples and exhortations of this kind are to be found throughout history, in every part of the globe. Of course, that does not in itself make them right, nor does it mean that other beliefs and methods do not exist. But they do prove that 'Autonomy' is not just a recent European gimmick.

Moreover, this insistence is not just to be found in the works of great thinkers living in so-called high civilisations. It can also be found in the life-styles and beliefs of very modest traditional societies. Time only allows me to quote one example, but I think you will agree that it is both fascinating and telling. It is provided by Joanna Overing in her article on "Personal autonomy and the domestication of the self in Piaroa society". The Piaroa are a jungle people dwelling along the tributaries of the Orinoco River in the Guiana Highlands of Venezuela. They have a highly elaborate 'Theory of Mind', a set of beliefs on how the individual self develops. They divide mental life and thought into two distinct areas :

a) ta'kwanya which is the knowledge of and the capacity to use social rules and customs, language, rituals, cuisine, etc. I think it would be fair to translate this as cultural competence.

b) ta'kwakomena which is the knowledge necessary to take conscious responsibility for such capacities and for their effects. This time the translation would be something like self-knowledge or even "metacognitive awareness."

Ta'kwakomena requires a considerable degree of autonomy, which is consequently a highly regarded virtue. The relationships between consciousness, reason and behaviour are regularly discussed by the Piaroa and ta'kwakomena is one of the most common words in the language. Children are taught the art of living a tranquil life (indeed, the whole aim of life and learning is to avoid what we call stress) which means above all how to take responsibility for one's own actions towards others and is regarded as much more important than the self-regarding virtues of courage, ambition, talent and industry.

I hope that you will not think I am being too flippant when I say that next time I go looking for staff for self-access or for counselling and learner-training, I shall go recruiting amongst the Piaroa.

A third argument against the idea that "autonomy" is somehow an artefact of western ideology, to my mind the most powerful argument of all, is that all learning is necessarily and essentially autonomous, there is no other kind. This approach, which draws heavily on evidence from anthropology and cognitive psychology, was recently given the most cogent expression to date by David Little in an article entitled "Learner autonomy is more than a Western cultural construct", a title which at the very least, leaves readers in no doubt as to the author's opinion on this matter. As always, Little's work is very tightly argued and supported, but I think a reasonable paraphrase would go as follows:

Firstly, learners learn: they cannot help but do their own learning, since no-one else can do it for them. This being the case, the learning process will be more efficient when it is brought into consciousness, so that learners are critically aware of their goals and methods, of what it is they are trying to do. It is the development of this critical awareness which will enable learners to overcome the limitations of their learning environment.

Secondly, Little continues, "understood as a capacity for independent behaviour, autonomy is the aim of all developmental learning... development is incomplete until the

individual can operate as an independent member of... society. ...here is an undeniable pedagogical element in child-rearing. But this does not alter the psychological fact that... children cannot help but construct their own knowledge. It may be culture, to begin with in the person of parents and siblings, that "provides the tools for organizing and understanding our worlds incommunicable ways" (Bruner, 1996, P3) but it is the individual child who must appropriate those tools and learn how to deploy them in the construction of his or her own meanings.

Thirdly, as children grow, they develop thoughts and beliefs: these are characteristics of first-order systems. But children also think about thinking and develop beliefs about beliefs, which are characteristics of second-order systems. "Our potential for autonomous behaviour derives directly from the fact that we are second-order as well as first-order intentional systems. The American philosopher Geoffrey Dworkin (1988, p.20) puts the matter thus :

...autonomy is conceived of as a second-order capacity of persons to reflect critically upon their first-order preferences, desires and wishes... and the capacity to accept or change these in the light of higher-order preferences and values. By exercising such a capacity, persons define their nature, give meaning and coherence to their lives and take responsibility for the kind of person they are.

May I suggest, without condescension of any kind, that the distinction the philosophers draw between first and second-order systems is very similar indeed to the distinction the Piaroa draw between their two levels of knowledge. This is no coincidence: they are both trying to account for the same facts of human nature.

CONCLUSION

It will not have escaped you that I seem to have talked myself into a logical impasse. First, I presented a number of research projects that show quite clearly that learners' beliefs vary and that different beliefs give rise to different behaviours and attitudes to, amongst other things, self-instruction in language learning. However, I then went on to argue, following the Piaroa, Dworkin and David Little, that really autonomy is widespread and that it is so because it is an inevitable, universal part of human nature. You could be forgiven for thinking that I was trying to have my cake and eat it.

However, it is important to keep in mind that we have been discussing these matters at two very different levels, which might be called the anthropological level and the ethnographic level (this distinction is discussed in detail by Dan Sperber, 1982). At the anthropological level, we ask the questions: What does it mean to be a human being. What are our capacities and limitations as members of our species ? What do we share with all the other members of the human race by virtue of our human nature ?

At the ethnographic level, we ask a different set of questions : What does it mean to be English or French or Thai or Piaroa ? What are our capacities and limitations as members of our society ? What do we share with the other members of our society by virtue of our culture, our beliefs, values and attitudes ?

In the light of this distinction, we can see that there is not in fact any contradiction between the different studies we have been discussing : it is just that some of them, David Little, for example, are discussing learners as human beings, whilst others are discussing learners as, say, English undergraduates.

This leads us to the following twin conclusions, both of which, as I have tried to show, are supported by research and observation : the first is that is that effective self-instruction requires appropriate support and learner-training, so that

learners have the opportunity and time to develop the self-awareness which, it is now quite clear, is an essential prerequisite to autonomy. It is essential because, if they are to take control of their own learning, they need to identify, understand and reflect on their culturally-determined beliefs.

The second is that that far from being culturally biased, autonomy as an educational aim is a social and cognitive imperative, a defining characteristic of the learning process. Its attainment may be either facilitated or obstructed by the arrangements for formal learning, which means that the forms of learner training appropriate to given cultural contexts will vary.

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