**Abstract:** Throughout this paper, I will pose a reponse to the question of, and elucidate through analogy, why it is that acquisition of certain languages is less effortful than of other languages. I will demonstrate that tradition dictates we ought to organize languages into family style groupings according to the organization and understanding of our personal situation in a world—our personal way of being in the world (*Weltenshauung)[[1]](#footnote-1).* The world in which native speakers of English live is more similar to the world of native Spanish speakers (both of which developing from Indo-European) than that of native Swahili speakers (developed from Bantu); consequently, it appears reasonable to conclude that expression between or among speakers of different language families communicate less successfully, efficiently, and effortlessly than otherwise because how each of these language families ‘carve reality at the joints’—that is, the conditions which make statements in one language true are more alike among members of a single family than otherwise. I consider an example of how ways of living in time varies. Further, I defend that the considerations I apply to the specific case of living in time are not a function of the respective culture independent of personal use of language, but arise according to the signification of such mental events as ‘past’ and ‘future,’ for example. Fundamentally, I rely on the assumption that what makes statements true or false is a function of the specific person’s existing in the world rather than a function of the world itself; therefore, I defend that language acquisition varies by similarity in those conditions which make propositions true or false.

A reason why it may be easier to learn a new language of the same family than one of a new family is because they ‘carve reality at similar joints’ as one another—they focus on some features of reality differently than other languages might and compartmentalize constituents of reality differently. Some languages may share an ancestor, and thus, those languages are different in virtue of being various ‘mutations’ from the ‘genome’ of their common ancestor. Consider, for example, English as represented by *Homo sapien* (modern humans), Spanish represented by *Pan paniscus* (modern Bonobo Chimpanzee), Latin by *Australopithecus afarensis* (an early common ancestor of *Homo erectus* and *Pan paniscus* and not to *Gorilla gorilla*), and Swahili by *Gorilla gorilla* (modern eastern Gorilla). I argue that the process would be less effortful for an English speaker acquiring Spanish than acquiring Swahili because the conditions that make the Spanish representation true are similar to those conditions which make the English representation true. Though they may frequently differ in sound, use, and more, the Spanish is more readily available to native speakers of English than is Swahili because “the structure of a particular language reflects the particular ‘genius’ of the people and their *Weltenshauung* [way of being in the world]” (von Humboldt, *Limits of State Action*); and, between Spanish and English geniuses and *weltenshauungen* are less distinguishable than between English and Swahili. Likewise, Swahili speakers and Spanish speakers will carve reality differently. I will soon demonstrate this case with the example of ‘past/future,’ ‘pasada/futura,’ and ‘zamani/sasa.’

The considerations above do not imply that a native Latin speaker would approximately equally effortfully acquire English or Spanish even though the two are descendants of it. The difference occurs because the work needed to acquire a language is not only a consequence of the language’s genealogy, but also a consequence of extraneous noise of cultural and personal factors, e.g. the customs of that person.[[2]](#footnote-2) Swahili begins separate from the genealogy of the other three; it develops from Bantu rather than Indo-European, like Latin, Spanish, and English. According to this thesis, the truth making conditions of one representation may not have evolved from the same kernel as some other conditions and therefore are more effortful to discover and internalize, i.e. those of English and Spanish from Latin, as compared to Swahili from Bantu. This is a reason why it would be easier for some people to learn one second language (L21) than another (L22) even when those languages’ conditions are equally proximal to their ancestor. Recall, however, the above elaboration that there is noise from personal and ambient influences which affect the way an individual uses a language and thus how they understand the character of those truth making conditions. By examining a Bonobo, someone may learn about modern humans less effortfully than by examining Common Chimpanzees because of personal intuitions that person has regarding Bonobos and Humans which they lack regarding Common Chimpanzees. Someone may have personal and ambient influences further shaped by the group setting in which they develop, e.g. customs. It is much less likely that someone can learn about modern Humans from studying Eastern Gorillas, though.

Analogously, English uses ‘past/future’ in a way that has a readily apparent counterpart in Spanish: ‘pasada/futura’ but not so in Swahili. The Swahili counterparts, ‘sasa’ and ‘zamani,’ are used very differently (Mbiti, p.22). The way someone presently uses language represents some state of affairs and represents what would be the case if that representation was directly caused by that state of affairs; however, there are some representations that a novice user of a language might not understand—nobody begins learning a language already with complete knowledge of the even just the vocabulary not to mention grammar and syntax. Recall the above biological analogy: of course, someone does not come to know much about modern human physiology from experience with modern Bonobo chimpanzees, but one comes to know some bit[[3]](#footnote-3), granted the knowledge that the two share a common ancestor. Surely, someone could learn more from those than one would come to know from experience with Eastern Gorillas, despite also knowing of our less proximal common ancestry. Returning to the case of the languages: an English speaker can better predict what conditions must be met to make the Spanish representation, ‘pasada/futura,’ a true one than they could regarding Swahili (granted dictionary translation). English phrases containing ‘past’ and ‘future’ better predict the truth making conditions of phrases including the Spanish ‘pasada’ and ‘futura’ respectively, than those of the Swahili ‘Sasa’ and ‘Zamani’ because these latter words carve reality at different joints. The conditions which make statements of ‘pasada’ and ‘futura’ true or false have counterparts in English with almost indistinguishable truth-conditions. According to Mbiti, however, the ‘sasa’ period refers to remote future, near future, indefinite future or indefinite near future, present or present progressive, immediate past or immediate perfect, today’s past, and recent past or yesterday’s past; ‘zamani’ refers to immediate past or immediate perfect, today’s past, recent past or yesterday’s past, remote past, and any non-specific time in the past (Mbiti, p.22). Already it is apparent that English and Spanish are more alike to one another in this case than they are to Swahili by virtue of the grammatical case dictating verb conjugation.

Commensurate with von Humboldt’s interpretation, I add that the particular ‘genius’ of two groups of speakers may be more similar than some other couple because of their proximity to a common ancestor. One likely indicator of the proximity of that common ancestor is the similarity in uses of the languages. ‘Past/future’ and ‘pasada/futura’ are more proximally related (to Latin’s ‘praeterium/futura’) than ‘past/future’ and ‘zamani/sasa’ (which doubtfully have a common ancestor, though they may influence each other environmentally)—as a consequence they have widely differing uses—widely differing conditions of truth. Exactly how proximal languages must be to their common ancestor to have the relationship I have outlined depends on customary features of personal and ambient influences. For a further example not to be presently elucidated, consider the dissimilarities among idioms.

Furthermore, my thesis appears to affirm William Jones’ conception of language as under continuous, non-unidirectionally revision. The non-unidirectionality Jones discusses parallels my thesis as follows: the independent development of two distinct descendants of an ancestor such as those traits of structure and use which arise in English, per this example, tend to develop the similarly yet obviously differently from those which arise in Spanish. Furthermore, the two may evolve to eventually be functionally as distinct from one another as are English and Swahili now. To supplement Jones’ thesis, mine accounts for the independent co-evolution of the two by introducing noise from personal and ambient factors. Those factors change the way each language can be used to carve reality, all the way down to the individual scale. The general scale, however, is nothing more than the conjunction of all in-group members; therefore, I agree that it seems realistic that at some point in the future English and Spanish may have the same functional distinctness as do English and Swahili presently.[[4]](#footnote-4)

For a further consideration of my thesis’ soundness, note Fodor’s Fis Effect—a psycho-linguistic phenomenon in which a child may asymmetrically refer an animal as ‘a fis’ and deny that it is named ‘fis’ instead of ‘fish.’ This evidence seems to affirm my proposition, namely that there is an asymmetry between linguistic input and output because the *use* of the language here is indistinguishable—that is, the conditions that make that child’s claim “I saw a fis” true are just those conditions which make true that child’s claim “I saw a fish.” B.F. Skinner presents the proposition that habituation into language causes acquisition thereof—this is a consequent proposition to his thesis of Behavioralism. My thesis, however, is more well equipped to handle the asymmetry of the input and output than Skinner’s. Furthermore, my position further accounts for linguistic bootstrapping (abstraction, generalization, and application of conjugations, even improperly). What causes the bootstrapped linguistic representation “I eated dinner” is precisely what causes the linguistic representation “I ate dinner,” the difference between the two being the personal and ambient customs, e.g. noise. In the former case, custom dictates that past tense comes about by adding ‘-ed,’ in the latter custom dictates an irregular conjugation—irregular conditions of representation in that language. Skinner’s position, however, is less equipped to handle such linguistic bootstrapping and is less tenable with respect to the further example cross-linguistic similarities of babbling which Fodor cites. With such linguistic variety for environmental training, it would seem that babies would babble dissimilarly; but, this is not the case, according to Fodor. In focusing so strongly on semantic grounding, Skinner forfeits his theory’s pragmatism in asymmetric cases where learned linguistic input is not identical to performed linguistic output. In this case, my thesis excels. If the baby intends to accomplish something through their babble, then that babble must have some meaning—something caused the baby to form that representation, it would appear. Therefore, that baby seems to use that babble to represent something, the conditions by which that representation truly represent are more difficult for an adult human to understand because that representation is not formed in way with which they are presently familiar. These conditions which make the child’s representation successfully obtain in their audience is then what they begin to learn. That is, they begin to learn how to represent meanings—how to use language— to others more successfully. This process remains ongoing throughout our lives. Some other languages may successfully represent by similar conditions as does a native language while others may be entirely functionally dissimilar (e.g. English, Spanish, Latin, and Swahili).

I have demonstrated that acquisition of a second language may be less difficult if that language has a close common ancestor with the speaker’s native language and have offered a partial cause for it. Because the function of language in behavior is the demonstration of states of affairs (internal/external to, or about, ourselves), an utterance can be said to be caused by those states of affairs (may misrepresent, but represents nonetheless). Therefore, acquisition of languages would likely be easiest between languages which depict the same parts and same relations of those constituents of states of affairs—that is, those languages which ‘carve reality at similar joints.’ Someone comes to know of those conditions through reinforced experience of reality compartmentalized as such. To add to von Humboldt, the structure of a language depicts the genius and *Weltenshauung* of a people, but the truth making conditions and use of certain instances of language dictate our ease of access to new language. I imagine that this same pattern extends beyond acquisition of languages additional to the native one, to development and acquisition of formal rules and new knowledge regarding one’s own native language. I have demonstrated this thesis’ superiority to that of Skinner and have demonstrated its applicability in various difficult cases.

References

Amidon, J., Monroe, A., & Ortwein, M. (n.d.). Education, Society, & the K-12 Learner. Retrieved from <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/teachereducationx92x1/chapter/human-language-development/>

Australopithecus afarensis. (2020, January 10). Retrieved from <http://humanorigins.si.edu/evidence/human-fossils/species/australopithecus-afarensis>

Chomsky, N., & Skinner, B. F. (n.d.). *Verbal behavior by B.F. Skinner*. Indianapolis (Ind.): Bobbs-Merrill.

Fodor, J. A. (1988). Précis of The Modularity of Mind. *Readings in Cognitive Science*, 73–77. doi: 10.1016/b978-1-4832-1446-7.50011-x

Humboldt, W. von, & Burrow, J. W. (2015). *The Limits of State Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tan, B. H., Tan, B. H., Foster, V., Foster, V., & Quora. (2019, September 1). The Root of All Human Languages. Retrieved from <https://www.angmohdan.com/the-root-of-all-human-languages/>

1. As an aside, this metaphorical application of the word ‘family’ seems to extend to discrete units of language, as well (phemes, morphemes, etc.)—those units being analogous to the discrete units of a genotype, i.e. genes. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Those customs will likely resemble those of the speaker’s ambient culture; that culture itself is wholly constituted by the conjunction of all group members’ personal experiences with those accumulated meanings developed over time. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Primary bipedalism, cross-arched foot, some behavioral features, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It seems doubtful that the two languages will deviate that far, as communication bridges groups across far distances and barriers, allowing many languages to comingle so that their evolutionary trajectories are likely codependent. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)