

What in the world is the World of Language?

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The World of Language, London

Introduction. This is a talk and a demonstration.¹ I begin by listing a few straightforward questions about language in layman's terms. I will be considering what "public awareness of language" means, and why it matters. Finally, I will briefly describe to you the past, present, and future of the World of Language project.

Some questions about language. For a project in Paris that I will mention again later, and with the inestimable help of David Crystal, we drew up a set of questions that the younger inquirer about language might ask. Here they are. As we go through their deceptive simplicity, I hope you will feel that they touch upon one or other of the many academic and research interests represented here today and with which our fields of theoretical, descriptive, and applied linguistics are concerned.

Language in me

1. How did I learn to talk, and what happens when I talk?
2. How did I learn to write, and what happens when I write?
3. How did I learn to use words, and what words are there to learn?
4. How did I learn to use grammar, and what more is there to learn?
5. Which regional accent/dialect do I speak, and what others are there?
6. Which varieties of language do I know, and what others are there?
7. How can I use language in exciting and enjoyable ways?

Language in my society

8. How did human beings learn to speak?
9. How did human beings learn to write?
10. Where did my language (French, English) come from?
11. How did people sound in olden days?
12. Where has my language travelled in the world?
13. Why can't some people speak or write?
14. How can we teach and learn language?

Language in the world

15. What other languages will I hear in France and the United Kingdom?
16. What other languages will I hear in the European Union?
17. How many languages are there, and where will I find them?
18. How many languages can I learn, and can I try now?
19. Why will I hear so much English around the world?
20. Why are some languages dying, and how can I help?
21. Can I put my speech/writing/sign into the World of Language bank?

With the exception of the last question, which might require a little explanation, I hope the others are patent. I call them deceptively simple because I suspect few members of the general public would be able to answer them satisfactorily. And I suspect we as experts would ourselves argue over the most appropriate means of answering them and probably, as academics, over the phrasing of the questions.

Of course, they are, as a curriculum of enquiry, a simplified version of a much more detailed curriculum that we do not have the time to explore today. But if afterwards you would like to investigate that richer curriculum of language awareness, again drawn up with the assistance of David Crystal and incorporating in its encyclopedic compass five subworlds of language and many paths of individual enquiry, you will find it on the World of Language website at <http://www.worldoflanguage.com>.

Public awareness of language. Those of you who work in ESP and particularly in English for Science and Technology will have no difficulty in interpreting this phrase by analogy with the considerable effort that has gone into the public understanding of science. We can look at two statements available on the web that demonstrate this. First, a policy statement by the Association for Science Education in the United Kingdom:

Rationale

Science and technology affect many aspects of daily life. Most industrial and public policies and many private decisions involve science and require informed public debate. The promotion of an improved public understanding of science should, therefore, form a significant part in the teaching of science. Now that Science is a significant part of the curriculum, there is the opportunity to provide all learners with a broad and balanced science curriculum which will lay the foundation of a greater public awareness of science.

Policy

The Association believes in the need to increase the public understanding of science. The world in which we live is highly

technological and scientific. Citizens will increasingly need a knowledge of science if well informed judgments are to be made. The work of the Association in formal and non-formal education can help to make a difference to the overall level of Public Understanding of Science in the community.

<http://www.ase.org.uk/policy/puspolf.html>

They also present some action points:

taking opportunities to promote Science to parents and others (through activities such as institutional open evenings);

fostering links between science educators and the scientific and industrial communities;

supporting the work of organisations whose primary aim is the public understanding of science;

encouraging members to keep abreast of developments in science;

contributing directly to informal education by, for example, providing a high quality science lecture programme open to the public at the Association's Annual Meeting.

<http://www.ase.org.uk/policy/puspolf.html>

We find, then, in the case of science, that policy flows into communications and activities and the media across the scientific board. So, for example, the United Kingdom's Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council states on its web site as follows (highly relevant in the present debate concerning GM foods): "Our aim is to promote public awareness, appreciation and understanding of biotechnology and biological sciences; and to address the priority identified by the Technology Foresight exercise to engender widespread understanding of scientific achievements and dispel unwarranted fear of leading-edge possibilities" (<http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/opennet/pus/pus.html>). Obviously, there are commercial and political issues here that would need some unpacking, but there are social, commercial, and political issues surrounding language too, though we tend to give little prominence to them.

The "PUS" message comes across well in the aerospace sector, as the example of carefully organized links information from the Sussex Space Science Centre site demonstrates (it goes on for pages; see <http://www.susx.ac.uk/engg/research/space/links.html>).

I have to say that we, the communication specialists, still have something to learn from the scientists about how to organize information to an agreed industry standard in a comprehensive, attractive, and accessible way. We are still definitely

better at talking to each other than we are at talking to the world outside, including our potential customers.

OK. So we know by analogy what the “public understanding of language” is. But does it matter? Obviously, I am going to say “Yes.” And I would add, “particularly in the United Kingdom.” There are many reasons but I will cite four: the poor take-up of foreign languages in the curriculum in England and Wales; the centrality of language in the school curriculum; the political role of language; and finally the curiosity factor.

FL take-up. I need not labor the point nor explain the reasons for the poor record of the United Kingdom as a language learning society. The Centre for Information in Language Teaching and Research in London has figures that demonstrate this forcefully (see <http://www.cilt.org.uk/>). We need to change public and pedagogic attitudes toward modern foreign languages and toward Britain’s minority languages if we want to provide a foundation for extending increasingly essential language skills.

Language in the curriculum. Again an area that needs little examination here. Language is ubiquitous in the school curriculum, as it is critical to success at higher levels of education, training, and research. Ted Wragg’s “cubic curriculum” sets this out visually, and Wragg (1997: 3) writes, “In this second (‘cross-curricular’) dimension of the cubic curriculum, language is one of the most vibrant channels. It seeps into every cranny of the other dimensions, the subject curriculum and teaching and learning strategies.” He continues:

Since language lies so close to the heart of learning, it is vital that teachers are not only aware of the issues and principles involved, but that there is deliberate scrutiny of the extent to which children are acquiring, or being confused by, the language they need in particular circumstances. It is also an issue for schools to consider on both an individual and group basis, in that the school’s “language climate”—that is, the extent to which all teachers encourage language development—is important, but so is the experience of individual students. (Wragg 1997: 63)

I cannot say to what extent this is reflected here in the United States.

The politics of language. The politics of language have a national and an international dimension, both poorly understood by the general public. There is, of course, the constant issue of multilingualism and respect for language rights within the United Kingdom. For example, there is the plaintive comment by

speakers of minority languages that they may speak at least two languages including English fluently but get no credit for it, whereas an exam pass in rudimentary French is seen as really “learning a language.”

More potent at present is the poorly recorded role of language in major political events elsewhere. Take Kosovo, for example, where the Balkan predicament is reflected in the linguistic fragmentation of the region, itself a potent marker of social division and antagonism. I have seen nothing in the papers that talks about the languages of the region, either as part of the problem or as part of the means of explaining the distribution of and relationship between communities. Yet it is all there on the web: on *Ethnologue*, for example, and on a general interest site, which you can get to via the Linguist List on the UCL site, that simply shows us how to count up to 10 in 3000 languages. An amazingly personal experience.

Personal curiosity and press coverage. Language and language issues get very little coverage at all in the newspapers, of course, except in the sense of crosswords and word games. You need only look at the Sunday papers to find technology everywhere in the news items, the business pages, the lifestyle supplements, and the ads. Not so language.

Yet language does interest people, and it is newsworthy. Look at the success of word games on the television, and of *Reader's Digest* over the decades, or highly popular joke cards like this one:

I know you believe you understand
what you think I said, but what you
don't realize is that what you heard
is not what I meant.

So there is curiosity about language—enough to build on—provided, unlike the builders of the Tower of Babel, we speak the same language ourselves. So much then for the need to work for a greater visibility and a better public understanding of what language is and what language does. Where does technology come into this agenda? Well, it comes, of course, as an important element in both the medium and the message.

In terms of public awareness, inevitably, technology is streets ahead of language. It has the websites. It has the press coverage. It has the physical presence. And it has the investment. For websites, for instance, we need only look again at the Sussex Science site earlier and follow it into its tour of the nine planets—let us say, to Jupiter. What would our analogy be in language for that voyage of discovery?

However, by the physical presence of technology I don't mean just that technology has, by definition, to do with hardware as well as software and is therefore

tangible in a way that language (by and large, and apart from the book) is not. It is that science and technology have also created their shrines here in Washington and in many centers all over the world. But for language we have no single physical presence, unless we interpret every library as a shrine of language.

This is where I want to introduce the World of Language project, at what for the project is a decisive point. First some history, then some impressions, then some content.

The World of Language. The World of Language emerged as a bright idea in 1996. Looking for a focus for a British Council Millennium project, we came up with the notion of a “museum of language.” We discussed whether this should be English or language per se and opted to avoid triumphalism. We considered funding and went for a millennium grant from the government, to be matched by sponsorship funding. We considered location and identified a site in Southwark, on the banks of the Thames adjacent to Shakespeare’s Globe, redolent with symbolism and in a richly multicultural and multilingual environment. We held workshops and we developed a concept and a curriculum. David Crystal created our language curriculum. We looked at technology and design and educational mission. We investigated markets and other aspects.

We did not get through the millennium grant process, although we had a website, promotional literature in place, and an idea with miles to run. In 1998 we responded to a request from Paris—the wonderful Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie at Parc de la Villette—for a reduced version of our concept as part of their millennium display. We revised our curriculum and brought our space requirement down from 4,000 to 650 m². Again with the support of the British Council, we ran a design competition and came up with revised concepts. The winning design was not The World of Language but Language City. Again, lots of ideas, a guaranteed location and audience—but still no money!

Which brings us to where we are now. We have a mission. We have a curriculum, writ large and small (with options). We have a website (which needs some TLC). We have a mailing list—in sixty-seven countries. We have no money. And we wonder if this is the point where we stop lusting after the concrete and espouse the virtual. Perhaps we should aim for product rather than presence. Go for a virtual, not a concrete, site. And our product would be “PUL”—assisting the public understanding of language internationally, and within the United Kingdom, by providing a rational and attractive environment for a range of language-related resources. The process would be online technology. The audience would be whoever wants to visit.

I have deliberately not associated our initiative with U.S. concerns. I do not know enough about them. I do know that many of our mailing list members live and work in the United States and ask us the same kinds of questions and find the same kinds of things interesting as our United Kingdom and international members.

A similar initiative is under discussion in the United States. We must wait to see who gets there first!

REFERENCES

- Wragg E C. 1997. *The cubic curriculum*. London: Routledge.
- Websites, in order of presentation
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NOTE.

1. This talk was illustrated with visuals of website pages. The addresses are listed at the end.