

From the Editor's Desk

It is sometimes assumed that anyone who has advanced to the point of translating the Scriptures is no longer likely to be concerned with some of the more elementary problems of language learning. To a considerable extent, this is true, but there are a number of missionaries who undertake to learn additional languages, and many are called upon to help others in the task of learning a foreign language. With the increased recognition of the need of more adequate verbal communication, this aspect of missionary work is becoming more and more important. Fortunately for the missionary, there are a number of published helps and for an increasing number of languages one can find very useful pedagogical grammars. Nevertheless, with all the published helps on the theory of language learning and teaching, and with the aid of much improved grammars, there are still a number of problem cases which seem to defy all attempts to resolve.

Psychological Difficulties in Language Learning

One not infrequent problem is that of the missionary who comes to the field intent on learning a language and who, despite above-average intelligence, the best of teaching, and the most earnest application, just never seems to be able to learn. Everything has been conducive to learning the language in question, and yet someplace along the line something seems to have gone wrong. The usual response to this type of problem is to say, "Well, he just does not have the gift for languages." However, this is not a valid answer, even as most of us know.

Further investigation and study into such cases may reveal some additional factors which may not have been carefully considered. This was true, for example, in the case of one missionary whose early academic training, devotion, and application seemed to guarantee success in one of the languages of the Middle East. Yet, despite every apparent effort, the results were almost hopelessly inadequate. In so far as can be ascertained, the heart of the problem lay in the fact that this person, as a small child, had apparently deeply resented the fact that his parents, as immigrants in the United States, spoke a foreign language. He tried, both consciously and unconsciously, to dissociate himself from this "foreign" group, and made every effort to identify himself with the English-speaking constituency and to avoid any associations with the foreign element (associations which have as their focus the language in question). As a result, he apparently built up a series of mental blocks, and when confronted with the task of learning a foreign language as an adult, he simply could not bring himself to "making strange foreign sounds." Of course, this reaction was quite unconscious. In fact, this is precisely what made the situation so difficult for him. If he could only have recognized the source of his difficulty, much of the trouble would have been removed, for it was the very repression of these feelings into the subconscious which aggravated the difficulty. These reactions to the "foreign" language were also tied up with a number of other feelings toward family,

heritage, and associations, all of which conspired to produce a complex psychological problem.

People may not experience the serious difficulties resulting from deep-seated resentments, but they are often handicapped by attitudes which in a more subtle but no less pernicious manner impair their language learning capacities. One of these involves the pressures of prestige acquisition by so-called "correct" language usage. It has been observed in a number of instances that among those who emphasize "correctness" of speech in their own mother tongue, there is a considerable group who have done so as a means of acquiring the prestige of a more acceptable dialect. This seems to be particularly true when at an early age a person has been aware of the necessity of conforming one's speech to the socially dominant group in order to be accepted. If a person at an early age has been subjected to severe taunts, or has suffered social disabilities because of his language background, there is a tendency for him to be very sensitive toward making mistakes. Such persons may make a real fetish of being "experts in grammar", even to the point of lording it over others by correcting them, even in public. Strangely enough, it is from this very group that one often finds people who seem to have extraordinary difficulty in learning to speak a foreign language. These people may be quite good at memorizing the rules or in analyzing the grammar, but many never learn to speak with fluency, for they never seem to be able to let themselves go. They cannot afford to make a mistake because of the haunting (sub-conscious) fear of social rejection. Of course, not all persons who have had to strive to "improve their dialect" have such difficulties, for there are often other features in the personality development which tend to compensate; but one cannot overlook the importance of these psychologically predisposing factors if one wants to understand some of the perplexing instances of failure in language learning.

That there are real psychological barriers in various aspects of language learning and using cannot be denied. One of these is well illustrated by what occurred to a linguist who worked for several years in Latin America and who attained a remarkable command of Spanish, as well as of one of the Indian languages. He then went to Europe to learn French. As with so many who must take up a new and cognate language, he felt that Spanish was his worst enemy in learning French, since the two romance languages are so closely related. Accordingly, he purposely tried by a psychological process closely akin to emotional rejection to forget all the Spanish that he knew. After several months, this person went to West Africa, but on one occasion he was called upon to do some interpreting for a Spanish-speaking African from Spanish Guinea. He discovered that it was almost impossible for him to say anything in Spanish. Only after a desperate psychological effort and after hearing the African speak for a few minutes in Spanish did he finally break through the barrier that seemed to screen off his knowledge of Spanish.

This experience is by no means unique. Another person who learned Spanish first and then French, and with the same type of attitude

toward "putting Spanish out of his mind", found that though he continues to speak Spanish more fluently than French, it is much harder to shift from speaking French to speaking Spanish than the reverse. This difficulty of transition seems to be intimately connected with the experience of purposeful thrusting aside; and to overcome this series of mental hurdles always requires a severe mental readjustment, accompanied by a proportionately greater expenditure of nervous energy and an emotional reaction not dissimilar from the effects of reconciliation.

Motivation in Language Learning

On the whole, however, the problems of language learning with which the average translator has to deal are not those involving deep-seated psychological attitudes or problems as much as those which center about factors of motivation. It seems that, though some students have the best possible grammars, teachers, and conditions in which to study, they do not make the progress which their native abilities would seem to guarantee. The answer to all of this is usually spoken of in terms of motivation. However, under the rubric of lack of motivation are hidden a good many different "sins" in failure to learn foreign languages. The trouble is that motivation is not something in and of itself. It is related to many other aspects of one's personality and has many facets. For example, a person may seem to have a profound motivation to be a missionary, in the sense of one who feels deeply constrained to witness of Jesus Christ, both by word and by deed, and yet this motivation seems never to be able to result in language learning. There may be a number of reasons for this failure, but one of the most frequent reasons is that such a motivation may not be specifically related to the "motivation to verbal communication". There are some talkative persons and others who simply feel no constraint to talk. For the most part, talkative people are likely to want to talk regardless of the country in which they live.

On the other hand, the motivation to communicate does not mean that talkative people will always learn foreign languages. Such people sometimes "freeze" in the foreign atmosphere. They draw into their shells and become confirmed introverts. In many instances, it will be shown that such persons have previously covered up a feeling of inferiority by the device of talkativeness. In fact, many talkative people are not possessed by any strong motivation to communicate; they are simply exhibitionists, more interested in hearing themselves than in communicating to others.

The motivation to communicate goes much deeper than mere talkativeness. Furthermore, the desire to communicate is not characteristic only of persons who are extroverts. While it is quite true that the extrovert normally seeks out means of communication, the introvert may also become communicative, especially in some specialized area of activity or interest. That is to say, the "quiet soul" may be possessed by some overriding desire to make people aware of some important truth. This motivation results in the drive to communicate.

However, there are many who are seemingly driven by a desire to communicate, and as a result learn to speak a foreign language, but who never learn to speak it correctly. They continue for years to talk with a barbarous accent and with incredibly bad grammar. They appear to be in such a rush to talk that they throw the rules to the winds and go bumbling ahead with almost total disregard to genders, cases, subjunctives, subtle meanings of words, or significant idioms. They speak Spanish, for example, as though it were English with Spanish words. It is quite true that they communicate—at least after a fashion. They usually acquire an extensive vocabulary and they are never at a loss to say something. But there is something lacking—something very important.

This other ingredient which is missing in their motivation is “sensitivity to the out-group”. It is not sufficient to define this quality as simply “sensitivity to others”. For example, there are many people who are very sensitive to the opinions of people in the “in-group”, that is to say, those who belong to their own clique, church, mission, country, or culture—however large such persons identify for the time being the limits of the group whose approval they desire, whether consciously or unconsciously. Such people will be very sensitive to overt criticism or to lack of acceptance by the in-group, but they may not care a whit what some “dirty foreigners” think about them. This is characteristic of some Americans who are terribly concerned about the impression which they make on fellow tourists traveling in Europe but do not seem to care in the least what sort of reactions they cause among the people of Europe. This type of sensitivity to the in-group, as important as it may be in many situations, for example, in the developing of institutional loyalty, team spirit, and group consciousness, is no guarantee of success in learning to speak a foreign language correctly. In order to master a foreign language one must be sensitive to the out-group.

The person who is sensitive to the out-group is going to want to speak in such a manner as to give the least possible offence. However, this negative aspect is not all. He will want to obtain the greatest possible approval to the out-group. It may seem strange that some of the persons who are the most sensitive to the out-group are also the most nonconformist in their attitudes toward the in-group. On the other hand, it is not strange at all, for the person who is a nonconformist as far as the in-group is concerned is very likely to be sensitive to the out-group, for the very reason that this is part and parcel of his nonconformity to the in-group. Since the rest of the in-group seek conformity within the in-group, and for the most part do not care about the out-group, it is the nonconformist within the in-group who seeks satisfactory response from the out-group.

This, then, brings us back to the person who is pedantically concerned about his own speech as a means of gaining acceptance within the in-group. This person's sensitivity on matters of grammar is no guarantee that in a foreign language he will react with the same care and concern. In fact, he may be so concerned with the

in-group that anything which is not characteristic of this group and its behavior he regards as either incorrect or foolish. In either case, he finds it hard to make an adjustment.

This brief description of some of the psychological problems involved in language learning and using is by no means the entire story, nor can we automatically pigeonhole people by types: introverts, extroverts, talkative, nonconformists, etc. Each person is a complex combination of various attitudes and responses. However, within the complex web of such diverse and often contradictory tendencies there are numerous important psychological factors at work determining in no small measure our reactions to and ultimate facility in the learning and use of foreign languages. A greater awareness of these factors on the part of those who engage in problems of communication in foreign languages will help to explain difficult problems and to overcome otherwise hopeless barriers to success.

E. A. N.

The People vs. the Dictionary

Of all the tradition-ridden languages of the world there is probably none more tied to the past and more circumscribed by what the dictionaries approve than Arabic. And yet, even in Arabic there is a proverb which says, "Better a popular mistake than an unknown dictionary usage."

The living language is what people know and speak. Dictionaries which always lag behind are often excellent witnesses to the past, but they must be used with discretion in translating for the future.

Ignorance is Bliss

In a small church in Egypt the pastor was discovered before the service going from pew to pew gathering up all the Bibles with vowel markings. He was in process of locking these up in a closet when a visitor, noticing the strange procedure, asked him, "But why are you locking up the voweled Bibles and leaving the much more difficult unvoweled texts in the pews for the people to use?"

"Ah, you see," replied the pastor, "if the people do not have the voweled text, they cannot notice all the mistakes I make in reading."

But that is not quite all of the story, for actually this pastor was unconsciously making adaptations of the text in the direction of the more colloquial usage—something he would not have dared to do had the people been in the habit of following a fully voweled text.