



## Intercultural Perspectives on Language Difficulty, and Their Effect on Learner Motivation and Ambition

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### Abstract

*What are the hardest languages to learn? The question seems obvious in some ways, but answers vary wildly according to context. This paper will tackle this question through analysis of college students and professors in the Northeastern United States, specifically, the George Washington University. The paper will focus on intercultural perspectives on language difficulty and complexity, recognizing and inspecting how speakers of different languages come to view both their own and others' native languages. Employing the notion of "language ideology" as outlined in linguistic anthropology, we will examine participant experience with foreign languages, travel, foreign cultures, and in the case of professors, teaching experience. Specific languages targeted include Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, and Russian, touching on how native speakers of these languages ideologically consider their own language "one of the most difficult in the world." The paper's goal will be the development of a contextually articulated belief-structure associated with language "difficulty" and "impenetrability," and how the mindset of a learner can be affected by this structure. The significance of this paper is that it will contribute to understanding the motivations of language learners and teachers, as well as the localized articulation of obstacles to fluency and proficiency.*

### 1. Introduction

There are many different ways in which people learn languages: some take classes, some immerse themselves in the country where it is spoken, and some simply use phone applications. While there has already been much research done on the topic of how students acquire a language best, the ways that specific cultures actually view language and language learning as concepts has been a less common theme of research. During my study of Italian, Spanish, Russian, Mandarin, Modern Greek, and Modern Standard Arabic, I have made friends from all over the planet who hold views about the world across the entire spectrum of possible beliefs. The different kinds of philosophies that those of different cultures held regarding the learning of foreign languages, though, had particularly interested me and became a heavy point of attention. Knowing that I could not interview an entire culture's population, blurry as the lines of who is "in a culture" may be, I turned my attention to the United States and academia. My goal was to see the ways different cultures view the concept of learning foreign languages, and how those views along with views of an instructor can affect the motivation of a student. Within each culture exist ideologies about language which make these views prominent, especially in the United States.

### 2. What Is Linguistic Ideology?

Linguistic ideology is a set of beliefs that a person may hold about language and its relationship with culture and social interaction, and how language can thus be explained by that belief structure as the root or cause of certain ways of speaking, and by extension, societal norms. [1] As Woolard and Schieffelin note as examples, linguistic ideology can make a family in Nova Scotia refrain from teaching their child a vernacular for fear that it will hurt their English, or make a Haitian family in New York City let their child receive input from any language and still expect them to be able to speak Creole. [2]

Anyone can hold such a belief structure consciously or unconsciously, though it is likely not to help if they are monolingual and have low exposure to other cultures. In my experience, especially in the United States, English is held by many as the "best" language due to its global reach, and its prominent place in U.S. life, and this serves as justification as to why foreign languages are not useful. Consequently, a development and even radicalization of this thought pattern can add fuel to the fire that is the shunning of learning foreign languages, viewing them as unnecessary. How, then, might people of other native

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tongues view their own native language on the global stage? Furthermore, how do these ideas, both in the United States and abroad, contribute to a higher or lower motivation for students of foreign languages?

To gain more insight about possible answers, I looked to the George Washington University and its language professors as well as their students to examine how they understood language learning and what they thought of the specific language in question – particularly, Russian, Arabic, and French. Further research and shorter interviews and talks were conducted into Chinese students, both native and non-native, to learn about the cultural views on language in Chinese culture. A common topic that arose, and an important one to keep in mind, was learning a new alphabet or other system of writing being an obstacle to having motivation to learn a foreign language.

### 3. Professor Interviews and Student Experiences

Language professors at the George Washington University have a wide range of views about the language that they teach and the expectations they set for their students, from strictly realistic to proudly idealistic. When approaching interviews, I split my questions into three sections: language experience, foreign culture exposure and travel, and teaching experience. To gain perspective about their outlook, I asked if they believe that the language they teach is among the hardest in the world, how they think other people view the language they teach, and if they believe knowing a second language is essential for people to have a well-rounded knowledge about the world.

To use a term coined in international affairs, the Russian professor whom I interviewed had a very realist perspective with students taking his courses. His view on Russian, as he told me, is that it is a very difficult language for a large number of people, and a student should have a serious desire to know the language if they join his class. He incorporates a less-than-forgiving teaching style, sifting through his classes until mostly only very serious students remain. When I asked him what he thought about the Cyrillic alphabet, he responded that it should be the least of his students' worries as Russian gets much harder than just a different alphabet, and that they cover it completely within two days, or at least within the first week. An aspiring student looking to sign up for one of his courses but nervous about how hard many say the language is would receive from him in reply that it *is* as hard as people, in this case Americans, say it is. Interestingly enough, the notion of “people” saying that a language is hard, and how that helps to form a popular opinion on said language, is a whole topic to be covered in itself later on.

I proceeded to interview a French professor, who took a decidedly more relaxed and supportive role as a teacher towards current and prospective students. Although French has the same Latin alphabet that English has and thus has one less factor than Russian to consider, many similar factors that students typically worry about in a new language were brought up: pronunciation, spelling, pragmatics and correct usage of words, etc. When asked the same question about a worried student, he said that he would provide all the resources they could use before and during the class to improve, as well as supplementary materials for extra practice. A decidedly different style of thinking about teaching, the French professor's answers in such sharp contrast prompted me to think about how this could affect how many learners stayed with a language, and how many learners chose to study it in the first place.

#### 3.1 Professors' Attitudes Towards Teaching

The differences between these two professors does not mean anything about the languages that they teach per se, but the way that they approach teaching their students may have an effect on how they see their own progress and self-confidence. This contrast is even more evident when a language like Russian, harder to a native English speaker than French on average, has less routes for the student to go for support. A mindset, therefore, is one of the factors at the onset of learning a new foreign language that can shape the way a student will learn; that is, the mindset both that the student has on their own, and the mindset of their teacher that can influence the student.

The initial factor to consider before taking into account teachers' attitude is the fact that students have preconceived notions of their target language in the first place. Although it is to be expected that a learner might be nervous about learning a new language, I have observed that students in the US focus their fears very much on aspects that the professors would consider simple, e.g., a different alphabet. Another feature of these professor-student interactions is the level at which professors try to “weed out” the unmotivated. Generally speaking, one would expect that a student with low motivation in a language course is more likely to be someone under the influence of the “English-is-best” ideology, and the way that



professors handle this, either by supporting them or by trying to leave only those motivated enough, may respectively strengthen or weaken the spread of this type of thinking about foreign languages.

#### **4. Mandarin and Arabic – Another Look at the “Most Difficult” Languages**

I spoke with an Arabic professor in order to ask how he thought Arabic was perceived not only in the US but also on a wider scale. He pointed out a few reasons for why, on the surface, Arabic can be considered a difficult language: it would take a considerably long time for a native English speaker to learn it to proficiency, its writing (and formal speech) system (فصحى) is standard while everyday speech is the dialect (لهجة) of the local area. In addition, even native speakers have problems with the grammar of Modern Standard Arabic because they learn it at four or five years old, a considerable amount of time after they learn their dialect which they use in their homes. This, I surmise, is one of the reasons why an Arabic speaker may have thoughts on how difficult their own language is and thus both caution and praise a hopeful foreign learner.

Although I was unable to reach a Chinese professor to ask the same questions that I had asked above, my past experiences speaking with Chinese students at the same university seem to reveal the same thoughts about how native speakers might think of their own languages. Two Chinese girls with whom I chatted in Washington, D.C. had questioned me extensively about my Mandarin, finding it extremely surprising that I had completed an entire book of grammar on the language. They continued, wondering whether or not I found tones or the writing system difficult. Given their interest, I couldn't help but notice how difficult they thought this was for a foreign learner.

#### **5. Conclusion – Common Themes and What We Can Learn**

What exactly, then, do these experiences with learners and teachers have to do with culture and a belief-structure about language impenetrability? From my interviews with professors and speaking with students at the George Washington University, I can conclude that based on how professors work with and handle the preconceived notions that students have about their language, as with the Russian and French professors, a cultural ideology about language difficulty can be either released or tightened in the mind of each student. Knowing the reasons for an ideology around a language, as in the case of the Arabic professor, can help both a student to get past superficial fears at all levels of language study and a teacher to deconstruct those preconceived, often misinformed ideas. Indeed, finding the particular points of ideological bias about a language's difficulty would most easily be done on a case-by-case basis, but a general overview such as this may serve as a door to deeper research on the issue. Finding these points of bias and learning to erase them can in the end lead to more confident learners, and more fruitful language learning.

#### **References**

- [1] Silverstein, M. “The Uses and Utility of Ideology: Some Reflections”, *Pragmatics*, IPrA, 1992, 2.3:311-323
- [2] Woolard, Kathryn A., and Bambi B. Schieffelin. “Language Ideology”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Jstor, 1994, 23:62-63.