

A linguist loses his language and regains it

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Herbsttag

Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr groß.
Leg deinen Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,
und auf den Fluren lass die Winde los.

Rainer Maria Rilke

1. Prologue

On New Year's Day, 2005, in our university flat in Duisburg, just after our return to Germany from a Christmas holiday in Cyprus, we had not long finished our New Year's Day-type lunch. I turned to my computer and was putting together my first paper for the new year when, feeling a little tired, I went into the next room and lay down. After that I must have lost consciousness. The doctor's voice: 'What languages does the patient speak?' 'The main one is English, but he also speaks adequate German,' said my colleague, Patrick. 'It seems that he learnt German as a child,' I heard one of the ambulance men say. After that, silence and darkness

2. The shock of losing one's language

Now, one year later, when I try to remember, the first thing during the three days I spent in hospital was the avalanche-like realisation that I had lost the power of language. But that was not the case. There was no doubt that, in those three days, I had lost most of my language. However, when my brother and his wife rushed by car from Prague, and jokes were told, I laughed a lot, and afterwards Patrick predicted, 'As long as he still has a sense of humour, he may well recover 99%'. And after that, during our stay in Germany, because Czechs and Czech-speaking people sometimes came to visit me, there was the opportunity to speak Czech. However, after we returned to Melbourne at the end of March, as my ability to speak Japanese and English gradually increased, I did not realise that my ability to speak Czech had decreased.

Around Christmas last year, I was ill, and while I was in that condition, my brother phoned from Prague on Christmas Day. Since my brother likes to joke, he seemed to expect us to brag to each other about what we had eaten for Christmas dinner. I too had eaten a fine meal worth boasting about. However, after a nine-month blank, I could not speak Czech any more. For me, that was an enormous shock. For anyone, losing his mother tongue is a painful thing, but for me as a linguist particularly, the pain of losing my mother tongue could not be put into words.

However, about a fortnight later, I had a stroke of luck which compensated for this misfortune. A Czech male charge nurse, who worked in the sanatorium, came into my room with the nurse, and introduced himself: 'Good day, I am Rob, the new nurse.' When he saw my name, he realised that I was Czech and when he furthermore realised that my wife understood Czech, he switched to Czech. He was born in Prague, and was planning to attend university in Melbourne. He was about 30 years old. The really delightful thing was that he spoke standard Czech and used the appropriate polite forms.

That is to say that he addressed my wife and me with *vy* (polite form of the second person). My most recent English article is entitled, 'Politeness in the Czech Republic' (the translation of this was published in parts in the March-May 2006 issues of this journal), so politeness in speech is my major interest. The strange thing is that, during this half month, for no particular reason, my language loss settled down, and I became able to talk to this pleasant young man.

3. The process of regaining language

During my first three days in hospital, I think I was unconscious. I did not know how much time passed, but when I regained consciousness, my wife and Patrick were smiling at me. My wife asked me with a smile, 'Good day, how are you feeling?' Since I was ready to cry, I said nothing, but smiled and lifted my left hand, which I could still move. Patrick said, 'Hello, George'. With my left hand still in the air, I said, 'Hello'. As Patrick is also a linguist, he took note of the importance of this sequence of linguistic activity; during the course of that day, he made a phone call to my son Peter, who lives in Melbourne. After all, the fact that I could not use my right hand was evidence that the damage was on the left side of the brain where the speech area is located. But his conclusion was that, fortunately, my ability in English was not a problem. During those three days, there were serious discussions behind the scenes in the hospital, and in the professor's judgment, it was decided that 'an operation was not necessary'.

At this point, I tried to look back over my language learning history. My mother tongue, Czech – from birth; German and Latin – from the age of 10; Russian from the age of 11; Japanese – from the age of 18; English – from the age of 20. And this history did not wholly match with the process of my regaining language use.

For two weeks after I entered hospital, there was no systematic therapy, but, as it happened, there was continuous contact with people who spoke Japanese, Czech, English and German, so the communication of wills was possible to a considerable degree. At the end of the second week, Patrick made me a present of a CD player, so, from then on, I listened to poetry and music all the time.

From the third week on, I was moved to a rehabilitation ward. And speech therapy was begun using English. The therapist, Katya, was a lovely person from Trier, and had musical knowledge in the field of music therapy. Furthermore, she told me that she had played the flute for about 10 years. As it happens, I had played the flute once, for approximately five years. When, in the first therapy session, I told her, in my meagre vocabulary, that I liked 'Music, flute, Mozart', she brought to the second session a CD, a CD player, and the score, and gave me a small concert. I followed the score with my eyes, and with my active left hand, I assumed the posture of holding a flute, and began to move my tongue corresponding to the melody of the flute concerto which flowed from the CD.

Thus, little by little, I began to pronounce, in snatches, words in Japanese, English, German, Czech. By the time I was able to say complete sentences, we were into February. In the evening of February 21st, at about 5 p.m., when my wife and I were alone, I began to talk to her, saying, 'Listen, I would like to return to Melbourne as soon as possible.' My wife looked surprised. At that time, my wife seemed to strengthen her resolve: 'I will do my best to fulfil your wish'. Subsequently, on the following day, I said, 'I would like to go to a place like the sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)*'. My wife thought I was joking and started to laugh. But, in fact, now, precisely one year later, the place where I have been since returning to Australia, is like the sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain*. However, there is no Mme Chauchat.

For some time after our return to Melbourne at the end of March, due to the sudden change of environment, I withdrew into myself and could no longer make normal conversation. For me, conversing with God and wandering in the depths of despair was more important to me than daily conversation. Also, at that time, on a daily basis, I listened to a CD of readings of poems in German, called the *Rilke Projekt*, on the CD player which Patrick had given me. My favourite poem was *Herbsttag*, the one quoted at the beginning of this article.

From that time on, former friends (many of whom, as it happened, were specialists in German literature and language), and also new friends came to visit me one after the other, providing a natural environment for conversation. First, Professor Bodi, a former colleague and specialist in German literature at Monash University, and his wife came to visit me, and he read aloud for me the Rilke poem, *Herbsttag*, quoted above. Because it was a poem I had heard frequently enough to have memorised it, I was moved to tears. After that, a friend, HR, who is bilingual in English and German, came to visit me twice a week over a period of more than half a year, providing me with all sorts of news and stimulation for conversation, and in fact assumed the function of my personal speech therapist.

On 27th February, just after 4 p.m., my wife came into my room, announcing that she had brought Mrs Nakayama with her. As that day was the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birthday, the radio had played only music by Mozart from the morning onwards. My wife turned the radio off for me, and read an encouraging card from Professor Shigeru Nakayama. The card contained an exchange of jokes, and it concluded with: 'Will you be writing your autobiography before long?' Also, there were very tasty chocolates surrounded by the scent of beautiful flowers.

The following day, my wife and son brought me some sushi. After eating one nigori and the sanatorium evening meal, I lifted my left leg from the blanket. This was body language which I had recently been practising, and indicated that I wished to move to the recently acquired wheelchair. With the help of a nurse, I was transferred to the wheelchair, and with my wife and son, I left the 'Magic Mountain' and went out into the outside world. We repeated this adventure many times. On walks, we sometimes went to a Belgian-type beer garden, or to the National Art Gallery in a maxi-taxi. However, because my wife had recently injured herself, it was the first time we had been on a walk together. With my son, we went walking along familiar avenues - S Road and P Road - which were filled with residences and office buildings. We walked for approximately half an hour, and I gained both physical and linguistic confidence. We returned to the 'Magic Mountain', and, filled with a feeling of happiness, I fell into a deep sleep.

4. Epilogue

Thirteen months after succumbing to illness, after being encouraged by many people with such statements as 'Your colour looks good' or 'You look better than before you fell ill', the process of regaining my language advanced. It had been literally painful. The demarcation between the time when I lost my language and the time it was recovered was indistinct. Regaining my language was as unreliable as scooping up water in the palm of my hand. I understood that I could spill it immediately.

However, what I was happy about was that the process by which I regained my language was, at the same time, also the process of my personal linguistic creation. For example, when I turn to my wife and say, 'Kokoro ga itai'. This is often misunderstood by English-speakers. It does not mean 'My heart is sore', but 'I love you'.

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