

# THE BALINGUA METHOD FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING (BMLL)

The following presentation revolves around three topics; first, a reminder of the basic principles of any language learning starting with maternal language; second, a specification of the major characteristics of the Balingua method and their scientific underpinning; and, third, some considerations regarding Balingua's complementary relationship with other current methods of language learning.

## LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Any tongue, whether maternal, second, third, or more is underlined by a neurobehavioral system called language. Language is also a function to the extent that it allows performing a number of language (or illocutory) acts (asserting, requesting, ordering, etc.) through the use of a code, the tongue. These acts make use of a particular modality, spoken, written or gestural (to quote only the most important ones). The three entities, tongue, language, and modality are clearly related but they must be distinguished given that their principles of organization are different. The tongue is a code systematically relating concepts, forms, and objects, events, or persons and specifying the sequences that can be used to express relational meanings (complex meaning going beyond the individual meaning of isolated lexical items).

As said, language is a function sustained by devoted brain structures determining particular behaviors which, in the case of speech, produce fluctuations in the vibrating patterns of the surrounding air molecules that can be received by a particular auditory apparatus and decoded by specialized brain areas. This is what is called the communication circuit. Tongue and language are not monolithic entities. They integrate specific components disposed hierarchically. There are the sounds (phonemes) and the prosodic patterns specific to each tongue. The phonemes combine to form the morphemes (the minimal level of meaning) and the lexemes (the vocabulary items constituting the dictionary of the tongue). Lexemes are organized in meaningful groups (phrases and sentences) combining to create texts or discourses.

A particular characteristic of the natural tongues that accounts for their remarkable flexibility and adaptive potential is that each component is arbitrarily constructed. This means that the choices from which they originate among a whole lot of possibilities have no other justification but themselves. The consequence is that the relevant aspects have to be reconstructed from nil by any learner of the tongue whether maternal or foreign. Granted that the language capacity is universal and stems from a neurogenetic basis, its application to a particular tongue requires systematic exposure and learning.

A common infelicity in the traditional programs for learning language lies in the insufficient recognition of the componential nature of language and consider on the contrary that everything in it can be learned and mastered at the same time and in the same manner. The modern study of language, whether concerning language development in the child or the numerous language pathologies demonstrate that the various components that constitute the language system are diverse in their structures, their functioning modalities, their development calendars, their very logic of organization, not to mention their evolutionary origins. It is important to recognize this diversity and to rely on it in any program of language learning whether it is maternal or foreign language for there is not fundamental difference between the two.

The structural analysis that defines the domain of linguistic science is useful in identifying the phonemes, lexemes, phrases, and standard sentences in a given tongue. Traditionally therein dependencies between words (morphosyntax) are specified in terms of rules which apply to formal categories (nouns, verbs, prepositions, articles, etc.) bound by so-called functional relationships (subject of, object of, attribute of, etc.). The school programs aim at sensitizing the learner to these types of relationship whether it relates to maternal or foreign languages. Research in psycholinguistics over the last decades suggests, however, that the ways real people function language-wise is quite different. Although it is indeed possible to describe facts of language using the linguistics categories, it does not seem to be the way language is learnt nor use by people.

The human brain, particularly the left hemisphere is a powerful linear analyzer able to detect and record the sequential regularities (proximal and distal ones) in the utterances received and use this type of information to organize the proper productions. The devoted brain regions are fully operational right

from the start (at birth and even slightly before) allowing language construction to begin very early in life relying on parental input adapted to the level of the child and getting gradually more complex with the child's progress. This ability of the human brain to detect sequential patterns in a given input providing that it is minimally coherent and intensive is not learnt. It corresponds to what biologists call a property of species, here *Homo Sapien sapiens*, which means that it derives directly from the genetic blueprint of that species an important part of which is devoted to the epigenetic development of the brain.

One should not misunderstand such an indication, however. The implication is not that particular linguistic knowledge could be available prior to any language exposure. It means that the development of language ability and language functioning are geared by brain structures well equipped to these ends. Regarding morphosyntax, the construction proceeds by a gradual elaboration from thousands of input and a gigantic associative matrix organized along two separate axes, one syntagmatic (i.e., regarding the chaining of words in utterances), another one paradigmatic (regarding the possible vertical substitutions of constituents within the utterances). This knowledge is implicitly achieved. It is constructed gradually by intuitive appropriation of the regularities and structures evidenced with sufficient frequency and consistency in the input, without a clear awareness from the learner's part. Such an awareness (always a partial one) is not excluded, however, and may play a role in more advanced learning but, and this is a major point, it is not required.

Consistently, an explicit knowledge of the particular tongue structures is not an objective of BMLL contrarily to other approaches in the domain. The stochastic dimension specific to each tongue at the level of the words sequences represents a rich source of information for the language learner. It is even surprising that such a potential has been most largely neglected in traditional language learning. The structural dependencies that characterize the phrases are detectable in the surface structures of the productions. From there a double analysis may intervene: within and between phrases in the sentences. The paradigm of implicit learning supplies a key-mechanism for language development and learning, mainly phonological and morphosyntactical but not only.

A series of pragmatic and discursive acquisitions (e.g., the conventions bearing on linguistic uses in social contexts as well as the so-called scripts –ordering a dish in a restaurant, conduct a telephonic conversation) are also learnt implicitly. These central characteristics of the learning of maternal tongues also apply and to some extent to the learning of second, third idioms, etc. It matters that modern methods of language learning be based on the same principles and realities. This is not the case with the more traditional methods of language learning which are too centered on the learning and use of formal rules and canonical structures at the expense of the functions. One clear example along this line is supplied by the traditional school approach to language learning that is considered nowadays as a dramatic failure exhibiting a neatly unfavorable efficiency/cost ratio. BMLL set up and experimented in recent years cuts with this tradition and goes back to the very foundations of language learning as illustrated in the children's acquisition of their maternal tongue. It is proven enough to let play the natural mechanisms of language learning without impeding them with inefficient formalisms. BMLL intends boosting such mechanisms through proper displays and working techniques rather than substituting them or interfering with them with inefficient procedures.

#### PSYCHOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF BMLL

BMLL exploits the syntagmatic regularities, paradigmatic associations, movements of immediate constituents allowed by the grammar of the tongue and pragmatically relevant to execute the speech acts necessary in social contexts. The method is available in a dozen of languages and several others are in preparation. It revolves primarily around syntax, viewed by modern linguistics as the hard core of any tongue, but the approach favors function over form.

By syntax, it is meant non only the surface structure ordering of the expression (which corresponds to the etymological sense of the term) but also the organization of the semantic relations expressed into the syntagmatic sequence (these are the meaning relations that we express using sequences of lexical terms: possession, localization in time and space, transitivity, presence, absence, notice, reappearance, qualification, quantification, etc.; which are universal characteristics of human cognition and as such need not to be learned just operationalized).

Concretely, the aim is to familiarize the learner with the typical sequential and relational patterns of the tongue. The learner is individually exposed (self-learning on line on computer; also applicable with a human monitor) for a determined number of hours (depending on her/his departure level and proper objectives and time available) to series of grammatical sentences in a given language with no translation into her/his maternal idiom. The sentences are presented one at a time followed by questions bearing on the identification of the major semantic-syntactical constituents of the sentence ("who is who, who does what, to whom, with what, where, when, how, etc."), their lawful displacements in the sentence, possible substitutions following the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes, the addition, suppression of words or constituents, and the possible variations tied to illocutionary functioning (questions, assertions, requests, orders, etc.).

Grammatical inflections (marking number, gender, time, and aspect) are introduced and modified in such a way as to make appear their meaning, function, and localization in the expression. Sentences are systematically modified while keeping the lexical items unchanged in such a way as to stress the syntactic patterns characteristic of the tongue. Lexical learning and enrichment is not a primary target at this time in BMLL. It is acknowledged that one needs a developed lexicon in order to function efficiently in any language but beyond a basic repertoire it is left to the learner her/himself to seek this enrichment in the particular directions that interest her/him most, given that lexical development is the affair of a whole life.

Similarly when it comes to the correct pronunciation of phonemes, no systematic training is involved in the first stages of BMLL. The learner is left free to look for improving it considering that a simple exposure to the tongue to learn should be enough to foster articulatory progress. It is understood, however, that a perfect pronunciation can only be reached by native people of the idiom or through early exposure and practice. It is not a primary objective of BMLL given that one may function efficiently in a given language community without a perfectly authentic phonology. BMLL advances in a spiral kind of way, from the simple to the more complex, the shorter syntagmatically to the more elaborated, from the already known to the yet to master, in such a way as to foster a gradual integration of the material to store efficiently in long-term memory.

The learner is plunged in an intensive language bath monitored by the computer program or a human monitor in order to favor a necessary and sufficient exposure for boosting learning.

The recourse to images and visual material through computer displays is permanent. Logograms are used extensively. They are pictorial elements corresponding to words or short phrases in a given language). Their use favors an intuitive grasping of the meaning of the display allowing the learner to concentrate on the structure and the constituents of the sentences. Pictures also favor the execution of the computational operations to perform on the linguistic material and stressed by the questioning and the systematic variations in word order. Neurophysiologically, the display favors a double afferentation (i.e., a double access to the central nervous system, visual and auditory) which is beneficial for short-term memorizing (basic condition for longer-term storage) while allowing not to have to rely on written language.

Lastly, the informatization of the approach guarantees its full individualization – implying complete freedom to organize the learning and to repeat *ad libitum* the sessions and various exposures for the amount of time judged necessary or wished by the learner. BMLL gives absolute priority to oral language. One of the permanent weaknesses of the traditional methods for language learning is their excessive dependence (and too rapid in the learning process) on written language.

It is true that written language in our tongues (which is only a recoding of oral language) contributes to solidifying oral language in some ways, but this type of effect can only be obtained after that a certain developmental level has been reached in oral language.

Too an early association of oral and written language may be harmful, a bit like if one wanted to expose a very young child barely in the process of learning her/his maternal idiom to systematic written language training. One must realize that in spite of their correspondences (in our idioms) the oral and written modalities respond to different logics, formalisms, and functions. The written language is too often viewed as a simple transcription of oral language. In fact, it corresponds to communication at a distance. This means that if the sender does not share with the receiver a number of relevant mental images and records, the former will have to supply a description of the contextual and/or the historical information needed to understand the message.

This necessity accounts for the common fact that written messages are usually longer than corresponding oral ones. Additionally, written expression is not typically dialogical short. The writer tends to express her/himself at some length prior to any response from the receiver. Except nowadays with the electronic devices allowing a quick written communication both ways carrying the possibility to converse in real time or almost, witnessing also a marked tendency to a shortening of the expression. It is advisable at the beginning to separate the learning of the oral and the written codes (in such a case the benefits of the double afferentation are reduced or cancelled by the functional differences between the two modalities. Later in the learning process, it may be indicated to turn to confront the peculiarities of the written medium.

BMLL is voluntarily selective. It encompasses a precise and scientifically motivated sequentialization of the learning objectives according to the modalities, components, and functions of the tongue to learn. What may seem at first glance a weakness, an incompleteness, actually is a strength for the energies of the learner are properly canalized and gradually oriented towards specific objectives according to a coherent planning; this is at variance with the usual methods of language learning where one common mistake is to confront the learner too early in the learning process with too many simultaneous targets (correct, sometimes even "perfect" pronunciation; appropriate or even sophisticated vocabulary, impeccable syntax, adequate pragmatics; neat discursive organization). These objectives are better prepared and more successfully reached whenever properly serialized.

## COMPLEMENTARITY OF BMLL WITH OTHER APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE LEARNING

In principle, BMLL is compatible and complementary with any other method of language learning for reason of its partial axiology, specific focuses, and the possibility to enter at various levels of competence in the foreign idiom. BMLL, however, cannot be used with very young children given that it consists in self-learning which cannot be transferred in any easy way to such an early learning context. One knows of the growing success of systematic bilingual school immersion in numerous countries.

This method proceeds by natural exposure of the children, as early as 4 or 5 years of age, to a second language more or less half of the school time in interaction with teachers native of the two idioms. BMLL can be used from the last years of primary school in order to insure a first exposure to a second tongue or for complementing an immersion practice. BMLL is perhaps even more usable in the context of secondary schooling, i.e. with slightly older children, and this according to different possible perspectives which could serve to potentialize the learning of foreign languages at that level.

A first perspective would be that of a secondary schooling following a primary one whereby nothing or close has been done to foster second language acquisition; BMLL would supply a relevant and efficient methodology to let in the hands of the teachers in order to foster such a beginning learning. A second perspective is that relating to children with a primary schooling immersion background for whom it then becomes imperative not to lose the benefits accumulated during secondary schooling. Here too BMLL would be useful in maintaining and furthering the previous language acquisitions.

A third possibility is that of an immersion framework at the secondary level aiming at the learning of a third language (an objective not currently realized in our countries). BMLL could then serve as a maintaining technique for keeping up the language acquisitions realized at the primary school level.

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