

HOW DO SECOND LANGUAGE SPEAKERS CORRECT THEMSELVES?

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

Are you aware of how, exactly, you correct yourself when you are speaking a second language? Do you regard your awareness of mistakes in the foreign language as a positive part of your language awareness or a negative one? In one of his books Earl Stevick describes how, after studying German and French to degree level, he visited Germany and France and found that he could only get his words out haltingly. His term for this state of linguistic semi-strangulation is "lathophobic aphasia" or inability speak due to fear of making mistakes. Have you ever experienced your own self-correction mechanism operating in this crushing and negative way? I suspect Stevick's experience is not unique.

The "language monitor"

Stephen Krashen has coined the term "language monitor" to describe the way in which second language speakers check their speech flow for error. In his writing the language monitor is taken as a given and he does not go into how he has observed this human ability working. The rest of this article is an attempt to share with you some of the things I have observed and found out about how people's monitors work when they are speaking a second language. Though people seem to be more able to bring their monitor procedures to consciousness in the context of second language speech my guess is that the same monitor checks on mother tongue production too. This is more likely to become apparent when the speaker is tired, drunk, speaking under some form of stress or dealing with a language realm they are not familiar with.

To bring a bit of order into the monitor descriptions that follow, I am going to divide them into three groups:

- mainly visual monitors
- mainly auditory
- mainly kinaesthetic
- and mixed monitors

What I mean by this will become clear as you read on.

Mainly kinaesthetic monitors

Barbara is an Austrian, with German as her mother tongue. The way she perceives mistakes is through her body reactions. In her case she FEELS the monitor. If the sentence she is saying has something wrong with it, she gets a cold feeling somewhere above her stomach and she has an itchy sensation. Both sensations vanish when she corrects what is wrong. In her case the monitor mostly works WHILE she is speaking rather than before or after. Occasionally she gets the cold and itchy feeling retrospectively, when she is already several sentences on in her speech flow. When this happens it is too late to correct what she said and the cold sensation lingers on unpleasantly.

What are the error areas that Barbara typically notices while she is speaking? She reports that her mistakes awareness mostly works at single word or phrase level. She reckons that when she speaks German normally she is unaware of the monitor function but that when she is speaking about technical things she is ill-acquainted with, like house-buying, then she gets the monitor sensations, but stronger than in English.

Matz is a Dutch musician. He reports that his language correction behaviour is similar to the pattern he is conscious of when learning a jazz arrangement. In the case of the music he does the following:

- he plays it through once
- he re-plays the tricky bits
- he puts the music into his abdomen (at this point he caressed his lower stomach in a clockwise direction)
- then he goes off and does something "easy", like watching TV or talking to his wife. While this is happening he can feel the music playing itself in his stomach.

Matz reports that he corrects language from his stomach too. He says that for him rightness and wrongness in English is a question of rhythm, and rhythm is something he lives in his stomach. If the rhythm is "wormy", like the order of these letters, then something is out of place and he wants to put it right.

Mainly auditory monitors

Pat is English and works in Spain. When she is speaking Spanish she is aware of two voices that comment on what she is saying. They both seem to well up from below her head and to come up through her head and out towards the front. The left hand voice, that comes up the left side of her head is gentle, kind and friendly. When this voice picks out a mistake she is making it is easy to want to correct it. When the right hand voice tells her about a mistake she does NOT want to correct it. The right hand voice is harsh, strident and very negative.

When Pat made these two voices fully conscious she, and the group round her, were amazed and maybe a little scared. How much is an ability to correct one's language mixed up internally with other self-correctional tendencies? Where did the right hand voice come from and does it affect the person in other, non-linguistic ways?

The monitor, as in Pat's case above, can be either positive and useful or negative and angering. Izumi is from Japan and she often spoke to the group about her Japanese personality and her English one. She describes her language monitor as a personality inside her- she feels the person within and in speaking about her she points to her chest. The person inside TELLS her about her mistakes, especially grammar ones, and when the mistake is particularly bad, she hears the voice as a kind of shriek. Prior to this session on language monitors we had often observed that Izumi, when she wanted to express something to the group, seemed to be in a sort of wrestling match with herself, with her arms moving in and out from her chest.

Izumi told us that sometimes she wanted to get this “correction personality “ out of her chest and to “throw her away “.

Maybe with Izumi we are back to the area of Stevick in his twenties unable to speak German in Germany through internalised fear of making mistakes. How would Izumi feel in the German high-school where mistakes are divided into normal ones and “grave mistakes “. For Izumi these “grave mistakes” might generate her inner shriek. The odd thing is that these German gymnasium mortal sins are trivia like omitting third person “s”.... they are mostly slips, and minor ones at that.

Mainly visual monitors

When John speaks Russian or German his monitor is sometimes active while he is speaking and sometimes active before he speaks. He reckons his pre-speech monitor is very helpful. He gets an abstract, visual representation of the “shape “ of the syntax and grammar he will use when he gets his turn in the conversation. Usually this creative monitor work leads him to say things fully and correctly. You may well want to know what John exactly means by “abstract visualisation of the grammar “- he found it hard to tell me more- he was very clear about the fact that this visualisation had absolutely nothing to do with seeing words in his mind’s eye. Sometimes John notices things going wrong while he is speaking. This is disastrous and robs him of confidence and flow. This “during “ monitor is as unhelpful to him as his pre-monitor is helpful.

In contrast to John’s abstract visual monitor, Margareta from Sweden visualises the words of the sentence she is saying as they go wrong.. Her monitor comes on while she is speaking and if something goes wrong she sees the words somewhere above her and usually in typewritten letters. The moment she sees the mistake she quickly reformulates.

Mixed monitors

Charlie is from South Germany and he never experiences his monitor during an utterance. It is there after he speaks or before.

The pre-speech monitor works visually: he will be searching for the right word or phrase... when it comes, it comes in picture form. Straight out in front of him he sees the target phrase in printed letters against a white background. This pre-speech monitor works on words and phrases only.

His post-speech monitor is quite different. He sometimes gets a bad sensation in his stomach about the syntax he has just used and this prompts him to quickly reformulate.

So What ?

In Charlie's group we spent maybe an hour finding out something about the way different people's monitors work. This work is both intense in the concentration it demands and pretty emotional. There was a lot going on internally among people I was not working directly with.

I asked for feedback and Jaap, from Holland, asked a useful, short, sharp question: "Ok, so what?"

This is a question that any professional excited by new discoveries needs to be asked and to somehow answer.

Here are some of my answers to Jaap's dry question:

1. The main form of language correction is self-correction. I want to be able to map how this happens and how teacher correction and peer correction influence the work of the language monitor inside each person. Am I helping a student to self-correct when I offer external correction? Are some of the students who demand more teacher correction thinking constructively or are they driven by Izumi's shriek?

2. After 30 years teaching English very much in the dark as to the students' inner processes, I am delighted that NLP (Neuro-Linguistic-Programming) has given me a few tools to try and find out a bit about what goes on inside the language province of the students' brains.

I want to apply the same techniques to other areas of our work. When an experienced teacher plans a lesson, what is actually happening inside? Maybe it is different from the linear process the Cambridge teacher training courses propose to their trainees?

3. Over the past five years I have become more and more aware that students learn a lot of English when you ask them to notice their own process and speak about it to others. The processes they explore can be general things like how they eat pizza and how mood affects the way they walk. Process is a marvellous topic of investigation in the FL classroom because students have usually neither thought about it or spoken about it before. They come to it fresh AND through English. This invests English with a relevance it does not have when they are forced to use it to answer flabby comprehension questions round a text they care little about.

Uncovering relatively hidden processes like the workings of the language monitor carries more excitement for the students and is more technically relevant than finding out about how they eat pizza. This kind of investigation draws the group really close together, providing you don't introduce such work too early in the life of a group, before trust has had time to build up.

Thank you, Jaap, for being unimpressed by my research enthusiasm and for asking the central question that must be put to anybody working in an applied field:

"Ok, so what?"