

## **Belief Systems in Language Learning, in Training and in Culture studies**

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#### **Introduction**

Let me introduce you to my ex-student of English ( EFL) , Robert. It was working with him that began to convince me of the practical validity of Gregory Bateson's hierarchy of logical levels. Bateson proposes this set of levels which he says will be present in any human encounter:

Beyond, what is higher than self

Self identity

Convictions, values beliefs

Abilities/skills

Behaviour

Environment

Let me show you how the above scheme helped me deal with the teaching situation Robert presented me with. He arrived on the Monday morning asking me, in a thick and powerful French accent, to help him to pronounce English better. All week I used his time and the group's time offering him intensive phonological correction. What was clear by Friday was that such correction had had virtually no effect on the way he pronounced English sounds. I took him to pub to find out how he felt about all this. He was aware that there had been no improvement but could not say why. In Bateson's terms it was that clear the problem manifested

itself at the level of “behaviour”, but that my attempts and his attempts to correct the behaviour had been ineffective.

In Bateson thinking this would suggest that root of the problem lay buried in a higher logical level.

My next hypothesis was that Robert was maybe deficient at the next level up, the level of language skill and ability. To test this out, I spoke to him in Italian, as, were he to be lacking in mimetic language learning ability, his Italian might well be as Gallic-sounding as his English. This was not the case, however; he spoke Italian with a slight French accent, not the extreme French accent he had in English. He was clearly a moderately gifted learner of foreign phonologies.

This took me up to the **Convictions, beliefs, Values** level. I discovered that most of the clients who Robert worked with as a lawyer on the South East French Coast were wealthy North Americans, Dutch and Brits. He worked with them mainly in English and in some way, felt threatened by their power and wealth. My guess is that his strong French accent in English served him as an internal protection against these self-assured, overbearing foreigners.

In the remaining week I had with him it was clear that I was not going to be able to help Robert change or modify these beliefs, deep-seated as they were, and so we agreed that I would let up on the sustained and useless correction I had been doing, rather concentrating on helping him improve areas of language where he was open to help.

The Bateson logical levels thinking frame helped me see Robert’s problem more clearly and stop banging my head into his behavioural brick wall. I did not help him solve his problem but at least I stopped trying to do so in ways that were 100% doomed to failure and we were able to work together on other areas of language, like lexis and grammar, where Robert made good progress.

### **Phonology as an indicator of a learner’s deep attitudes towards L2**

I think it is fair to say that people learning an L2 who manage to articulate it in a fairly native-sounding way are at some level congruent with the way that language is, with its values and with the way its native speakers think and feel. These learners have managed to “surrender” to the sound patterns, to the rhythm, to the music of the L2, and this indicates that they have modified their belief system to accept the values inherent in BEING in the new language.

Learners who impose the music of their mother tongue on the L2, thus mangling and distorting it, reveal an underlying, unconscious belief in the superiority of their original language. I can think of many examples of L2 speakers, like Robert, who express a conscious wish to improve their pronunciation, go in courses to achieve this, and who fail miserably. I guess this is because their linguistic superiority complex is well buried in the folds of their unconscious mind.

There are three instances I can think of in which poor L2 phonology is probably not indicative of negative attitudes towards the foreign language:

- a) when the learner has been taught by an excellent instructor with bad pronunciation
- b) when the learner has poor linguistic intelligence ( in Bateson terms when there is a deficiency at the ability level)

- c) when the learner comes from a non-tone mother tongue and is learning a tone language like Yoruba or Chinese. ( Here we know from brain scanning research that the non-tone learner is trying to use an area of the right hemisphere to do a job that the native Chinese or Yoruba speaker uses an area in the left hemisphere to accomplish.)

I am sure that the editor of this publication would welcome the views of you, the readers, as to how far phonology can be sensibly used as a guided to hidden learner beliefs about the target language.

### **How our language students' beliefs can be changed**

I make no apology in this article, for writing anecdotally. Your life so far, dear reader, has been a longish anecdote and so has mine! Illustrative stories are an age-old device for teaching..... so let me tell you about Ivan.

Ivan was a one-to-one student of mine whose level of spoken English was upper-intermediate but whose ability to write English was wobbly elementary. His declared aim was to get over this writer's block , as he himself described the situation.

We had 10 ninety minute periods together and much of the work we did was at lively behaviour level: we did a wide range of useful and interesting writing exercises, including speedy competitive ones, as Ivan had been Russia's third fastest sprint cyclist and was quick-paced in everything he did well, including speaking English.

The break-thru came in our seventh session: suddenly Ivan began telling me about his teacher of Russian, a woman who taught him over the last three years at primary school. This woman, as he remembered her, was a sadistic bitch, who one hundred percent disliked him and always gave him the lowest marks she could for his written homework. He wanted to be sure that it was not just a paranoid fantasy of his that she had it in for him, so, one day, he copied out the composition of the boy who normally came top of the class, introducing one of two small changes here and there, and handed it in to her. As usual he got the lowest mark in the group while his friend, with virtually the same text, got top marks!

Ivan spent at least 45 minutes of that seventh period venting his spleen against this monster of an unhappy woman. He also told me that his feeling that he could never write a line correctly and fluently in any language was planted in his soul during those three years. He also told me that He had virtually forgotten about this part of his childhood experience and that this woman coming back to mind was a shock.

Ivan had now unearthed the belief that this teacher had seeded in his heart: I CANNOT WRITE.

The mental act of realizing this had an immediate effect on his writing performance.....in our last three sessions his pen was unshackled and he began to write with something of the same fluency and correctness as when he spoke. He suddenly found pleasure in writing. Naturally I was overjoyed at what he had achieved in terms of belief change.

### **The power of a person's belief system in a business setting**

Failure to be aware of Bateson's thinking can lead good, decent managers to waste their time helping a subordinate, but in ways that bring no useful, lasting results.

Let me take the case of small company what we will call Smiths. Smith's managing director noticed that one of his best middle managers, with whom he was also linked by bonds of friendship, was doing a good job generally, but was plagued by her inability to get on top of and stay on top of her paperwork.

He was convinced that the problem lay at behaviour level and that all he had to do was to model better ways of doing things that would lead to an empty in-tray, a full trash-can and plenty completed stuff in her out-tray.

He spent three weeks working as this middle manager's understudy and within three days her three foot high in-tray was down to a reasonable paper thickness and her work became streamlined and efficient. It looked as if the problem might have been solved.

The managing director went back to his own work and within a month the situation reverted to exactly the way it had been before he intervened. He had shown this lady intelligent behaviours/techniques for coping with her tasks but had failed to identify the person's beliefs which included some of these:

- *I can always do this boring stuff tomorrow*
- *I am much better at doing the stuff I like, working with people- this bureaucratic rubbish is not my thing. I am brilliant at dealing with people.*
- *delaying things I hate doing has stood me in good stead all my life.*
- *I really love doing what I am good at....I get real pleasure from it and I do it well*

The managerial intervention described above is a clear illustration of how a person's belief system governs what they do and don't do and how it is impossible to get a person to change a behaviour if this particular practice is internally "defended" by a consciously or unconsciously held belief.

### **The importance of belief systems in teacher training**

There are so-called teacher training courses in Universities round the world in which anodyne information about subjects like the history of methodology is transmitted by traditional lecturers to rows of bored students. I would hesitate to call these sequences of lectures "teacher training". What I refer to here as teacher training are practical workshops that introduce nitty-gritty techniques for trainees to try out in subsequent teaching practice sessions. The CELTA courses would be examples of such genuine training.

In the input workshops the trainer is mainly working with the trainees at behaviour level, answering the trainee question "WHAT shall I do with my students tomorrow?"

When the trainees get up and teach their students the trainer has to work with them at the next level up, that is to say their teaching skill and ability level.

The classroom techniques the trainer demonstrates and the areas of teaching skill where she exhorts the trainee to improve may hit up against inner belief barriers in the trainee. I feel it central to good training that the trainer should be on the lookout for opposed beliefs in her trainees and help the trainees to make such beliefs conscious and facilitate their expression to the group.

Once a belief is consciously expressed the trainee can responsibly decide to modify the belief or to reject that aspect of the training course that clashes with her belief.

Let me give you an example from an NLP course for EFL teachers that I was involved in some years ago. I could see that Paco was not finding the course easy to cope with. By early week two he was showing clear signs of unhappiness and incongruence.

I did a one-to-one beliefs exploration with him and discovered that his devout Roman Catholic belief system clashed with what he perceived to be the NLP belief system. Life key words for him included **PATIENCE, HUMILITY, SURRENDER**. “*I hate it, Mario, when you do those slick NLP tricks, and I hate it even more when they work with on other people in the group*”

It was extremely useful for me to realise just how wrong much of NLP was for the way Paco organized his world, and it made me feel much empathy with him over the rest of the two week course. I was happy to admit to myself and to him that much of what I had taught the group was rightly and conscientiously wrong for him in the light of his deeply held belief system.

Gregory Bateson’s Logical Levels thinking frame has led me to

- a) become a bit more aware of my own and other people’s conscious and unconscious belief systems
- b) become more respectful of other people’s value construction frames
- c) realise that responsibility for changing or modifying a system of beliefs and values must lie entirely with the person themselves and is not a decision for a temporary facilitator to take.

### **The Logical levels as a key tool in understanding culture**

When we enter a new culture we are acutely aware of the three lower levels of the Bateson hierarchy: environment  
behaviour  
skill

On the environmental level we notice the shapes and colours of the buildings, the types of trees, the open spaces, the world of sound or silence all around us etc....

On the behaviour level we notice how people walk, how they talk, how close to or faraway from each other they sit or stand. We notice the ways they do things like cooking, expressing regret, making a bed etc....

On the skill/ability level we notice how well they drive, how fantastically they sing, how excellent their use of time is etc.....

All these observations are valid and interesting but they remain at the “dead” level of a Linnaeus type of classification until we also try to understand the culture at its belief system level.

I would suggest that behind many environmental features and behind most behaviours and

excellent performances there is a belief. Let me offer some examples of this:

In Malay culture, when eating with the fingers of your right hand, you are not allowed pass another person something with your physically clean left hand, unless you first grasp the wrist of the left hand with your right hand.

Behind this behaviour lies the strong feeling that the left hand is the unholy hand and that it is with your left hand that you do your nether ablutions after defecating. You can only use your left hand to pass somebody something if you endow it, via touch, with the power and virtue of the right hand.

In Japanese culture a person will never blow their nose in public. This must only be done in the toilet. It is acceptable to breathe snot in when you are in a public situation.

Behind this behaviour are strong beliefs about cleanliness being of paramount importance. (The Japanese find all Europe to be dirty, with the partial exception of Switzerland). In this culture there is horror at all bodily excretions, including snot, *hana* (nose) *kso* (shit).

In Italian culture you lay change on the surface between you and the other person (counter, table etc) but in giving to a beggar you typically put the money onto his palm.

The belief behind these two behaviours are to do with money being dirty and with the receiving of money being somehow degrading. You reduce the bad feeling of the exchange by making it less personal when giving change.

In UK culture you typically put money on the beggar's box or hat while in a shop you give change into the assistant's hand.

What are the English values behind this typical behaviour? I am not sure that I understand them and herein, for me, lies the thrill of anthropological study, or the study of culture and cultures. One of the reasons why WATCHING THE ENGLISH, by Kate Fox, is such a brilliant addition to what we know about the culture of those large off-shore European islands is that Fox keeps ferreting around trying to uncover the values and beliefs that lie behind English behaviours like incessant talk about the weather, queuing at bus stops and invisible cueing in pubs etc....

### **Plea for dialogue**

I feel, and this a strong belief of mine, that there is something oddly out-of-date about a long monologue, like this article, and that dialogue, or a multi-voice conversation, would make much better sense. Please send Bonnie Tsai, our editor, your experiences in the area of dealing with your own beliefs and dealing with those of others. ( [REDACTED]@hotmail.com) Please send her, too, your disagreements with your impression of what I have written here and your counter points of view. There may be places in which I have been too quick and shunted things together too much and you might want me to try and "unpack" them a bit more.

Think about it.....then get on the keyboard and write what you have in mind.