



Ignorance Is Strength

By Ewandro Magalhães

In 1988, I was a graduate student in Constance, West Germany. The Seoul Olympics were upon us. I would compromise on anything as long as I did not miss the men's 100-meter dash final, the long-awaited confrontation between the legendary Carl Lewis and the Jamaican-turned-Canadian Ben Johnson.

The television in my dorm room had been found on the street two days prior in a popular German exchange tradition called *Sperrmül*. This is where you take all the stuff you no longer want and put it on the curb so that passersby can look through it and take whatever they want.

The television in question was a battered black and white 14-incher, but, much to my surprise, it worked fine. Just for half an hour, though. At the end of 30 minutes the circuitry heated up and the image got fuzzy. A few seconds more and it all spiraled into an indistinct vortex, with the sound soon going out as well. At that point, the television had to be turned off and left to cool for another half an hour.

In time, I devised an ingenious way to keep abreast of the news and follow at least the Formula 1 races. I would switch the television on and off at timed 30-minute intervals. With the

help of the precisely-timed airings for German television programs, I did just fine. That is, until the 100-meter Olympic final, when the schedule went south and there was no telling when the race would start. I prayed that my 30-minute allowance would hold long enough. It did not. The athletes were barely off their starting blocks when the image of the racetrack merged into an indecipherable, soundless contrail. I spent the rest of the night, several time zones away, desperately turning the clunky channel knob for 30 minutes at a time, all to no avail.

Competitive Advantage

Back in the day, a sprinter's reaction time—that is, how fast the racer reacts to the firing of the gun—was believed to be a genetic trait. Ben Johnson was obviously gifted in that regard and spring-loaded ahead of his adversaries. But I could bet all my chips that Carl Lewis would eventually recover the lost terrain and overtake the Canadian, who looked too bulky to be fast.

In high performance sports, success is a rather predictable business. A simple test of an athlete's muscle fibers will indicate clearly the disciplines at which he or she will excel. Champions are selected with great

care early on, in a process that involves popularization and meticulous screening.

When I later transitioned from fitness to interpreting, I thought it only natural that the same logic would apply. I tended to believe that great interpreters were born and privileged by a fully multilingual upbringing, with two or more languages occurring naturally and effortlessly. In my mind, a top-notch interpreter would necessarily have been born into a fully bilingual environment. Success required a natural yet absolute mastery of one's working languages without a trace of accent. The ability to interpret simultaneously was, just like the sprinter's reaction time, a genetically encoded, unalterable attribute. Or so I thought.

My subsequent career as a trainer of interpreters would soon disprove this theory. As soon became evident, the notion that interpreting results from innate talent is just the first of a series of misconceptions about the trade. In a training environment, candidates with perfect linguistic credentials tend to have the most difficulty getting past the first exercises. While they rely on a vocabulary that is far more complete than that of their peers, they tend to be too demanding of themselves and come to expect a

level of performance that is simply unattainable for someone just starting out. Their frustration mounts when the next classmate in the interpreting booth does surprisingly well despite many perceived shortcomings.

Uncooking the Soup

Humans are competitive by nature, but our self-knowledge is always limited. The better our skills, and our awareness of such skills, the greater our self-imposed demands. Upon realizing one's comparative edge—say, one's fully bilingual abilities—it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the weight of the responsibility to perform at a superior level. With that responsibility comes fear, and performance suffers.

But there is more involved here. An interesting process goes on inside the fully bilingual mind. In time, different languages and cultural experiences blend into one another in a seamless flow. The many semantic constructs, and the different rational and emotional responses elicited by each, eventually fuse into a melting pot of common experience. Objects simply go by different names, in different languages, but their labels are not thought of in terms of equivalences. In a fully bilingual mind, what we would call “interpreting” occurs naturally, in an unconscious exercise that will later make the process seem rather artificial when one has to interpret purposefully and look for synonyms.

Now, for those of us who learned a foreign language through conscious effort, there will always be the perception of two distinct worlds: our own and that of others. While they touch one another, they never fully intersect. Communication then becomes an accumulation of linguistic and metalinguistic mechanisms, with much attention given to gestures and subtle

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intonation changes. This usually leads to greater reliance on ancillary inputs such as body language, and to a more proficient use of less language-dependent coping tactics such as segmentation, delaying the response, or reconstructing meaning from the context.¹ With the right personality and hard work, such a process, although equally unconscious, may work to one's advantage in the interpreting booth.

On the surface, this analysis may seem obvious or common sense, but it lends itself to rather interesting inferences. The frontier between language and cognition is still fuzzy, with little consensus so far as to what comes first—speech or thought. Despite this lack of conclusiveness, it seems clear that such things as our personalities, emotional reactions, prejudices, and how we view the world are, in great part, defined by the cultures in which we were raised. And the way in which we acquired our languages will greatly determine our inflexibilities, the ability to improvise, and our informality or formality. Just as the use of our thumbs and our dexterity differentiated us from other primates, gradually allowing us tactile and manipulative experiences that would create new synaptic pathways and ultimately enhance our cognitive potential, so, too, our speech and the virtues or limitations of our languages configure and discipline our way of thinking and how we function.

For most of us, white is a well-

defined color, or the plain absence thereof, the opposite of black. Yet for an Inuit, whose surroundings are most always snowy, white is a continuum of numerous shades, each carrying a specific label and triggering a linguistic and emotional reaction of its own. For different yet comparable reasons, some African desert tribes will have no word for green, but six names for red. What for most Westerners is an insipid linguistic attribute, a bland adjective, to an Inuit or a speaker of a Tuareg language requires the mastery of a far vaster vocabulary, with sensorial and rational implications that are *literally* visible.

Language acquisition is an individualized process with a collective counterpoint where our choices are validated or refuted by our environment and labeled as “successes” or “failures” depending on how high they score vis-à-vis a common repository of cultural references. These references transcend the mere linguistic realm. For example, Caucasians usually think of a zebra as a white animal with black stripes, but a native African may see it as a white-striped black horse. A person born and raised in the U.S. will understand the practicality of killing two birds with one stone, but a Brazilian like me will definitely picture two rabbits being struck dead by a single blow of a club.

Choices of this sort tend to occur naturally, without much conscious elaboration. Yet, as interpreters ►

or translators, irrespective of our bilingualism, several of these conceptual and linguistic cross references need to be deconstructed. An opposite process is set in motion, forcing us to retrace our steps and undo associations made long ago. We must see the world again through two distinct sets of lenses, which, in the case of bilinguals, had merged long ago. In a certain way, we need to unlearn.

This concept cannot help but bring to mind Winston Smith, the main character in George Orwell's *1984*, overwhelmed by the cruelty of a world where truth and lie were relative notions and where "stupidity was as necessary as intelligence, and as difficult to attain." In a funny way, in interpreting, as in the surreal Orwellian world, ignorance is strength, too.

Beyond the Edge

It is great to rely on some competitive advantage, whether it be a privileged reaction time if you are a sprinter, or a prodigious memory if you are an interpreter. However, to keep ahead of the curve and sustain your lead without fear, you need more than just a head start.

The morning after my sleepless night in Constance, the *Südkurier*, the local newspaper, featured a photo of Ben Johnson crossing the finish line, his arm provocatively raised in victory while still in motion. A new world record had been set: 9:79 seconds. But to everyone's dismay, Johnson tested positive for performance-enhancing drugs a few hours after the race.

As it turns out, our competitive edge, whatever it is, will carry us only halfway. The home stretch will always require much sweat, dedication, and, of course, fair play.

Despite his head start, Johnson's success was short-lived. He had to

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surrender his medal to his rival and was banned from sports for life. The flying Canadian, the Big Ben as they used to call him, and the second-best sprinter in the world was turned off and left to cool. Just like my cheap television set.

Note

1. For a description of these and other coping tactics see pages 191-201 of Daniel Gile's *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995).

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Additional Reading

Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct, How the Mind Creates Language* (HarperCollins, 2000).

Berlitz, Charles. *Native Tongues* (Castle Books, 2009).

Bertone, Laura E. *The Hidden Side of Babel* (Argentina: Evolucion, 2006).