
BABEL

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INTRODUCTION

Commenting on the language of mystics, Staal observes, “The view that there are realms of reality where ordinary language is not applicable is not, of course, paradoxical, inconsistent or contradictory. Such a situation is quite common not only in philosophy, but also elsewhere, e.g. mathematics or engineering, where for that reason artificial languages are constructed” (Staal 1975, 53).

ELABORATING ON STAAL’S STATEMENT

Staal is right of course, but I think we should extend his statement even further. Every profession and discipline, and every variety of social subgroups like families, adolescents, hooligans, prostitutes and thieves, and according to anthropologists, each culture, each religion has its own language, its own shorthand notions, its own neologisms, its own jargon. Let’s take all this together under the name of ‘specific language’ (SL). Each of them also has its own rituals and practices in short its ‘specific actions’ (SA). Moreover, there is more to it, like some specifics seemingly out of consciousness not to be grasped under the heading of SL or SA, but still learned what might be put under the name of Polanyi’s ‘tacit knowledge 1’ (TK for short).

I am sure that both SL and SA are always taught together in every professional training program, be it the streetwise on-the-job training of a dope peddler or a highly sophisticated academic training of, say, a neurosurgeon. Together with this go both the TK and also the *attitude* that seems to be attached to any specific profession, i.e., the professional attitude (PA) though this may be seen as a combination of the other factors. Within each ‘profession’ an apprentice is introduced to his craft by a combination of SL, SA, TK and PA, more often than not after some explicit or implicit initiation rituals, also specific to his job-to-be. Within most professions apprentices are—still—trained in ways quite similar to the guilds of old until, at last, they deliver their master piece or presentation in whatever form the profession requests.

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Thereafter they are considered as full professionals, be it carpenter, physician or philosopher. They act, behave, speak and trade *as* carpenter, physician or philosopher.

An evident example among physicians is that any physician will recognize instantly the typical surgeon and will distinguish such an illustrious colleague easily from, say, a paediatrician. Indeed, many jokes are constructed about such well recognized stereotypes, as for instance the following admittedly matured one: A physician knows everything but can't do anything, a surgeon can do everything but doesn't know anything, a psychiatrist doesn't know anything and can't do anything, and a pathologist knows everything *and* can do anything, but... just too late.

Inversely, each *SL, SA* and all the rest refer to a specific body of objectives, activities, concepts, etcetera, that should be understood within the framework of some discipline. One *is* an example of some specific profession, one radiates some specific profession and one demonstrates the typical attitude of that profession. As the saying goes, a man chooses his job, the job chooses the man. One might therefore sustain that a real professional is wed to his profession.

TWO(?) DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

Now, what does it mean to know more than one language? Emperor Charles v (1500-58) is reputed to have remarked that he spoke Diets (vulgar tongue of the low countries of his time) to his horse, French to the lower classes and Spanish to his equals (some claim Italian to his mistress). According to this—speaking as a Dutch *Homo sapiens* and no horse—deplorable statement it seems to allude to some kind of value judgment attached to the different languages. Possibly old Charles v understood well that everyone who is versed in a second language knows by experience that some words, some verbs, some expressions, some feelings are not translatable into another language without loss of meaning and/or feeling, or needs to be elaborated with—sometimes long—additional explanations. Obviously in Charles v's view, an inhabitant of the Netherlands needed less airs and graces than an equal; possibly the horse responded more favorably to the Diets instructions than to other languages its owner may have used.

The first answer to the question posed by the editor: Yes, indeed, 'the use of languages and discourses different from your own has always some effect.'

PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE(S)

1. The language and discourse of an academic physician and gradually also of a teacher is the one that I am familiar with, as I was trained that way.
2. My second 'language/discourse' is a peculiar one; a formal training in that language or discourse does not even exist. Faced with a complex

job and hoping to receive some guidance I sought advice by interviewing systematically five chairs and two emeriti chairs in ear-nose-throat surgery, a chair of anaesthesiology and a chair of histology. This was undertaken in preparation of and prior to the task of leading an academic medical department. This resulted in a kind of blueprint of such a task (Feenstra 1996) which was executed according to plan (Feenstra 2005). Only a few years later a 'cursory' observant book was published with a similar intention (Fritts 1997). The language that I allude to is one that gradually develops in the kind of learning by doing processes as summarized in the table.

3. My third 'language' is the one of philosophy.

ACTIVITY	FUNCTION	CUSTOMER
tuition	teacher	students
training	tutor	residents
post-academic	lecturer	colleagues
patients-care	medical specialist	patients
research	investigator, coordinator	peers, residents, students
management	manager	academic and hospital authorities, staff
committees	political	multiple

TABLE. Tasks and responsibilities of a chair of an academic clinical department (Feenstra 1996).

INTERACTIONS

A variety of different 'languages' are needed for the many tasks of an academic (teaching and research), ENT-surgeon (being simultaneously a sort of intellectual and an artisan) and physician who needs to incorporate traits of both care and cure. Each role needs its own 'lingo' and meta-language.

Within our ENT-Department we need to collaborate with speech therapists, audiologists (a specialty for physicists) and psychologists to name but a few. It is clear that to communicate with these non-medics one should at least know enough of their trade (and vice versa) to explain the specific help needed for each patient, be it diagnostically or therapeutically. Part of the training of all of us is—explicitly—to learn enough of the other's trade to be able to communicate in an effortless way and to understand the problems and the facilities of the other areas. It goes without saying that we meet regularly, informally and formally.

The variety of tasks and subjects of the table asks for different speech acts and different styles, and one has to be able to communicate with all these 'customers' in order to navigate in an orderly way among the rocks, crags and reefs that might turn up in each of them.

Moreover, it is clear that reciprocity exists. Each language between two people can go both ways, according to information theory from source through a channel to a receiver with risks of misunderstanding at each 'station.'

To make it even a little more complicated by taking one example only, though I am sure many more could be found. There is the curious fact that some activity may serve more than one object, i.e., an operation performed with a trainee may serve patient care, training and tuition, and frequently also research in one and the same session. However, each one of these objectives has its own 'discourse'—features, demands, problems and backgrounds. Indeed, occasionally the demands of any of these sub-objectives may ask for a different approach that may contradict and even conflict with the interests of one of the other objectives.

SO?

I never worked outside academia, so I have left out money, insurance companies and non-academia politics. But even without that, clearly the number of languages and discourses easily create a local Tower of Babel. Is there a way out of such an imminent danger? I think there is.

The very first requirement is self-knowledge. The logical conclusion thereof is that one will never reach the Olympic pinnacle in each task, any more that anyone will receive a Nobel Prize for literature in more than one idiom. Therefore, it is wise to delegate some of the tasks to those who are better trained or have better capacities in those games. By selecting a team of people each one being preferably competent or even expert in some game, it may be possible to create a crew which together is fit for the whole. And yes, one should be able to communicate with each and every member of that team. Basically becoming as Lwoff says '*a bon patron*' (Lwoff 1965). Unfortunately, academia of today with its fierce competition and loss of humanities does not impress one as being the best nursery of character and, moreover, not every dean is interested in or even able to select his dons on grounds of character, among which I think should be included an understanding of at least the basics of the unspoken and spoken languages of one's collaborators.

NOTE

1 Someone learning from a teacher must try to combine mentally the movements which the performer combines practically and he must combine them in a pattern similar to the performer's pattern of movements. Two kinds of indwelling meet here. The performer co-ordinates his moves by dwelling in them as parts of his body, while the watcher tries to correlate these moves by seeking to dwell in them from outside. He dwells in these moves by interiorizing them. By such exploratory indwelling the pupil gets the feel of a master's skill and may learn to rival them (Polanyi 1966, 29-30).

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