

Why Are Some Languages Harder to Teach and Learn Than Others?

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Abstract

In theory, all modern spoken languages should be equally difficult to teach and learn, since they all fall within two rather narrow parameters: They must be complex enough to describe the modern world yet simple enough to enable mass communication among its speakers. Moreover, empirically speaking, all normal children learning their native languages do so at approximately the same rate and with the same competence, progressing from easy to more complex grammar and syntax in the same way. Why then, do some languages seem more difficult than others? The difficulty of learning any L2 derives from two sources: hardened L1 language habits trying to cope with contrasting L2 choices; and unfamiliarity with unique L2 characteristics which cause faulty language expectations. The number and difficulty of new L2 choices should be more or less equal for all languages based on the theoretical and empirical considerations described above. It is claimed here that the latter (faulty expectations) causes some languages to be more difficult to cope with. For example, Chinese is indeed harder to learn for English speakers than most other languages because of at least two faulty language expectations: 1) English speakers expect the main subject of a sentence to be near the beginning, with supporting details following relative pronouns. However, since Chinese doesn't have relative pronouns, the details come first and the subject, or main focus of the sentence, comes later. This is very disorienting for an English speaker who expects the important information to come first. 2) English speakers expect every word to have basically one meaning, but Chinese is characterized by hundreds of homophones which causes English speakers great confusion, since they do not know whether the word that they had already "learned" is indeed the one they are now encountering. This causes inordinate confusion.

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