
I once served as interpreter for some colleagues who were interviewing an elderly Soviet emigrée, Mrs. G. As she described her life in Russia, Mrs. G. explained that she had lived in Moscow from the age of 6, and before that in a small village... at which point in the story she suddenly switched into another language. When I interrupted, with apologies, asking if she might speak Russian again, she said with some surprise “Oh dear, wasn’t I speaking Russian?” and she resumed her story in Russian for a few phrases before lapsing into the other language, again without noticing.

“I don’t think I can be of much help,” I said to my colleagues, “I have no idea what she’s saying.”

The interviewer named Sandy, however, was looking dumbstruck. “I know what she’s saying!” she said. “She’s speaking Yiddish. She’s saying that the situation in the village was really difficult, and her parents thought she’d have a better life with her mother’s sister in Moscow...” the reason Sandy was so amazed, she told us later, was that she had not heard Yiddish spoken since the age of four when her grandmother died, and would have sworn she did not remember a word. As it was, she was able to understand everything she heard, but could not produce even the simplest question back to Mrs. G. in Yiddish. Thus our interview took on a peculiar pattern: I asked a question in Russian, Mrs. G. responded in Yiddish, Sandy glossed her answer in English, and so it went.

Had Franco Fabbro’s excellent introduction to the Neurolinguistics of Bilingualism been available at that time, this experience would have sent me scurrying to the library in search of a copy. How was it that Mrs. G.’s memories were so inextricably bound up with the language she spoke at the time events occurred? How was it that Sandy could retain a language she believed she had no memory of, and how could she understand without being able to speak? I had learned Russian only in late adolescence, yet I could switch freely between it and English. Mrs. G. and Sandy had each become bilingual in childhood, (usually the ‘gold standard’ of language learning) and yet seemed to have in some ways more restricted access to what must have been greater knowledge. Welcome to the neurolinguistics of bilingualism.
Fabbro begins the book with a general overview of the study of language and the brain. Language is defined in terms of its use of the vocal-auditory channel and its structural property of double articulation (i.e., patterning at two levels: words and sounds) and the subfields of phonetics/phonology, syntax, morphology and semantics are introduced.

Chapters 2-4 outline the anatomical structures of the brain and vocal-auditory channel which subserve speech production and perception, and sketch out a brief history of research on language and the brain. Having done this, Fabbro goes on to present a comprehensive, but always readable discussion of aphasias (losses of linguistic faculty as a consequence of cerebral lesions).

The second half of the book is devoted to topics particular to bilingualism, including the sorts of issues raised by Mrs. G.'s interview: the relationship between language and various types of memory (implicit and explicit, long-term and short-term), voluntary and involuntary switching and mixing of languages, a neurolinguistic model of simultaneous interpretation, and so on.

Fabbro ends with a couple of more speculative chapters, one on forgotten and invented languages (such as shamanistic or ritual languages), and another on the possible role of language diversity in maintaining biogenetic diversity in human evolution.

In his writing, Fabbro strikes exactly the right balance — assuming an intelligent but nonspecialist reader — and avoids either patronizing or excluding his audience. The organization of the book is also extremely user-friendly. Each of the chapters is a concise (5-10 page) treatment of a particular topic, preceded by a one-paragraph summary outline.

Throughout the book, Fabbro emphasizes the point that although monolingualism has long been considered the norm by scholars and clinicians, it is in fact the case that at least 50% of the world’s people speak more than one language or dialect. Thus, Fabbro argues, researchers should not treat bilingualism as exceptional but instead should demand, of any neurolinguistic model, that it allow for the representation of multiple language systems.

Anyone interested in the cerebral organization of language will find this book a superb introduction and a valuable teaching resource. Its comprehensive scope and accessible style make it appropriate for a wide readership, from physicians and cognitive scientists to language teachers. But even aside from its usefulness to professionals, Fabbro’s introduction to the neurolinguistics of bilingualism will be engaging reading for many casual readers: including those who — like me, Sandy, and Mrs. G. — have witnessed firsthand the complicated interplay of languages and memory, and have wondered what science could tell us about it.

In this terse book, Harris makes a far-reaching case that a distinctive representational capacity — imagination — is the springboard of human culture and cognition, historically and ontogenetically. He points to a leap in human imagination occurring some 40,000 years ago. Cave painting and ritualized burial practices, among other artifacts, are seen to rest on the same qualities that undergird children’s pretend play: Artifacts or props are collectively produced and understood; they serve to generate an imagined world separate from immediate reality, and require a capacity to move back and forth between these worlds. Harris starts out by documenting these capacities in the pretend play of 2-year-olds. He then looks at how imaginative processes, emerging in early childhood, support a host of cognitive, cultural enterprises.

The benefits of “simulation” are particularly dramatic. Harris reviews evidence to show that children who are distinctively engaged in role play — simulating other points of view — exhibit higher levels of mental state understanding as compared to children who are involved impersonal, solitary forms of pretend. He shows that the cognitive “spotlighting” effect of taking a point of view, reported in the fictional text processing of adults, is present in young children. Equally, children’s emotional response to fiction depends upon their absorption in the story, especially in terms of adoption of a character’s point of view.

Imagination and emotion are considered to be primitively and adaptively linked. Based on a thorough analysis of current theory and evidence, Harris concludes that imagined inputs directly drive emotions. The first-order response of human beings is to become absorbed in fiction, responding as if the self were really involved as an actor or witness. What develops is not the capacity to distinguish fiction from reality so much as the capacity to moderate the initial tendency toward absorption. More widely, the link between imagination and emotion is a boon to human planning and communication. Harris cites the work of Damasio and colleagues who report the devastating effects of brain damage that isolates thinking from its emotional connection. Without this connection, perfectly intelligent individuals become hopelessly inept in making practical decisions.