

Multiple personalities and languages

A common observation is that people who are fluent in more than one language have a different personality in each language.

The reason is that speaking a language is not just coding your thoughts into words. It is entering into a context. Language is simply the most observable part of a person's thorough participation in a social and cultural situation.

Learning to speak a new language involves learning to enter a new personality. In fact the inability to get out of oneself and into a new self seems to hamper many language learners. What can we learn about this process? Let us examine the condition in which people have multiple personalities to begin with.

What used to be called multiple personality disorder is now called dissociative identity disorder (DID). It is a condition in which the "self" is fragmented into psychic entities or "parts," which assume executive control of the body one at a time. The usual cause of dissociation is severe childhood trauma such as sexual or physical abuse, which causes the child to exit from the first self and enter another that can bear the abuse. After the first split, the child has the ability to make new parts for new problems. The result is that by the time the DID sufferer presents himself or herself to a health professional there may be 10 or 12 parts.

DID sufferers like Sybil and Billy Milligan (see the books by those names) have become famous in the popular press, and Japanese TV seems to report a new case of "taju jinkaku" every month.

The words "dissociation" and "parts" come from modern (in the last 7 or 8 years) understanding of the disorder. The old term "multiple personalities" could be wrongly taken to mean that separate identities were complete and permanent. Today's words imply that the problem is incomplete integration. Successful treatment does not erase the parts, only puts them in touch with each other so they can work as a whole. Those of us who are singletons (as DID folks call us) have different parts, too, but our parts are mostly integrated: we are aware of what we do at

different times and in various moods.

The different parts of a DID sufferer “come out” one at a time and are usually not aware of each other. Each part has its own voice, perceptions, reactions, neuroses, posture, facial features — even blood pressure.

Some DID parts are able to speak foreign languages. The second language may emerge even though the body was raised in a monolingual environment. Obviously, some powerful language learning can take place. That fact is of interest to language professionals.

There are many books about DID. The best are by medical doctors and, surprisingly, philosophers. Members of both professions are doing their best to understand what is going on (what is the nature of a self, how is it formed, and what can go wrong). Professional associations publish informative and useful journals. Mutual help associations are good sources of information, as are the autobiographies of some DID survivors.

The least useful writings are by people who earn income by denying the existence of DID. I suppose such skeptics are to be expected, just as there are people who refuse to admit that the earth is round, but it is annoying to see their sensational headlines when more sober treatments are passed over.

How do DID parts learn languages?

I submitted a query to a magazine written by and for DID survivors. I asked for readers’ ideas on how a DID part can become fluent in a foreign language in spite of having little experience in it. I got a very interesting reply from an American writer and artist I’ll call “Portland.” A victim of childhood sexual abuse, her self shattered into parts when she was a little girl. Her parts are reintegrated now, but her memories are clear and vivid.

Because of childhood abuse, the adult Portland was terrified of having sex with a man. For many years, she dissociated in sexually charged moments. Her mind fled from the scene and was replaced by a part named Rabella who was Italian and spoke no English. When Rabella was out, Portland ceased to exist as a participant but seemed to watch from a safe distance. That worked just fine for having sex, and Rabella even hung around afterwards — she was

a much better cook than Portland, cooked Italian dishes and even translated a cookbook.

Portland said that Rabella and the boyfriend — who spoke no Italian — had many hilarious times together. Portland was not jealous; she was relieved that Rabella could take over and do appropriate things when Portland couldn't handle the situation.

Where did the Italian language ability come from? “Perhaps my brain became so frightened it ran away and ran so far it dredged up as much Italian as it could in a desperate attempt to avoid the terrifying memories/incidents which caused my dissociation in the first place.”

Portland tried to explain. “I've heard that the brain remembers everything it encounters, but of course all the information is stored in inaccessible places — to keep ourselves from going mad, I presume. My brain would have learned some Italian from several experiences: 1) joining a friend's family on her father's business trip to Monte Carlo for 4 days, 2) working as a teacher's aide in a little kids' summer school, where the theme for half the summer was Italy and the Italian language, and 3) skiing over the Swiss-Italian border and having lunch with some Italian family friends.”

Whatever Portland's mind did, it worked. Rabella spoke real Italian, although with a limited vocabulary and perhaps some made-up words in Italian style. “My boyfriend and I tried to remember Rabella's words and phrases, and looked up what we could in an Italian/English dictionary. Most of the words matched words and phrases in the dictionary, and also made sense within the conversations they had.” Portland said “I did not know most of Rabella's words, like ‘picchio’ (woodpecker) and ‘bacio a mi’ (kiss me).”

Fortunately, as Portland recovered, she no longer needed Rabella to stand in for her. As herself, Portland is no prize language student. But when she needed help, she tapped into an extraordinary language ability.

Lessons from DID survivors

The trauma of DID is deplorable, but we can learn some lessons from DID survivors like Portland. First, whatever a person is doing, some part of the mind is hearing and comprehending more detail than

the surface personality can attend to. Second, the mind can concentrate marvelously under certain circumstances. Third, in order to speak another language well, we must enter the mood of the language so thoroughly that verbal aspect of it seems incidental to intense participation in the whole situation.

Don't get me wrong. I am not recommending dissociative identity disorder as a means to language learning (I wouldn't know how to give people DID even if I wanted to). What I am saying is that fluency in a second language means developing a whole repertoire of behaviors. The body must be sensitive to new situations. The hearing system must be attuned to the frequencies, overtones and rhythms of the target language. Control of the speaking muscles, which comes from the same parts of the brain where hearing is accomplished, must also be attuned specifically to the language. Feelings must be within the appropriate range.

Expert language learners tell me that one's base personality is not changed or threatened by "thinking in" a second language — no more than it would be changed or threatened by getting into the mind set for high-jumping. The hardest part may be switching into the new frame of mind when events require it. Switching is easier for some people than for others. More about that in a later column.

This column aims to reconcile the views of language teachers, theorists and bureaucrats. Readers are invited to send e-mail to mrchilds@tokai.or.jp or letters to The Daily Yomiuri. The column will return on August 31.

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