



MICHAEL LONG

Systematic Language Proficiency

When the United States government grades its employees on language proficiency, it uses a functional scale with five main steps. For example, those judged to be at ILR 2 to 4 levels (where ILR stands for Interagency Language Roundtable) have relatively good language skills, although they are not as fluent as someone deemed an ILR 5, the equal of a highly articulate and educated native speaker.

“ILR 2 is equivalent to taking about four to six semesters of language in college,” says Michael Long, a professor of Second Language Acquisition and director of the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultures at the University of Maryland. “Until recently, the government considered ILR 2 a ‘working competence’



level,” says Long. Three years ago, the government decided that federal employees who know a second language as a professional requirement should upgrade from ILR 2 to 3, a jump that would take a speaker who might occasionally make awkward gaffes into someone who can conduct much of their work in the language with very few mistakes.

With funding from the federal government, Long and a team of 14 faculty, Ph.D. candidates and post-docs at Maryland are planning to collect a great deal of data about what exactly people graded at various proficiency levels can and cannot do, and whether their skills vary systematically depending on how they came to learn a language. Specifically, Long’s team is looking at four languages that are important in today’s political climate yet are not commonly taught in American schools: Arabic, Korean, Persian and Russian. For each of these languages, the researchers are developing detailed tests assessing pronunciation, grammaticality judgments, the ability to decode semi-audible speech, and other skills.

Long and his team want to design consistent data-collection batteries among the different languages. “We want to see if grades compare across languages,” he says. For example, does a person who is ILR 3 in Russian have the same linguistic profile in Russian as an ILR 3 in Arabic has in Arabic? The goal is to convert a relatively impressionistic rating system into something more objective. The extensive diagnostic tests that will emerge will give a more detailed portrait about what any given person knows and yield clearer guidelines about how to further train that person.

In running the tests first on paid volunteers this summer and then on government foreign language professionals, Long is eager to compare what different groups actually know. For example, based on pilot studies on Japanese and Korean, the profiles of ILR 2 people who initially learned a

language informally at home—“heritage speakers”—are expected to be very different from those who learned the language in school. Will these differences persist at more advanced levels, however? Knowing what the differences are should lead to more specialized and more effective curricula for further training.

Long’s team is also comparing the profiles of people who know a third language, where their

second language is either related or not. For example, if a native English speaker is trying to master Arabic, how much will it help to already know a relatively close language, like Hebrew? Does knowing Hebrew help more than knowing a language like French or German? Does knowing Japanese help more than knowing Russian when learning Korean or Chinese? It is already well established that adult native English speakers can learn some languages, like Spanish, more easily than others, such as Arabic or Chinese.

It may seem obvious that someone who knows Korean will learn Chinese more readily than someone who knows Russian. But while knowing a related language may help with learning the third language grammar, Long suggests that differences in pronunciation and “pragmatics”—such things as body language and standards of style and politeness in a particular language in a particular place—may in fact be easier to master if one is starting with a relatively clean slate. “Knowing a closely related language may actually hurt,” he says. For example, a native English speaker who knows Spanish may have more trouble learning some elements of Portuguese pronunciation than someone who is learning Portuguese afresh. When it comes to higher-level language skills—again, issues of *pragmatics*—knowing a language is inextricable from knowing the culture in which the language is spoken. For example, to be persuasive, someone speaking Portuguese should use cultural references and expressions that native speakers would use.

The government’s interest in these questions is to understand how to most efficiently train people in needed languages. As a side-product, Long is curious to see whether certain languages can be easier to learn because they share certain properties, for example because they have evolved similar rules of grammar and syntax. “Will we be able to predict the learnability of as yet untaught languages?” he asks. The answer is of basic theoretical interest. And if the answer *is* yes, it could also help the government whenever it needs to train people quickly in a rarely taught, or never previously taught, language. —Karin Jegalian



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