Intralingual and Interlingual Factors in Language-Learning Difficulty

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A distinction between behavioral and linguistic measures of difficulty in language learning is made explicit. It is argued that behavioral measures must be regarded as primary and linguistic measures as secondary, the latter being only a component of the former. An evaluation of the evidence leads to the following conclusions: (a) No unequivocal answer can be given to the question of whether some languages are intrinsically more difficult to learn than others; (b) second-language learning is more difficult than first-language learning, to the extent that native-speaker competence is a very difficult goal to achieve by adult second-language learners; and (c) interlingual distance is a determinant of difficulty, but simple, linear relations between them or between linguistic and behavioral measures of difficulty can hardly be expected.

In bilingual learning, a widely held notion is that foreign languages are invariably more difficult to learn than one's own native language, and that the greater the difference between the languages, the greater the difficulty. For example, Chinese who are learning English would presumably experience greater difficulties than would Germans learning English. Another notion, popular among foreign language learners but by no means uniformly accepted by linguists, is that some languages are more difficult to learn than others. These two notions have not been
subjected to systematic investigation, and the question of their validity still occasions controversy. In view of their theoretical as well as practical significance, a review of the evidence and issues pertaining to them is in order.

In considering the degree of difficulty in bilingual learning, three separate but related questions present themselves.

1. Are some languages intrinsically more difficult to learn than others, regardless of the learner’s language background? This question pertains to cross-language comparisons of intralingual aspects.

2. Is second-language (L2) learning more difficult than first-language (L1) learning?

3. How does interlingual distance (i.e., degree of similarity and difference) affect bilingual learning difficulty? This question pertains to interlingual factors.

No claim is made that linguistic factors (either intralingual or interlingual), in themselves, are the ones most important in bilingual learning. It may be that nonlinguistic factors (e.g., age of the learner, individual psychological dispositions, motivation, the relative statuses of the languages involved, contexts of acquisition, the opportunity, amount, and quality of instruction and exposure often beyond the learner’s control) are the more potent. Ferguson (cited in Center for Applied Linguistics, 1977), a sociolinguist, acknowledges that “social, political, psychological, economic and other factors [outweigh] the purely linguistic factors in any analysis of bilingual education” (p. 43). Nevertheless, while being intrinsic to the languages and characterized independently of the learner’s linguistic behavior, linguistic factors exert their influence on bilingual learning through interaction with nonlinguistic factors.

**PROBLEMS OF MEASUREMENT**

To answer the questions raised above, first the methodological problem of measurement must be addressed. A major problem to be overcome is how to measure difficulty. Objective criteria need to be established, independently of the investigator’s own background. Measures of difficulty in language learning that have been used fall into two main categories: (a) those defined in terms of linguistic factors, such as sentence length, derivational complexity, types of embedding, number of transformations, and semantic complexity, and (b) behavioral measures, such as ease of comprehension, processing time required, the number and types of errors made, and subjective report by learners.