

Learning English in Mauritania : Obstacles and advantages

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To the seven wonders of the world, we should perhaps add another one : the wonder of languages. What a wonderful thing language is indeed ! Because it is an abstracted substitute for the physical environment, it enables us to carry the immense world in our little tiny heads.

Yet the way the world is organized in our heads varies from one language to another. Furthermore, the terms a language uses are most arbitrary and conventional, in so far as they bear no relation to the designated things themselves.

On account of these two reasons, the pattern of organization and the conventionality in designation, to learn a language is a strenuous and demanding task indeed. Yet, many a man has completed this task and learned a language. So, if obstacles are impressive, the possibilities do exist. Both vary, depending on the mother tongue. A German who is learning English, because his language originated in the same source, faces considerably fewer obstacles, and has far more possibilities than a Mauritanian. So, what are those obstacles a Mauritanian is bound to face when learning English ?

One of the major obstacles is that the reality conveyed in the English language could simply be non-existent in Mauritania. So how can one understand a reality one has no experience of ? A language is a system society uses to express its other cultural systems : law, social organization, technology, religion and so on. Now, the English cultural systems differ sharply from the Mauritanian ones. The reality conveyed through the terms "bishop" and "vicar", "diocese" and "parish", has no existence in the Muslim religious system.

Thus one major obstacle a Mauritanian is bound to face when learning English lies in that the reality portrayed by the language could well be unknown to him because it does not form part of his cultural environment and he has no experience of it. As sociologist Durkheim points out, "souvent un terme exprime des choses que nous n'avons jamais perçues, des expériences que nous n'avons jamais faites ou dont nous n'avons jamais été les témoins" ⁽¹⁾

Thus in the lack of a joint experience lies a major obstacle in learning English. Yet fairly often, the experience can be the same. The reality conveyed in the language, although common, is nevertheless organized in a widely dissimilar way. The second major obstacle lies thus in a sharp dissimilarity of structure. In the preface to his translation of Hamlet Act I, André Gide, the French writer and intellectual, scathingly derides some translators on account of their being so literal that they become incomprehensible.

This is owing to the sharp dissimilarity of structure. The way languages organize the world varies from one another, according to their individual genius. This, a linguist points out thus : "we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language" ⁽²⁾ Thus in Arabic, the future is grasped as one undivided entity, whereas in English, there are six forms : ⁽³⁾

I am going to meet him, I am to meet him, I shall meet him, I shall have met him and so on. English and French differ fairly often in their processes of thinking. In relating events, English usually follows the sequence of things happening. It states first the means used to get the result and then afterwards only the result itself. In French, the result is stated first and then the means used to get it.

means put in operation to secure that result : il tua l'oiseau par balle ; il traversa le fleuve à la nage.

Thus, three languages differ sharply as to the way they organize reality. In this structural dissimilarity lies a significant barrier for a Mauritanian who embarks on learning English. Whether his chief language is French or Arabic, what is actually required of

him is to alter his natural vision of reality and his usual way of conceiving it and to integrate into his mind a system of thought that widely differs from his.

This system is fairly often concrete and precise. Another major obstacle for a Mauritanian who is learning English, is to be aware of this feature and operate the language in the sense of its character, or if you will, its genius. English, thus, fairly often conveys an image rather than a concept. As taine, the French critic and philosopher, points out : "Traduire en français une phrase anglaise, c'est copier au crayon gris une figure en couleur" ⁽⁴⁾ In a sentence like : "En sport, je te dépasse en bicyclette, en voiture, en bateau, et à la course à pied", there are four different realities : bicyclette, voiture, bateau, courir. And they are expressed by one single word : dépasser. So, French expresses here, a general idea, a concept, but not a specific precise and concrete reality. Whereas English conveys these realities in four different and specific ways : "In sport, I outride you, outdrive you, outsail you, and outrun you". In the same way, English is concrete and specific when it comes to time, space and volume. "Cet homme a dépassé ses vacances" expresses time, "ce gratte-ciel dépasse la maison" expresses space, "cet enfant dépasse maintenant ses vêtements" expresses volume. Where

French uses one concept - dépasser - to convey three different realities English uses three specific terms : this man has "overstayed" his holidays; this sky-scraper "overtops" the house; this child now "outgrows" his clothes. English is thus close to reality, it sticks to reality. It conveys an image rather than a concept. An English critic, Robert Graves, has this to say, when contrasting English with some Roman languages :

The vocabulary is not fully dissociated from the imagery from which it developed words still tend to be pictorial...

It is this persistent use of this method of "thought by associations of images" ... that distinguishes English proper ⁽⁵⁾.

English has thus a whole host of terms to describe light : glitter, glimmer, glisten, glow, gleam, glare, shimmer, sparkle, flash, blaze, dazzle, twinkle and so on. whereas French, for example has far fewer words : étinceler, scintiller, rayonner, luire, briller, flamber, éblouir.

So one of the main obstacles, a Mauritanian faces in learning English is to operate, to use the language in the sense of its genius, in its concrete and specific character. This may sound pretty hard to undertake, and one might wonder why learn English if so much is required of the learner. The advantages

are many indeed. Although English has a few words of Arabic origin - capher, giraffe, magazine : Sifr, Zarafa, mahzan... - it is another matter altogether when it comes to French. The French occupied England for about four hundred years, that is from the French conquest in 1066 to the end of the religious wars in 1453. Historian André Bourde points out : "pendant quatre siècles, se maintiennent la tentation et la volonté de puissance d'un Etat anglo-français qui essaiera de dégager ses provinces continentales de la seigneurie du roi de France" ⁽⁶⁾. The consequence of four hundred years of French occupation was far reaching indeed as regards the English language. Linguist Michel Viel points out : "En 1066, les Normands, conduits par Guillaume le conquérant, envahissent l'Angleterre... En quelques années, le français devient la langue exclusive de la classe dirigeante. Le peuple parle anglais. Une situation de bilinguisme suit. Les élites indigènes apprennent la langue des envahisseurs. Le français n'est pas profondément 'anglais'" ⁽⁷⁾.

English syntax ⁽⁸⁾ and English lexicon ⁽⁹⁾ since possibly 40% of it is French. This is an advantage of outstanding importance for the Mauritanian French-speaking learner of English : English becomes far easier and partly familiar to him.

He will be all the more prompted to learn English as it is, and is increasingly becoming, a necessity of our time. It is indeed the language that is most widespread the world over. Professor and linguist Peter Strevens points out : "the number of users of English worldwide, surges towards a probable two billion" ⁽¹⁰⁾ Thus 40% of the world uses English. There is not one continent where English is not used on a fairly large scale. In North America, only 2% are French speaking. In France, 87% of the secondary schools choose English as the first foreign language. This is most significant if we bear in mind the sensitivity of France, nationally and officially, about her language, and her endeavours to shield it against the increasing influence of English in daily life. In Africa, the country with the largest population in the continent, Nigeria, opted for English over her fifty languages. In India, where there are 485 languages English is the common tongue". «L'anglais sert de langue commune à différents pays», André Crépin points out, «à l'Inde qui compte 485 langues, à la Malaysia qui désirerait promouvoir la langue malaise» ⁽¹²⁾.

Because English is widespread, the world over, many a nation is using it in trade. A radio-cassette, manufactured in Japan, will bear, most likely, the instructions, not in Japanese, but in English. A shirt, manufactured in Thailand, will bear indications such as : wool, do not bleach and so on.

So, the things we are using every day, the things around us, require us to understand English. English becomes thus a necessity of our daily life.

In one's work, more often than not, one needs English. If you work in a ministry or company, quite often they will be using machines, such as computers. Now the instructions on how to operate the machines are most likely in English. If one wants to study further and to do research, one is bound to find English a necessity. For, on one's topic, the chances are that some research has already been carried out in English, chiefly the most up-to-date research. In France, some researchers have to write their studies in English; or get them translated into English, in order to stand a better chance to be published, and therefore be read and known.

On the whole, English is the language, par excellence, of science and technology. To learn it is a means of acceding to that science and that technology.

But English is also the vehicle of the predominant civilization of our time, the Anglo-Saxon civilization. To learn English is a means to accede to that civilization. How can we know Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Hemingway, if we ignore their language ? Through translation, you might say. But traduire, c'est trahir. When Verlaine, the French poet, says :

Les sanglots longs
Des violons
De l'automne
Blessent mon cœur
D'une langueur
Monotone

How can the music of it be rendered through translation ? The beauty will most likely be lost. Verlaine's poetry without music, is not simply Verlaine's poetry and Verlaine's poetic genius. And, in the same way, Almutanabi will hardly be Almutanabi otherwise than in Arabic. Similarly Shakespeare is only Shakespeare in English.

The world we live in is a world of technique, technology and science. English is the first means used to express it and to convey its culture. To be able to understand that world and

1) E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* ed, Alcam, Paris 1925, p.620

2) Whorf, *Language, thought, and reality*, N.Y. Wiley 1956

3) A.J. Thomas and A.V. Martinet, *A Practical English Grammar* Oxford University Press, 2^e édition, p.118

4) Hippolyte Taine, cit. par A. Chevilon, RDM, 11 mai 1908

5) Robert Graves, "Impenetrability, or the proper habit of English" in "the Fortnightly, December, 1926, 781-92

6) André J. Bourde, *Histoire de la Grande Bretagne*, P.U.F. Paris, 1971, p.13

7) Michel Viel, *La phonétique de l'Anglais*, P.U.F. Paris 1981, p.19

8) André Crépin, *Histoire de la langue anglaise*, P.U.F., 1982, p.52-60

9) Ibid; p.9

10) Peter Strevens, *Forum*, vol XXV, N° 4, oct. 1987, p.58

11) André Crépin, *Histoire de la langue anglaise*, P.U.F., Paris 1982, p.7

12) Ibid.