

Burling, Robbins (2005). *The Talking Ape: How Language Evolved*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 65-69.

The beginning of chapter 4:

The linguist, Kenneth Pike, used to enthrall an audience with a performance that he called the “monolingual demonstration.” With as many as several hundred people in attendance, Pike would meet, for the first time, a speaker of a language that he had never heard before. Without using a single word of English, or any other language that both he and the speaker knew, Pike would spend an hour or two learning as much as he could about this unfamiliar language. He could keep the members of his audience on the edge of their chairs as he moved from single words to short phrases and then to sentences of increasing complexity. It was a startling demonstration of just how accessible a previously unknown language can be.

While never as skilled as Pike, I regularly did monolingual demonstrations for my introductory classes in linguistics, not only because they are fun to do and to watch, but because they demonstrate so clearly just how much we all know before we even start to learn a language. I would find someone who spoke a language I had never worked with, ideally a language very different from my own English and from the English spoken by the members of my class, and my instructions to my helper were minimal. I would simply tell her that I wanted to learn as much as I could about her language, that she should speak no English whatsoever, and that she need not prepare ahead of time in any way.

I always brought a few props to class—some stones, leaves, and small sticks, and perhaps a cup, a spoon, and some pens and paper. I also exploited whatever else was in the room, the desk and chairs, the door

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and windows, and even the members of the class. I needed to start at the simplest level, so I would hold up a stone or leaf and, looking quizzical, I would glance back and forth from the object to my helper. It never took more than a fraction of a minute before my helper realized that I wanted her to name the object. As soon as she said something that sounded like a word, I would imitate its sounds as best as I could, and then repeat it until she accepted my pronunciation. Her gestures and facial expressions were always enough to tell me whether she judged my pronunciation to be adequate. I then transcribed the word in phonetic characters on the blackboard, and hoped I would be able to remember it.

Having obtained the word for “stone” it was easy to obtain words for “leaf” and “stick.” By holding up varied numbers of stones and sticks, sometimes with the aid of

fingers held as if counting, the numbers came easily: “two sticks,” “three stones,” “four leaves,” and sometimes a plural marker came along at the same time. With a stick and a stone I could elicit a phrase that meant “a stick and a stone” and I would usually have a way of saying “and” as well. Different-sized sticks or leaves, together with some helpful gesturing, elicited phrases such as “big stick” and “little leaf.”

When I tired of sticks, stones, and leaves, I would move on to “eye,” “nose,” and “mouth.” By pointing to my nose and then her nose, I could find out how she distinguished them, and then it would take only a fraction of a minute, often filled with amused giggles, to sort out the difference between “your” and “my.” What she called “my nose” I had to call “your nose” and vice versa. That done, other noses in the classroom made “his nose,” “our noses”, and “their noses” easy to get.

By pointing to objects, I would find out how to say “shirt,” “sweater,” “blue,” “red,” “cup,” “pencil,” “desk.” Then, with the help of some acting out, short descriptive sentences came easily: “the pencil is in the cup,” “the cup is on the desk,” “I put the pencil in the cup,” “I open the door,” “he walks from the door to the desk.” It did not take long to get a feeling for the range of sounds in the language and for some rudimentary grammatical patterns. I would try to make sentences of my own, substituting new words in the patterns that I had found. Of course, I made mistakes. Sometimes I even made mistakes deliberately, hoping for a correction that would show me how the

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language really worked. More often my mistakes came naturally and with no special effort. The scowl on my helper’s face told me clearly when I had said something wrong. When she said something along with her scowl, the context often made it easy to guess that I had heard a word meaning “no.” I always looked for, and then seized, whatever words popped naturally from my helper’s mouth, for the situation often suggested their meanings.

Starting with single words, it was possible, within a fifty-minute class period, to build up phrases, and then sentences of considerable complexity. Nouns, adjectives, verbs, conjunctions, negations, numbers, and prepositions fell into place, along with some of the prefixes and suffixes that decorate the words of many languages. I gained some feeling for the distinctive speech sounds of the language and for how these were grouped into syllables. Of course every language has thousands upon thousands of details and only a tiny fraction of them can be found in an hour, but enough can be discovered to give a class the sense that with more of the same kind of exploration, the entire language would gradually open up.

The demonstration is fun, but it also reveals with great clarity just how much we already know before we start to learn a language. I could assume that my helper and I would be able to understand each other’s gestures and facial expressions—our gesture-calls. I could

see the disapproval in her face when I said something wrong and her satisfaction showed just as clearly when I improved. I don't think I ever elicited "your" and "my," as I learned how to distinguish "your nose" from "my nose," without exchanging mutually satisfying grins as we both became aware of the problem of pronoun reference, and almost as quickly realized that we had solved it. We could smile to encourage one another and laugh to demonstrate solidarity. I knew that her language would have words, and I had a good idea of some of the things that her words would name. I could expect her to have distinct words for "eye," "nose," and "mouth" but I did not need to worry that she might have separate words for "left eye" and "right eye." All these words could be recognized and repeated. Props were essential. We could not even have started without the sticks and stones, the parts of the body, the shirts and sweaters, tables, chairs, and doors to which my helper and I pointed. Language is not a disembodied set of rules, and it is

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impossible to learn a language without relating it to things and events. For me, as for a child, strings of sounds became meaningful only by their association with the objects and events around us.

In addition to these very general background assumptions, I could assume that my helper and I could both use five specific cognitive tools, all of which were essential if I was to learn something about her language. They must have been just as essential when language first began.

First, I could assume that my helper and I shared a rich conceptual understanding of the world around us. I could assume that she made the same sorts of distinctions among objects, qualities, and events that I made and that she had an understanding of cause and effect. I knew that her understanding was close enough to mine to let us communicate. Her perceptions were very much like my own. She could see what I saw and hear what I heard. She had concepts for most of the same things that I did. I knew that she could describe the same things that I could. I knew that she knew an awful lot.

Second, I could assume that my helper and I could attend to the same objects and events. As the jargon has it: We could "achieve joint attention." Even more, I assumed that I could call her attention to something, and that, equally, she could call my attention. If I held up a stick and looked back and forth from the stick to her, she would know that I was thinking about the stick and that I wanted her to think about it too. We required not a single word to learn what the other one was attending to.

Third, I could assume an ability to imitate. I constantly imitated her sounds, her words, and the way she put her words together. She could recognize my efforts as attempts at imitation and she could judge their accuracy. Even when I imitated badly, she knew what I was trying to do, and she could, in a sense, imitate her own words by repeating them, so as to demonstrate what I ought to be imitating better.

Fourth, I could assume an ability to understand pointing gestures and gestures that resemble the objects that they refer to. When I looked for words meaning “big” and “small” I could hold up big sticks and small sticks, but to be certain that she knew what I was looking for, I could also stand tall and spread my arms and shoulders wide while holding the big stick. I could emphasize small size by making myself

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small, by hunching down, lowering my head, pulling in my arms, and even puckering my face.

Finally, I could assume that her language would be patterned in repetitive ways. I could search for these patterns and use them to predict what else she could say. If she said “stick big,” with her word for “big” following her word for “stick,” it was an excellent bet that she would accept “leaf little” from me, but not “little leaf.” That was all I needed to extract a simple grammatical generalization. As I elicited longer phrases, I could recognize, and then use, more complex patterns of word order, and learn how words and affixes were joined to form larger words, phrases, and sentences