There is a curious point about human beings when it comes to language. This point is comically portrayed in the episode *And the Rock Cried Out, No Hiding Place* from the third season in the television series [Babylon 5](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babylon_5). This particular scene starts when Delenn, a member of an alien race called the Minbari (distinguished by the bone-like protrusion surrounding the sides and back of their heads) enters the command and control section of the eponymous space station. She approaches John Sheridan, the commander of Babylon 5 and the man she is starting to grow romantically close to, to reproach him for driving himself too hard. The way that she chooses to discuss his recent behavior sheds a humorous light on the idiosyncrasies of human language.

While her central point is obviously meant to be silly, the core message about language is, nonetheless, serious – one cannot use a dictionary to learn a language. A dictionary’s job consists of simply relating a word unknown to the inquirer to other words that the inquirer knows. If no words are known, the dictionary can only serve secondary functions as paper weight, door stop, or bug smasher.

Even if one already knows one language, a dictionary translating terms in the known language to the unknown language, is, by itself, an extremely poor guide to learning that language. Other scenes, no doubt, spring to mind showing some clueless tourist trying to use a phrase book in a foreign country to comic results.

Despite being a source of endless hours of mirth, these humorous vignettes point towards one of the most mysterious and yet evident parts of human existence – that with no formal training each of us learns his mother tongue simply by observation and immersion. The process by which we all learn to speak is commonplace that many of us may even have lost sight of it.

To clarify just what mysterious power is operating, consider the newborn emerging from the womb. He knows none of the words of his mother tongue and so he cannot be hoped to use a dictionary. Indeed, he cannot even hold a dictionary nor turn the pages let alone read the entries. However, he is equipped with the potentiality to speak and to really learn the abstract ideas that words represent and not just mimic them as would a parrot. We can comfortably assert that he has some power to grasp the world and to extract from the objects he encounters (animate or inanimate) something of their essential forms.

An earlier blog ([*Learning Essential and Accidentals*](http://aristotle2digital.blogwyrm.com/?p=31)) discussed this ability to apprehend the essential forms of object within the context of learning a foreign language. In that case, we suppose that the learner has already a good grasp of his mother tongue and the associated abstractions (redness or beauty or big) and that the process is one of making a many-to-many mapping between the known and the unknown. In that scenario a learner is being taught, much in the way an newborn is, by example. The native speaker points to a bottle of water and says ‘zerk’, a word which, to the learner, signifies nothing beyond the possibilities of ‘bottle, ‘clear’, ‘full’, ‘water’, and so. With some trial-and-error, the learner soon learns that what for him was a nonsense sound can now be taken to mean ‘water’.

The ability for the learner to sift through quite different concepts to arrive at the idea of water is quite remarkable. Consider that he was required to compare extremely different types of nouns. Water, as a substance, is very different from a cup of water used in drinking or preparing a recipe. A bottle, which can be held in one’s own hand, is very different from the concept of clear, which is an attribute that can only be grasped in the mind.

As remarkable as this ability is, it pales in comparison to the far more interesting case of the infant. In the case of the learner of a foreign tongue, he is not starting fresh but already has his faculties fully equipped, exhibits fluency in his native language, and is familiar with all of the abstractions he needs in order to extend what he knows into what he doesn’t. However, the infant knows no words (at least not as far as we can tell), he has only nascent faculties to learn but no facility in having learned, and if he knows of some level of abstraction he is in no position to communicate it.

So how does the process get started? For the new born, just what does he know that allows him to actualize speaking? How does the gibberish syllables of ‘da-da’ or ‘ba-ba’ slowly but surely transform into not just the word father but the abstract idea that this older man looks after me, who is related to me, with whom I have a connection and so on?

The fact that we don’t have satisfactory answers to these questions is the heart of the mystery. We, as humans, exercise a faculty which we use so well yet so poorly understand. It is a faculty of a different type compared to reading or learning to play a musical instrument. In those latter cases, we are conscious of having been taught how to accomplish these skills. We remember formal lessons and, even if we get to the point where each is automatic, we still needed to learn. We needed someone to tell us how to interface with a shared scheme of denoting sounds by symbols or affecting these sounds on a man-made device.

The learning displayed by the infant is more primitive but also more sophisticated. It is a learning peculiar to that individual (how to move lips, mouth, gums, lungs, and so on) but it is also links that individual’s existence with society as a whole. And it is results in far more than simple communications system about things happening now. With speech, the individual can eventually express immaterial concepts such as love and justice.

We are forced to conclude that each of us possess, innately, an active facility from the moment we begin to exist that allows us to learn to grasp not just the sensible world but the essential forms that sit behind (or within or whatever) the world as a whole. Each one of us should pause and ponder this truly astonishing ability the next time we look up a word in the dictionary.