

A little preface to this post: I'm in a small village in El Salvador right now with a group of Sacred Heart University students doing mission work. I say that because being part of this class, I have been observing many linguistic elements at play in communication. For starters, the young children we have met struggle with learning Spanish in different ways that us English natives struggle when learning Spanish. Also, the idea of a universal grammar is certainly present, but what I find interesting is that there is no universal lexicon. There are some words that simply don't translate directly from one language to another. I find it strange that some words do and some don't. Lastly, students who are native English speakers with minimal Spanish experience apply English syntax to Spanish and that often that doesn't work.

There are many young children that we interact with on a regular basis while we are here. As a beginner-to-intermediate Spanish speaker I would expect that I would make similar mistakes and have similar trouble as a beginner-to-intermediate Spanish native. Absolutely not the case. The mistakes that I make are very different from the mistakes they make. An obvious fact is that they learn Spanish much faster, so for most of the children that can speak they are already ahead of me. However, because I have studied some of the Subjunctive tense, or prepositions, I'm able to piece those together, but I stumble on some basic present tense issues, or I speak without putting the inflection in the right place. I suppose that I had assumed that everyone who learned a language learned it in the same order or sequence. But now I see that is just not true.

I suppose that whenever I thought of how languages were created, I thought that each language was derived from another. And therefore there was a translation for everything because in my initial (and very naive) thought, different languages were just translations of each other. After reading this chapter and reading about the lexicon, then experiencing difficulty asking someone for the translation of the word "Already" I had an epiphany. Languages were most likely developed separately from one another. Maybe deriving from one particular language like Latin, but developed totally independent of one another. The universal grammar theory applies because our brains are conditioned to structure any language the same way, but syntax, semantics, vocabulary, etc. are all different and not necessarily just a simple translation from one language to another.

Lastly, I've observed many of the students who maybe took a few years of Spanish in High School try to communicate with the students here in El Salvador who are native Spanish speakers. Knowing just the small bit of Spanish that I know I have noticed that the students have a command of English syntax and when they attempt Spanish simply apply the English syntax. Similar to the example of "me want cookie" they structure translations literally without thinking that Spanish may be different. For example, articles indicating gender are essential in Spanish. Also, negation is placed differently in some cases, and even verb and adjective order is different many times. It has been really interesting to watch the Salvadoran natives struggle to understand what is being said even though the words themselves are being said well enough. It goes to show how important syntax is to understanding a language.