

HOW TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

**An Exposition of the Phonetic Inductive
Method for Foreign Resident Language
Students. A Direct, Practical, Scientific
Way of Mastering Any Foreign Tongue**

By

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Dedicated
to
My Wife and Her Father
in memory of their
sympathetic
interest

PREFACE

Adrift on the uncharted sea of a new language, without a pilot, and with no compass to steer by, save the recollection of the way languages were studied in schooldays, the foreign resident in non-European lands is often at his wit's end. Hundreds of years and untold nervous energy are wasted on mission fields and in foreign settlements for want of proper language teachers. To save these years and conserve this energy is the aim of this little book.

The method herein set forth is a growth of which the concentric rings are the mother tongue and a taste for language; college Latin and Greek, with no particular acquirement of either; college German, with much improvement, but still comparative failure; scholastic Hebrew, with little attainment of practical ability; Hindustani, by a mixture of primer, reading and some conversation, with considerable success; temporary impairment of eyesight, and, consequently, Panjabi, by the ear, with decided advance in efficiency; observation of much hard work by others, with very incommensurate results; attempts to assist beginners, with recognition of own insufficiency for this self-imposed duty; Prendergast's Handbook to the Mastery Series, with resultant improvement in giving aid to others; recognition of personal and general defects in pronunciation, but no solution of the difficulty; Sweet's Primer of Phonetics, and the dawn of a great light. Then followed gradual development of this method during many attempts to help others, through fifteen years of teaching and study, and the result is this book.

The method is direct, but as one teacher who tried it said: "More direct in its results than the 'Direct Method.'" It has been called the "Phonetic Inductive Method," and perhaps there can be no more descriptive title, for it is phonetic in using phonetics, and in making the teacher use his voice to do the teaching, instead of turning it over to the pupil's eye. It is inductive, in that it imparts the language by the concrete sentence rather than by the abstract grammar. And, lastly, it may be called **the automatic method**, not because it works itself, which, unfortunately, it does not, but because the goal of every sentence is automaticity, and only when the use of the idiom becomes automatic is the method satisfied.

A pupil in China, who preached after six months' study, thinks it saved him from six to twelve months. Several pupils in Persia are reported to have saved nine months. A pupil in India, after four weeks' coaching in America, passed three years' examinations at the end of nine months. A pupil at home said she knew more Urdu in a forty hours' course than she did French in a college year. Another pupil said he had learned more Urdu from two months' study, fifty hours, at home than he learned French in two years in college. The language examiners of the United Presbyterian Mission in India, where the method was developed, say it saved from one to two years in the time when one was able to begin effective work.

It is hoped that the statements of this book are clear enough to help many to block out their own pathway, and really master their languages quickly and effectively. Any notice of faults or excellencies will be gladly received.

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DISCUSSION OF METHOD

Many books have been written on teaching languages, but such do not fully meet the problem of the adult who finds himself in a strange land, among a people whose language he cannot understand, especially if he is unable to find someone competent to teach a helpless foreigner the unknown tongue.

It is true that this foreigner, if he is an educated person, should have learned by past experience what is necessary to be done in order to master another tongue, but the fact is that few, if any, have really made this discovery. The method in vogue in the schools of England and America is almost universally at fault, and, though there are here and there indications of the dawning of a better day, there is great need for a book that will give such plain and simple directions to the bewildered foreign resident as will enable him to direct his "teacher" in a manner that will eventually mean success. Such is the aim of this treatise.

The well-nigh universal failure of language teaching is due to its false ideal, its imperfect material and its unnatural method. This will be evident if we first define our term "language." Language is an habitual mode of expressing thought by symbols. Primarily these symbols are audible. The visible symbols, such as are used in books, are conventionally spoken of as "language," but, as they are artificial, they are language only in a secondary sense. Natural and fundamental language is that which is spoken and heard, the invisible and immaterial sounds and combinations of the sounds of the human voice. This being true, and it cannot be denied, it is plain that

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the ordinary language method which takes the book as the basis of its study is wrong. Its ideal, as expressed by the American Committee of Twelve, is "to be able to read a book and gain therefrom the thought without difficulty"; whereas, it should aim "to speak so as to be understood and to understand what is spoken." Given, therefore, a wrong aim and unnatural material, what can you expect but a vicious method. Consequently, the scholastic method, aiming to teach you to read, and dealing as it does with visible signs and symbols, must substitute the eye for the God-given medium of language, the ear, and it will, as a result, never bring one to the true goal of language—the ability to speak and to understand spoken thought. No doubt it is the proper and only possible method for the study of the "dead" languages, and the scalpel of the grammarian may fittingly dissect the old cadaver and pile the "parts" on the "tables," but who is ever again able to take these and join them into a living organism? Not "all the king's horses nor all the queen's men." Where one has a living language to learn he must take some other method. Vivisection is likely to destroy life, and when life has gone our real language has vanished. The aim of the grammarians may be to construe, to analyze, to parse, and thus "train the judgment," but the true aim is to make the new language the vehicle of thought. Particularly must those who are foreign residents aim at nothing less than a ready mastery, both active and receptive, of the new language.

The most important thing, of course, is that one should get the language. Second, that he should get it correctly. Third, that he should get it quickly. For life is a reservoir of which language is the chief conduit, and, lacking it, our lives must be continually hampered and restricted.

Since language is primarily and fundamentally speech, let us note some of the difficulties which confront us. The first is the rapidity with which speech

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sounds follow one another into our ear. At a comparatively slow rate of utterance, we are compelled to receive over fifteen vowel and consonant sounds per second, and in rapid utterance it may be thrice as many. In the production of each of these, two or three movements of the vocal organs are involved, so that we find the vocal organs are compelled to make from thirty to one hundred and fifty movements per second. The mere mention of this number, to one who knows anything of the rate of mechanical movement, makes the hopelessness of mastering such speed apparent, and explains our desire, on hearing a slightly familiar language, to say: "Do not speak so fast." Yet all languages have normally pretty much the same rate of rapid utterance. None are slow.

To secure a correct concept out of this torrent of sounds seems quite impossible, but it cannot be, since children gain it, little by little, day after day, and year after year, until they have mastered it. But we adults cannot afford so much time. The children hear the same sounds over and over again by chance, but we must make special opportunities to hear the same sounds repeated until they crystallize into concepts. To these we shall add others, going over the whole range of sounds, till all are familiar. Thus we shall be compelled to learn to hear at the normal rate of speed. Though tempo has not been recognized as an integral part of speech, it is. It is as important for language as it is for song.

As we learn to do by doing, so we learn to speak by speaking. Indeed, we learn to hear by speaking, and frequently it seems that is not till we really form a new sound that we learn to hear it. The new motor action seems to arouse the brain to grasp the new impression. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that at the basis of all correct speech lies a correct concept of the sound. God has so linked ear and tongue together that as we hear so we speak. The ear is the governor of the tongue. Yet this whole tremendous difficulty

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of mastering the tumultuous stream of sounds, made up of vowels and consonants, of high and low pitches, of slides, slurs, glides and stops, of labials, dentals, pre-palatals, palatals, nasals, fricatives and trills—all this difficulty the schools have turned over to the eye! No wonder the result has been, and always must be, failure.

These sounds, as they issue in the vocal current, indicate ideas. These ideas are in certain definite relation to each other. This interrelation is indicated in various ways—now by their relative position, now by their endings, now by their connecting particles. To grasp this relationship from the swiftly flowing stream of sound—here, indeed, is a problem for a skilled ear.

Some languages have a rather simple set of sounds. Chinese has only, in its Pekin form of Mandarin, some four hundred syllables. Theoretically, each of these is subject to four “tones,” or modifications, giving a possible sixteen hundred syllables, whereas English has a possibility of over one hundred thousand syllables. But when it comes to the book, Chinese has thirty-two thousand characters,¹ and English, when printed phonetically, has only some forty letters. How simple are the Chinese syllables compared to the English, and how impossible the Chinese book as compared with that printed in alphabetic characters. To state the problem arithmetically, as 1,600 is to 32,000, so is the ear difficulty as compared with the eye difficulties (1,600:32,000:: ear: eye), that is one-twentieth of the difficulty. In other words, it will be twenty times as hard to get Chinese by the eye as by ear.

But even where the syllabary is simple, it requires patient and careful listening to acquire a correct concept of the actual sounds. Manifestly it is impossible to speak correctly without a correct concept, yet most beginners hear only what they have been accustomed

¹Some estimate as high as 47,000.

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to hear—their own native sounds, and so substitute them for the real thing. For example, it is not unusual to hear a German, after years of residence in America, say: "I'll go mit you," since **mit** and **with** sound to him alike. Further, it has long been disputed by Europeans as to whether a certain sound in China is a non-aspirate p or a b. The fact is, it is neither. There is no non-aspirate p, nor is there any b, in China (from Peking to Shanghai, at least), as can be easily demonstrated if you will ask a Chinaman to say "Speak"¹ and "Bye, baby, bye." But how many foreigners make b do duty for this similar sound! Again, in India, there are four t's, all different from each other and from the English t. Yet not a few foreigners make the one t do duty for all four, and never hear the difference.

Here is where a preliminary training in phonetics would be of inestimable value. For this reason the Edinburgh Missionary Conference, in 1910, said: "The modern science of phonetics, without doubt, is of great use in the acquirement of a correct pronunciation, and ought to be studied at home." Unfortunately, only two mission boards in America attempt, at present, to provide this training for their appointees. If possible, this training should be secured before going abroad. It can be had only from a living teacher, not a book.²

The scholastic method is not only at fault in using the eye instead of the ear, but it has hitherto failed to recognize the sentence as the unit of speech and has put its emphasis on the word, making that the center of instruction. Further, it has not reckoned that the elementary difficulty of pronunciation does not fully exist in the word, but rather in the sentence. Here we find, in addition to articulation, the tempo and cadence which go to make up the sentence melody.

¹*Speak* has a non aspirate p

²Some books would be helpful, but never take a teacher's place. See Bibliography.

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In teaching grammar, as the introduction to language, scholasticism has a further discredit to its account, since this substitutes the abstract for the concrete. The miserable results, however, that are secured in the schools by students of Latin and Greek, and little better in many places by those of French and German, these are the strongest indictments.

There are, however, better methods in vogue than the scholastic. The "Direct Method," as it is called in England and America, is most excellent. This grew out of a revolt against the scholastic method, and was fathered in Germany by Wilhelm Viëtor, and has been gradually wrought out by his followers, until it has secured recognition from the leading linguists of Europe. It emphasizes the use of phonetics, and is sometimes called the "Phonetic Method." It is a method for adolescents, and as one investigator said: "It produces results that are positively brilliant."¹ In France it is called the Inductive and in England the Direct Method.

The Berlitz method is good, but it does not insure a good pronunciation, nor does it lead an adult on quickly enough into the complex sentences.

The first really good method that fell under the author's observation was that of Simon Stern, in his "Studien und Plauderein."² It is direct, natural, simple and progressive, but makes no special provision for pronunciation. It, like the others, presupposes a teacher who knows how to teach. A good teacher will get results with almost any fair method, if he will use the language as the medium of teaching in class. Without that nothing can be accomplished. Those who go abroad, however, are usually, especially in Oriental lands, confronted with the difficulty that the "teachers" have to be reckoned on as sources of information and the pupil must bear the burden of extracting it. Unless the student directs the teaching,

¹Mary Brebner.

²Henry Holt & Co., New York, 1879.

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no good work is going to be done. He must plan all the work, and teach the teacher how to teach. How shall he accomplish this new and arduous task?

The method herein set forth is, as noted in the Preface, most direct. It presupposes, however, that the student must assume the burden of directing the work, though it often speaks as if it were the teacher. The improvements on some teaching by the "Direct Method," as herein set forth, are homonymic sentences for pronunciation training and a definite standard of attainment as a foundation for further assignments.

The true method will, then, proceed from the known to the unknown, from the concrete to the abstract, from the whole to its parts. We must, therefore, inquire: What is the unit of language? It is not the letter, nor the word, but the sentence. Hence, we must make the sentence the basis of our study, and since speech is the primary language, we must make the spoken sentence the basis of our study. Grammar, rules, declensions and conjugations are abstractions, so that we cannot begin with them. Just as we should put a model, or, better, a specimen, into the hands of a pupil who is about to begin to write or draw, or study anatomy or botany, so we ought to put a sentence into the ears, and on the tongue of a pupil, as we expect him to begin the study of language. We must, of course, learn grammar, but concretely, and after it is so learned we shall be able to appreciate it when stated abstractly. The usual custom of beginning with a declension and memorizing words and case endings that have never been observed does not make linguists. It was one such student who said, and it is true of the whole catalogue: "Arabic grammars ought to be well bound, so as to stand being thrown violently about the room."

The difficulties that are found in every language are three: Pronunciation, vocabulary and construction. The first is a difficulty of memory and formation of

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sounds; the second, of memory of sounds, and the third, of remembering a new method of indicating logical relationships. So, then, our method must train the ear to hear and the tongue to utter strange sounds, but it must also train the memory to recall promptly the new vocabulary; and, lastly, it must train the memory to link these new words together in just that order and manner that will indicate their logical relationship and best express the idea. Each of these difficulties revolves about the memory. Indeed, language learning may be said to depend wholly on the memory, but so, indeed, does all progress. However, we all have memories, and the question is how to get the most out of them in this case.

Language is a habit of uttering sounds to represent ideas. We do not utter sounds by recalling them individually. They utter themselves, at the proper time and place. Think of consciously trying to utter fifteen or fifty sounds per second! A speech habit is like a row of bricks standing near together and on end. Push one down and in succession, one after the other, down they all go. One sound suggests another, and it the next, and the whole thing is said. We start to repeat the words of a familiar song, but cannot recall it. We begin to sing it, habit asserts its control, and line after line it sings itself. Again, sometimes, we sing a whole song through and realize with a start that our thoughts were somewhere else. Was it memory that recalled these words and notes? Not our intellectual memory, certainly, but the motor memory, the muscular memory, the automatic memory, whatever you are pleased to call it, but it was not the deliberate, recollective memory. It is this automatic, this motor memory that takes care of our language. It is on this that we must depend. We must cultivate the motor memory till a new habit is formed and it is trained to utter a new set of sounds from new impulses.