

Re: Esperantist lies (Re: Learning a language)

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From: Sean O'Leathlobhair (jwlawler_at_yahoo.com)

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LEE Sau Dan <danlee@informatik.uni-freiburg.de> wrote in message news:<m38ydux654.fsf@mika.informatik.uni-freiburg.de>...

> >>>>> "Sean" == Sean O'Leathlobhair <jwlawler@yahoo.com> writes:

>

> Sean> You claim that the Chinese script contains phonetic hints.

> Sean> Of course, I know much less than you of the script but this

> Sean> description fits reasonably with what I know.

>

> Why don't you compare with me and my classmates when we(exclusive)

> were in primary school? At that time, my classmates and I didn't know

> much English. Teachers seldom directly teaching us how to letters in

> a word relate to the pronunciation, as an alphabet, "phonetic" writing

> was not familiar to us. They do teach us, though, that we should

> remember pronounce an ending "s" (Cantonese syllables can't end with

> an "s") when we see letter "s" or "ce" at the end of a word. Other

> than these minor hints, they don't teach us to relate English

> pronunciations to spellings. We had been learning English this way.

> Each word is learnt as a triplet of meaning, spelling and

> pronunciation. So, at that stage, my classmates couldn't pronounce

> any English words that they've never learnt. But at that age, most of

> us have enough familiarity with the Chinese script that we can guess

> what an unseen Chinese character means and how it is pronounce, with

> pretty high chance of success.

You may have been taught to read English in a similar fashion to Chinese and as others have commented, some natives are taught that way. I don't deny that you can treat the English script as if it were Chinese. I only deny that you have to. I cannot read any Japanese, does that prove that the Japanese script is unreadable? Of course not. Your experience is no more proof that the English script is unphonetic.

I, and many (most?) other, literate, native English speakers were not taught that way. We can pronounce English words that we have not seen before. Even when my son had been learning to read for less than one year, if he encountered a word that he did not know, he would say: "Daddy, what does blah mean?". He would not show me the book. On a good day, he would say it correctly or close enough for me to

recognise. On a bad day, I would ask for some context and then be able to guess what he meant. It was very rare that I had to ask to see the book or ask him to spell out the word. Some 6 year old children can read English words that they do not know.

I have only related one case against your one case but logically that is enough for my argument and not yours. I am claiming that it is possible for someone to read English words which he does not know. A single example is enough to prove that. You are claiming the converse and would need to show that not only you cannot do this but that no one else can either.

> *I was special in my class. At an age of 7 (before I even started to
> learn that wierd thing called "tense"), I was already able to infer
> the principle of an alphabetic phonetic script from the English words
> that I've learnt. I even developed a feeling of the spelling rules of
> English. So, I was able to "predict" how the English words the
> teacher was going to teach us in the coming lesson. The classmates
> came to me, flipped the textbook to the page for the coming lesson,
> and asked me how to pronounce the new words on that page. I guessed
> the pronunciation (with high success rate!) and they wrote it down by
> transcribing the sounds into Cantonese/Chinese characters. (Don't be
> surprised; that's what most HK schoolchildren do. We've already
> mastered our script at this age so that we can transcribe English
> sounds in Chinese characters!) Why were they doing this? The English
> teacher had to teach so many new words (plus other things) in a single
> lesson that he/she had to go quite fast. The classmates seldom have
> enough time to do the transcription and write it down. With the help
> of my predictions, they can catch up with the teacher.*

You seem to be arguing against your own case now. Although you were not taught to read English phonetically, you figured it out anyway.

Take this issue up with your teachers for an explanation. If I were teaching English to literate Chinese speakers, I may also start that way. Their experience with their own script may lead them to accept an arbitrary relationship between the written and spoken form. But after a few dozen or few hundred words, I would switch strategy and start to explain the phonetics. That way, they could make a fast start at reading simple texts without getting bogged down with trying to make CAT out of the children's names of the letters. But the switch would allow them to make more progress on their own. I believe that English is sometimes taught to natives that way. But, with a few exceptions, the teaching does soon switch to a phonetic mode.

> *Sean> I know that, unlike it is commonly believed, there is some
> Sean> phonetic information in the script. But it is approximate
> Sean> so "hints" seems an appropriate word.*
>
> *The phonetic info in the English script are also hints only. You
> cannot rely completely on them. Those who pretend that they can rely*

- > on them as "accurate information" are also those who complain about
- > the English script, apparently. Schoolchildren in Hong Kong aren't
- > taught that the English script is "phonetic". (They're often
- > encouraged to learn the IPA so that they can look up the real
- > pronunciation from dictionaries.) So, we never complain that the
- > English script is crazy. Rather, we learn it as a mnemonic script,
- > and we're fine with this.

To me, at least, there is a big gap between hints and total reliability. I would not claim that the English script is totally reliable. Remember that I used the spectrum analogy and not a simple phonetic / non-phonetic dichotomy. I accept that hints is an appropriate description for Chinese and hence it is towards the non-phonetic end of my spectrum. English is not at the other end. For the problem of reading (predicting sound from writing) it is not too bad. The worst exceptions are among the most commonly used words. Name some English words with unpredictable pronunciations which are not among the few hundred most commonly used words. The really tough ones such as: tough, cough, bough etc are not really very numerous and are commonly used. I accept that it is further from the ideal in the other direction, predicting the written form from the spoken is hard. But, for me at least, I can do it well enough to find an unknown word that I have heard in a dictionary.

- > Sean> *But although, far from perfect, I claim that the English*
- > Sean> *script contains much more than just hints. Also, most of*
- > Sean> *the difficult bits are in commonly used words. In the less*
- > Sean> *common words, it is mostly minor points such as f/ph*
- > Sean> *redundancy or whether a consonant is doubled or not. Have*
- > Sean> *you looked at the links posted by Ruud on the subject?*
- >
- > *Yeah. I'm aware of those rules. Actually, those are basically what I*
- > *have (more or less subconsciously) inferred during my first 4 years of*
- > *learning English, even before I came to "tense".*

Tense does not have anything to do with this debate. I prefer the Chinese absence of grammatically marked tense. I am not claiming that English is superior to Chinese in all respects. In fact, I have at some points in this thread and others claimed the reverse.

- > *For Chinese, it's even simpler. Every Chinese schoolchild know how to*
- > *recognize the signific and phonetic parts of a Chinese character, and*
- > *can guess the pronunciation from the phonetic hint, together with the*
- > **background knowledge* of the lexicon of the language. That's no*
- > *magic. Every schoolchild of normal intelligence can do it. Our*
- > *guesses are sometimes wrong, and hence we need to memorize the*
- > *exception. But most of the time, we can rely on the phonetic hints.*

A good English schoolchild does not read any word wrongly. He or she will know all the completely unpredictable words and know the rules for reading the rest. (Note that I did say 'good' schoolchild, there

are bad ones who cannot read well.) Remember for my point, it is not necessary that everyone can achieve this, just that some can. Even if the rules of English were so complex that only Einstein was able to read it reliably, it would still show that the English script contained more than hints.

- > Sean> *Not only can a well educated English speaker pronounce most*
- > Sean> *unfamiliar words accurately,*
- >
- > *The same is true for a literate Chinese.*

What happens when the phonetic hint has the wrong tone or a wrong consonant or vowel? The hints are often quite approximate. If he does not know the word, how will he know how to correct it or even that it is wrong? The English speaker needs to remember a few hundred unpredictable words. The rarer the word, the more likely the pronunciation is to be predictable. If there are going to be exceptions, it is better that there are in the common words than the rare ones. I don't think that is true for Chinese, is it?

- > Sean> *he can usually hear a word and find it in a dictionary.*
- >
- > *This would be more difficult for Chinese.*

- > Sean> *If I hear an unfamiliar word, I can usually find it in a*
- > Sean> *dictionary.*

- > *Me too, for English and German, and sometimes French (if liaison is*
- > *absent).*

So you do acknowledge some advantage to our script. Surely that also indicates that the script is providing more than just hints. I see this as a very valuable feature of the English script (and other similar scripts). There are many contexts when it is not possible to ask a speaker to explain a word (e.g. TV or radio). The ability to find it in a dictionary can make the difference between understanding and not understanding.

I can also do it with many European languages. French is a tough one because of the liaison and if there are multiple words that you do not know, the word boundaries can be a challenge. There are also many spellings for some sounds. But it has less of the random variations of English. For a native French speaker, I would expect the level of difficulty of this task to be comparable to English. Spanish is an interesting case. Reading is realible, I don't know of any Spanish word which cannot be accurately pronounced with just a few rules. But the reverse is not so simple (better than English). Few speakers differentiate B and V. In many dialects S and Z are not distinguished either.

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- > Sean> *I may have to make several attempts, for example if it*
- > Sean> *starts with the sound <ju> then it may begin u or eu, if it*
- > Sean> *has the sound <f> then it may be spelled f or ph etc.*
- >
- > *I see. You mean multiple attempts. We can often do it with Chinese,*
- > *too. Firstly, there are dictionaries with a phonetic index (based on*
- > *some phonetic transcription method -- Pinyin is gaining ground). Even*
- > *for dictionary without phonetic indices, we can find a homonymous (or*
- > *similarly sounding) character. On that entry, there is usually*
- > *another character of the same or similar pronunciation, so that people*
- > *not familiar with Fan3Qie1, Pinyin, or other phonetic transcription*
- > *schemes may guess the correct pronunciation. We can sometimes find*
- > *the desired character there.*

What difference in meaning do you intend by multiple rather than several? Are you suggesting that a large number of attempts are required? That depends on knowledge and experience. If your initial guess is good then few attempts are required. I usually find the word quickly and only rarely have to open several pages of the dictionary. The worst case is of course when the word starts with a silent letter.

But the kn words are limited and I know most of them. Other funny ones such as ps, pn, mn are mostly restricted to well known prefixes that I will recognise. Mistakes further down the word matter less since they will be close in the dictionary.

- > *Rhyme tables (supposed to be a tool for poets?) have existed in China*
- > *for over a millennium. They're another tool for looking up characters*
- > *by sounds. Of course, with computers, it's quicker to use the various*
- > *phonetic-based input methods to do a similar lookup. Type in the*
- > *phonetic transcription of a sound, and you get a list of candidate*
- > *characters. (Is there a similar tool for English, other than using*
- > *the simplistic Soundex algorithm?)*

I don't know. We don't really need such tools. There are rhyme tables but their main purpose is to assist you in writing poems or songs. I have not heard of them being used as a spelling aid. One useful tool in the days before computers is a reverse dictionary. This does not place Z before A. It sorts words by comparing the last letter first, then the next to last. It is useful for crosswords and other word puzzles. It could be used to assist finding odd words but I have not heard of anyone doing that.

- > Sean> *This is a nuisance and makes the job harder than it would be*
- > Sean> *in Spanish*
- >
- > *Not entirely:*
- >
- > *When you hear [x], do you know whether it is spelt with "j" or "g"?*

Usually J only before A, O or U. G is far more common than J before E and I. Not a perfect rule but a very good first guess. A perfect

rule is that [x] would never be G before A, O or U.

> *When you hear [T], do you know whether it is spelt with "z" or "c"?*

A similar rule. C before E and I and Z before A, O or U. This is also not perfect but it is better than the J / G rule. It is also a perfect rule that C would never be [T] before A, O or U.

A problem are the dialects that do not distinguish [s] and [T]. In these the sound [si] could be SI or CI and maybe but probably not ZI.

Look at conjugations of verbs whose stems end in G, J, C or Z. You will see these rules in action.

> *And when do you know there is an "h"?*

You don't but it is only common in a small number of frequently used words such as the haber. If you cannot find a word that sounds as if it starts with a vowel then try again under H.

> *Sean> but it is possible with practise.*

> *What is not possible with practice and suitable tools?*

Many things. If the association between written and spoken forms was completely arbitrary then no one could read an unfamiliar word or find an unknown word in a dictionary.

> *Sean> I will need to find two closer Chinese dialects. Indeed*

> *Sean> Mandarin and Cantonese are further apart than UK and US*

> *Sean> English but they are closer than English and French.*

>

> >> *I don't think so.*

>

> *Sean> A separate debate that we could have but irrelevant for my*

> *Sean> point. Mandarin and Cantonese share many characters but*

> *Sean> they do not pronounce them the same way.*

>

> *Similarly, English and French share many words, although they don't*

> *pronounce those words the same. "cousin" is an example.*

> *"beautĤfĤ©"/"beauty" is another. "commence", "important", "instant",*

> *..., "football", ...*

>

> *So, why do you think this pair is so different from the*

> *Mandarin/Cantonese pair?*

I only raised this point to counter your argument that differing UK / US pronunciations showed that our script was not phonetic. The different UK / US pronunciations of missile do not show this, they only show that the rules for the UK and the US are not quite the same. If you think that the differing UK / US / French / German

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pronunciations invalidate my phonetic claim then the different Mandarin / Cantonese / Japanese pronunciations of shared characters invalidate your claims for your script. Both of our scripts are shared by multiple languages and dialects. To be fair, let's concentrate on one example of each. I will select Southern England English for my example of the English script. You can choose one language or dialect to represent yours.

- > Sean> UK and US English share many words but do not always
- > Sean> pronounce them the same way.
- >
- > But the differences are so minor that we don't have difficulties
- > understanding both pronunciations, given time to adjust our ears. The
- > same never happend to Mandarin/Cantonese.
- >
- >
- > Sean> No one calls English and French a single language.
- > >> I would call them a "European" language. :)
- >
- > Sean> If you wish but I don't think that you find many others that
- > Sean> would agree with you.
- >
- > Many linguists agree that calling the Chinese branch of languages "a
- > single Chinese language" is as ridiculous as calling the Romance
- > languages "a single Romance language", or even the European IE
- > languages "a single European language".

I agree as well. But is it relevant to our script discussion?
Remember way back, you were impressed that I realised this and recognised that by selecting Mandarin, I would not be able to practise with the Cantonese speakers that I often meet here in the UK.

- > Sean> I thought you claimed that you learnt Mandarin easily, is
- > Sean> that no evidence that Cantonese and Mandarin have a close
- > Sean> relationship. The English and French do not usually learn
- > Sean> each other's languages easily.
- >
- > Go to Hongkong and ask the HKers whether they find the learning of
- > Mandarin easy. If it is really easy, then most HKers should be able
- > to understand Mandarin easily, right? But this is not the case. Most
- > HKers can't even understand a simple Mandarin sentence.

I would not expect a HKer to understand Mandarin without learning. Also I would not expect an Italian to understand French without learning. But I thought that you had said that you leant Mandarin easily. Is that wrong? I am not suggesting mutual comprehensibility but I did think that it would be fairly easy to learn your second Chinese language.

- > >> A couple of questions for you: Does anyone call Danish,
- > >> Norwegian and Swedish "a single language"? Are they mutually

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- > >> *intelligible? Are they more similar to one another than*
- > >> *Mandarin is from Cantonese?*
- >
- > *Sean> I asked exactly the same question myself a while back.*
- > *Sean> Remember the Flemish discussion? They are commonly regarded*
- > *Sean> as separate languages but this is only because they have*
- > *Sean> separate names and are used in separate countries.*
- >
- > *Remember that the Cantonese speaking region is larger than many*
- > *European countries. I'm not referring to the minute countries like*
- > *Liechtenstein or San Marino. I'm referring to countries like Germany,*
- > *France, UK. That this region does not have political independence is*
- > *the main difference here.*

We debated the Chinese language / dialect issue a while back. I thought that we agreed that it was not just European ignorance that caused the assumption of Chinese as a single language. If the Chinese community stressed the differences more, we might eventually learn. But we also make the same mistake with our own languages and often wrongly assume that one country = one language. This causes languages such as Catalan to be ignored (no official EU status) whereas Danish with fewer speakers is not ignored.

- > *Sean> If the national boundaries were ignored and the languages*
- > *Sean> analysed from scratch, I expect that they would be regarded*
- > *Sean> as dialects of one language.*
- >
- > *How about Dutch and German? (esp. Flemish vs. Austrian)*

This is often debated. The extreme ends are not mutually comprehensible and hence this suggests that they are not a single language. However it is hard to find where one stops and another starts. It is a continuum. Countries do have some significance since they often set standards. I am not an expert on the Germanic languages but I expect that there is a standard Dutch and a standard German and that they are not mutually comprehensible without learning. So in at least one sense, they are different languages.

I have heard that the Australian aborigines understand the issue better but it may be an urban myth. They do not classify their languages / dialects as we do. They describe the speech of other tribes in terms of the time that it takes to get to know it. So a one week dialect is quite close but a one year one would probably be a different language to us. In this way, Flemish may be a one week dialect of Dutch and German may be one year dialect.

- > *Sean> Danes and Swedes can understand each other with practise*
- >
- > *This is impossible between Cantonese and Mandarin. The speakers needs*
- > *to LEARN the others' language in order to communicate. Or communicate*
- > *by writing in standard written Chinese (no dialectal style writing).*

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- >
- > *Even Toishanese and Cantonese are mutually unintelligible, although*
- > *everyone considers Toishanese to be a "sub-dialect" of Cantonese.*

Does that "everyone" include the Chinese? If so, it is not just us Europeans misclassifying the Chinese languages.

- > *Sean> but I have often seen Danes and Swedes talk in English even*
- > *Sean> when no other foreigners were present. I know Danes that*
- > *Sean> claim not to speak Swedish but that may be just a joke or*
- > *Sean> prejudice.*
- >
- > *Why? They don't speak Swedish. They only understand it. These are 2*
- > *different matters.*

The Danes usually understand Swedish easily. The Swedes do not so often understand Danish easily. Here is one example. In a hotel in Stockholm I met a Danish woman. Later I saw her talking to reception in English. I asked why use English since she was Danish and the receptionist was Swedish. She said: "It's much easier that way". Since both she and the receptionist spoke English well, it was easier than forcing the Swedish receptionist to cope with an unfamiliar Danish accent.

- > *Sean> I know nothing of Alsace.*
- >
- > *Alsace is a German dialect. I can understand a bit little of it. But*
- > *it is spoken in a French department near Germany. That region has*
- > *been ruled by German, French, German, (perhaps also Austrian) and now*
- > *French powers in history.*

I know the Alsace region and some of its history but I did not know that there was a language called Alsace.

- > *Sean> I, and several others such as Ruud, disagree. Just because*
- > *Sean> you may not be able to read an unfamiliar English word does*
- > *Sean> not mean that I cannot. I am not saying that it is easy but*
- > *Sean> it is possible.*
- >
- > *Apply the same argument, please. Just because you cannot pronounce an*
- > *unseen Chinese character correctly does not imply that I and most*
- > *other Chinese cannot do it with ease.*

But do you claim to be able to read the vast majority of unfamiliar characters accurately, including when you do not know the word? Can you hear a word and find the character in a dictionary (unless it uses an auxiliary index such as Pinyin).

I can do both of these for English. I would claim that I could read 99% of new English words correctly. Note that I am not claiming that 99% of English words can be read correctly from their spelling. I am

only claiming that 99% of those that I don't know are. This is because I know the vast majority of the exceptional words. In English, the rarer the word, the more likely that the pronunciation is as expected from the spelling.

> >> *With a good knowledge of the Chinese vocabulary, one can know
> >> which "possible" pronunciation derived from those phonetic
> >> hints would match the signific part to give a sensible word in
> >> the given context.*

>

> Sean> *If you know the word. I can read an unfamiliar English word
> Sean> that I have never heard. Could you read a Chinese character
> Sean> if you did not know the word?*

>

> *As mentioned before, most "unfamiliar" Chinese words nowadays are
> compounds built up from highly familiar Chinese characters. So, yes,
> I can pronounce each character of the unfamiliar Chinese compound
> word. e.g. new brand names. People aren't that stupid to invent new
> product names or jargons using characters that most people would
> mispronounce.*

Do you know all Chinese morphemes? Even if you did, it would say nothing about the phonetic nature of your script, just that either your stock of morphemes was small or your memory was good.

I do not deny that the Chinese word formation is more logical and simpler than English. I am only claiming that our script contains a high level of phonetic information. It could be that the Chinese script works for Chinese mainly because of the structure of the languages (note the plural). The European languages needed to develop more phonetic scripts since they have far more morphemes and the Chinese approach would not work.

> Sean> *I accept all this and I agree that Chinese is better at it
> Sean> than English. My only point here is that many English words
> Sean> do have some structure and it is at least sometimes possible
> Sean> to deduce the meaning without being told.*

>

> *And I inform you that the Chinese script is no worse at this.*

I don't deny it. In fact, I would accept that it is better.

> Sean> *But what can you tell from hearing the names spoken?
> >> Nothing. That's why I prefer reading a text, than having
> >> someone else read it out aloud for me to interpret.*

>

> Sean> *So here, English may be slightly ahead. Its "meaning hints"
> Sean> work when spoken as well as written.*

>

> *No. I prefer reading because I can proceed at my own pace, not the
> speaker/writer's pace. Moreover, homonyms are often distinguished in*

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- > *English spelling (e.g. "see" vs. "sea", "said" vs. "sad"), which means*
- > *I have to do less disambiguation (even though it is subconscious, it*
- > *still consumes energy). Also, words pronounced quite differently due*
- > *to vowel changes or stress changes are spelt the same, making it*
- > *easier to recognize the meaning directly from the glyphs, e.g. "says"*
- > *(from "say"), "read (past tense)" from "read", "urbaniZation" from*
- > *"URban".*

As a native speaker, I do not have these problems. I learnt to distinguish "see" and "sea" before I learnt to read. Note that for me "said" and "sad" are not homonyms. This could be one reason why non-natives find our script harder than the natives do. We have a lot of phonemes in English and many of our distinctions (e.g. said / sad) are not noticed by non-natives. Which are and are not noticed depends on your native language. For example, the Spanish often struggle to distinguish "sit" and "seat". Also, although the phonetic values of "i" in "write" and "written" are quite different, the association is automatic to me. I don't mean that they sound the same but that they are regarded as close and do not necessarily signal unrelated words.

- > *Sean> If I read or hear a word starting Xylo then I guess that it*
- > *Sean> has something to do with wood.*
- >
- > *What's a Xylophone? (That's the only "xylo-" word I know.)*

Xylo = to do with wood. Phone = to do with sound (e.g. telephone). It is an wooden instrument consisting of lots of bars (one per note) which you hit with a stick. Do you know glockenspiel (German word used in English). It is similar but the xylophone is made of wood. Xylo is a fairly obscure morpheme. I picked it as an example of what a highly literate speaker would know and recognise. Another example is "xylograph" which is a wood engraving.

SeÃfÂ;n O'LeathlÃfÂ³bhair