

The language learner as a value-assigning system: learning and performance
as wheeler-dealing with the real world.

- A discussion paper -

The dominant trend in cognitive psychology today is one which is most aptly characterised as a view of man as an information-processing system. Researchers in second language acquisition have been borrowing sporadically from this field and it may be worthwhile to adopt this approach more wholeheartedly as a heuristic procedure for research into the learning and performance of all kinds of language learners. The interest in this paper is in fact in the second or foreign language learner. One interesting avenue might be opened up by considering the language learner/performer as someone who not only processes information, that is decodes and encodes messages but as someone who is constantly assigning values to the many aspects of the total process such that certain routes are favoured at any given time with any given type of learner such that certain types of performance or learning may be interpreted in the light of this value assignment. In other words behind any type of performance we may see a network of decision-procedures. These decisions are not taken (necessarily) in a completely predetermined manner, mechanistically so to speak, but are the result of an 'on-line' (moment-to-moment) application of priorities: this is the value-assigning system (V.A.S.). Past and current research into second language acquisition may be interpreted as an outcome of certain decisions (having been taken by the learner (consciously and subconsciously, slowly or spontaneously) which in turn have been arrived at because certain things were deemed important by the system at the moment of performing or in the course of learning.

The easiest way to illustrate the basic idea behind the value-assigning system is informally and anecdotally. Imagine a person who has learnt Danish at one time in his life but has long since used it and has 'forgotten' it; he or she then returns to Denmark and finds that words long since forgotten mysteriously 'reappear'. Forgetting, as George Miller once observed may simply be a question of a reduction in accessibility: the 'items' remain with you but become almost impossible to retrieve. The arrival in Denmark triggers off a certain amount of unexpected behaviour because the items that were lost are retrieved, or in terms of V.A.S., the system has (reassigned) a higher value to them which has as its result an increase in their retrievability: the access routes are reopened. Another example might be the native speaker of English who lives more or less permanently in, say, Denmark and whose English shows signs of Danish and yet not long after returning home to England on holiday those Danish traces are less and less evident. The Danish influence may be a result of a number of factors that boost the value of Danish routes even while the English linguistic system is being operated:

1. Both English and Danish are used interchangeably: any reduction in the distance between them facilitates switching and means that less has to be held in a state of readiness in the course of everyday conversational exchange. Combining languages is an economy measure.
2. The languages are in any case typologically related: mixing can proceed at many levels (not just lexically).
3. The experience of being in Denmark primes the system: associations are formed between the general sense impressions of living in a Danish context induces a state of readiness (cf. Vildomec)