

# Day 5

Language Proficiency

# Questions to talk about

- ❑ How difficult are other languages?
- ❑ What do we mean by language proficiency?
- ❑ How do we determine language proficiency?
- ❑ How do different language abilities match to overall proficiency?
- ❑ Can a person be equally proficient in two languages?

# Perfect language candidates through the ages

**Hebrew:** the language of Adam and the Bible  
(sort of)

**Irish:** the synthesis of all the best parts of known  
languages (via Irish Christianity)

**Greek:** the language of logic, learning, and the  
Pantheon

**Sanskrit:** the language of logic, Hinduism, and  
Buddhism

**Chinese:** the language of scholarship and the  
Tao

**Latin:** the language of power, learning, and  
Christianity

**Arabic:** the language of Muhammad, Islam, and  
medieval scholarship

**French:** the language of diplomacy and good  
breeding

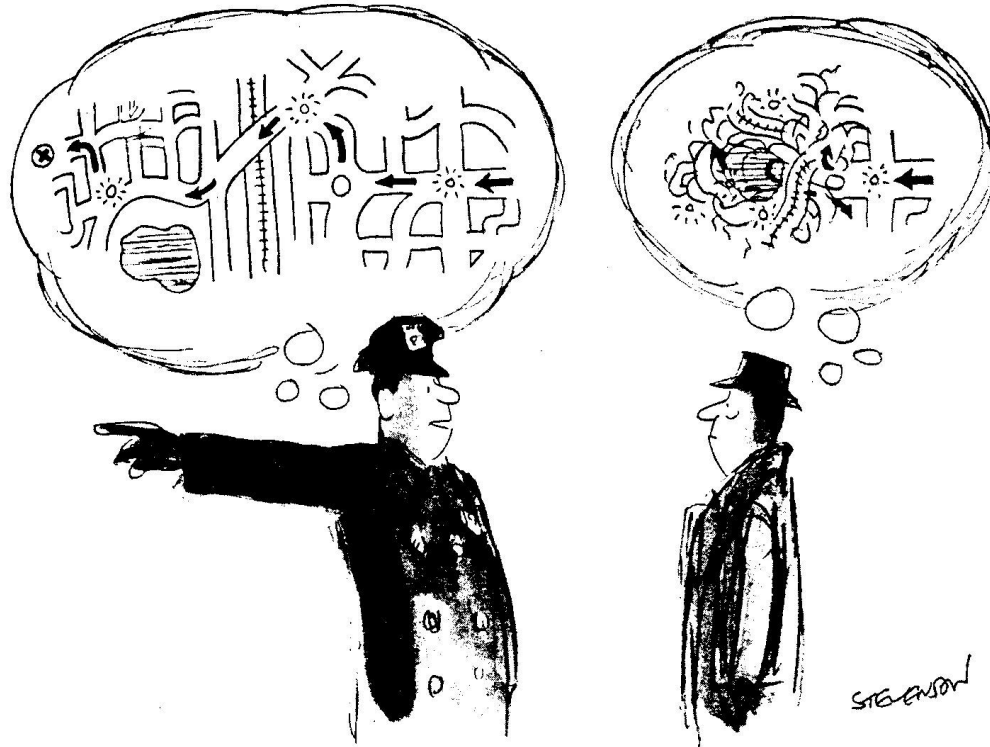
**English:** the language of power and capitalism

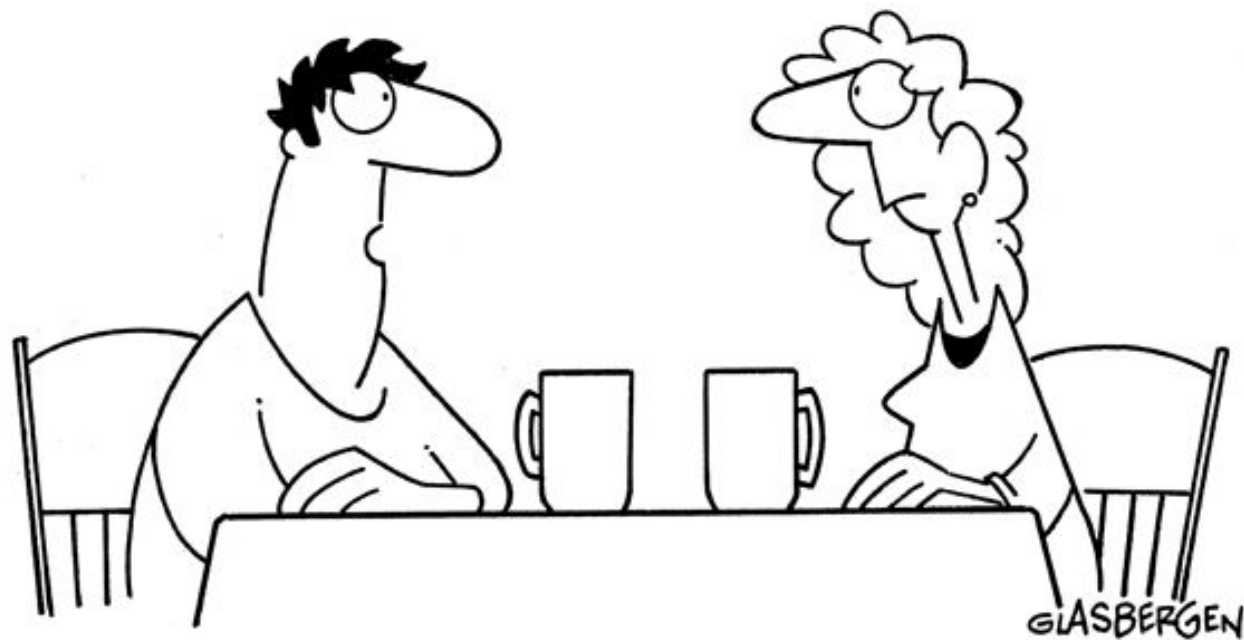
**Esperanto:** the synthesis of all the best of other  
languages (if we were European)

**“The dream of a perfect language has always been invoked as a solution to religious or political strife.”**

— Umberto Eco, *The search for the perfect language*

# Production versus Comprehension



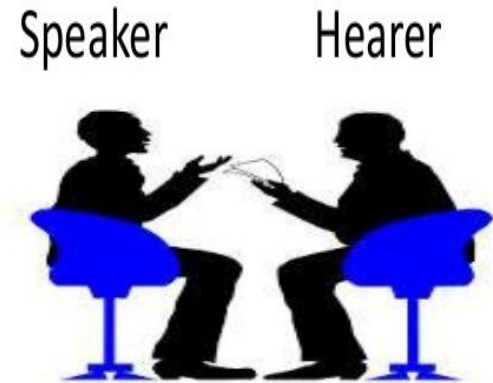


**“I’m trying to be a good listener, but you keep breaking my concentration by talking!”**

# Listening is harder than it sounds

1. Listener hears the speaker's language stream
2. The stream passes to the brain's auditory area for language recognition, "dechunking", & grammatical analysis
3. Dechunked signal passes to frontal cortex where it is processed together with contextual information
4. Speaker's intent is **decided on** based on additional **inferences** from speaker's body language
5. If transmission is successful listener **interprets** speaker's "full" meaning
6. Hearer prepares appropriate response or acts accordingly
7. If transmission fails, hearer requests clarification or repetition

It all starts with comprehension --  
Comprehension outpaces  
production.



# What about English is hard?

- How we use modal verbs -- shall/should, can/could, will/would, may/might
- How we use contractions -- he is/he's, is not/isn't, going to/gonna
- How we use phrasal verbs -- break up, break out, break down, break in
- How we use irregular verbs -- go-went-gone, bring-[brung/brang]-brought
- How we use articles & determiners -- a/an, the, some, any, none
- How we handle tense and aspect -- e.g. He would have had to have been going
- How we pronounce words -- vowels, rare consonants, word stress
- How we handle sentence intonation -- e.g. elision, sentence stress
- How we put words together in sentences -- phrase ordering, “do” support
- How we use slang and colloquial language

# How “hard” is [language x]?

Level of difficulty	
1	A cinch
2	Not so bad
3	Rough
4	You're kidding!

Language component	
A	Sounds & phonology
B	Grammar
C	Semantics
D	Writing system

French A2, B1, C1, D2

Spanish A1, B1, C1, D1

German A2, B2, C1, D1

Danish A2+, B2, C1, D2

Dutch A2, B2, C1, D1

Finnish A2, B3, C2, D2

Mandarin A3, B2, C3, D4

Japanese A2, B4, C4, D4

Turkish A2+, B3, C3, D2

Russian A2, B3, C2, D3

Polish A2+, B3, C2, D2

Arabic A3, B3, C4, D4



# What do we mean by language proficiency?

Historically, languages have been described as if they all shared the same grammatical fundamentals and this notion was based on Latin as the ideal standard.

This was a big mistake!

Grammatical categories & descriptors have to be relevant to the language being described and categories come and go in all languages over time.

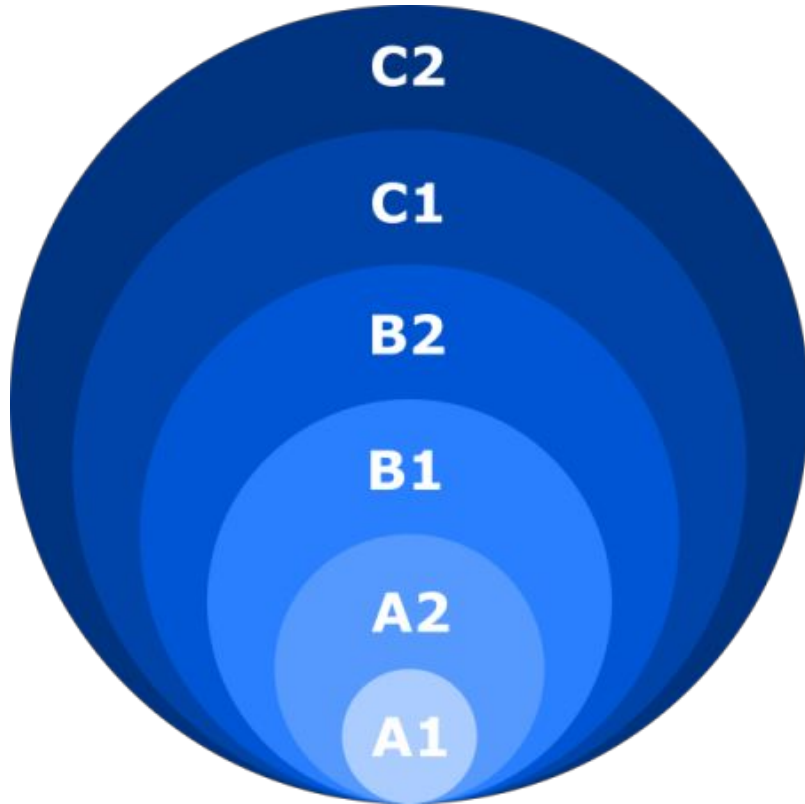
**“Even now I’d be hard-pressed to tell you what a nominative absolute is, I think that the word “genitive” sounds vaguely smutty, and I certainly don’t know, or care to know, how to diagram a sentence.”**

— Benjamin Dreyer, *Dreyer’s English*

Is proficiency in a language a measure of how well one understands the grammar of the language?

Historically, proficiency was determined by someone’s ability to describe a language and was tied more to reading proficiency than to speaking.

# CEFR proficiency levels



**C Level:**  
**Proficient User**

**B Level:**  
**Independent User**

**A Level: Basic User**

Cumulative hours to reach each level (In parens: the greater effort in going from one level to the next)

- Zero to A1 ~95 hrs
- A1 to A2 220 hrs (1.76x)
- A2 to B1 420 hrs (2.10x)
- B1 to B2 640 hrs (2.91x)
- B2 to C1 890 hrs (3.56x)
- C1 to C2 1240 hrs (3.54x)

# What the B1 Level Can Do

## The B1 Resume

- Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters related to age or life appropriate activities.
- Can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken.
- Can produce language on topics which are familiar or of personal interest.
- Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

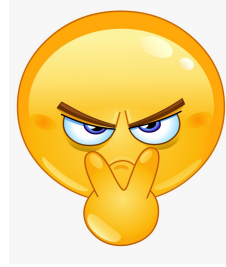
## What does a B1 level entail?

- Vocabulary size
- Speech characteristics
- Listening depth
- Reading & writing breadth
- Word formation
- Sentence complexity
- Discourse continuity
- Use of language supports

# What's the best predictor of proficiency?

- Having a large vocabulary seems to be a prerequisite for proficiency, especially in the receptive skills, reading and listening.
  - Evidence suggests a proficiency threshold of around 2,000 of the most frequent word families, i.e. about 6,000 distinct words and constructions
  - Setting the bar at 2,000 word families means learning about 20 word families a week over two years, starting from zero.
  - In addition to word families, learning has to include the 200 or so closed class words and morphemes used to build constructions & word families.
  - Learning words and learning grammar are two sides of the same coin, i.e. learning constructions
- Run, runs, ran, running
  - Rerun, run in, run on, run out, run down, run back, run around, etc
  - Runner, (a) run, runway, runaway, runtime, the runs, run around, etc.
  - Runny, runnily
  - (pf) Biec ~ biegnąć (biegnę, biegiesz, biegłem, biegłbym, biegnij, biegnący, biegany, etc.) ---- (impf) Biegać (biegam, biegasz, biegałem, biegałbym, biegaj, biegający, etc.)
  - Pobiec, przebiec, przybiec, wbiec, wybiec
  - Bieg (biegu, biegiem, biegi, biegów, etc), bieganina, biegacz, biegaczka, obieg, biegun, biegunka, biegielność
  - Biegowy, biegle, biegielny

# Vocabulary: Synonyms & Pushing the Semantics



## General seeing

- See (in, into, to, through)
- Look (at, in, into, after, down, up, by, through)
- Watch (out, for)

## Special seeing

- Gaze
- Peer
- Glimpse
- Stare
- Scan
- Spot
- Glance

## Emotional seeing

- Gape
- Goggle
- Ogle
- Leer
- Gawk
- Eye

## Purpose seeing

- Detect
- Notice
- Observe
- Inspect
- Espy
- Descry
- Peruse
- Behold

# How do we test proficiency?

## Speaking and Writing

Performance testing conducted and assessed by trained evaluators.

### Examples

Tell me about your family.

Write a story about the foods you like.

## Listening and Reading

Evaluation of speech and writing samples often with assessment via multiple choice or short answer testing. Responses usually recorded.

### Examples

Listen to a husband and wife discuss buying a car. .... Who wants to buy the pickup?

Read the following passage and answer the five questions that follow it.

# Accuracy versus fluency

## What is Accuracy ...

- In regard to listening?
- In regard to speaking?
- In regard to reading?
- In regard to writing?

## What is Fluency ...

- In regard to listening?
- In regard to speaking?
- In regard to reading?
- In regard to writing?

Overall, which is more important, accuracy or fluency?  
For a learner, what's the right balance between these two goals?  
How do you strike that balance?

# Proficiency of native speakers versus second language speakers

## Speakers of English

English Native Speakers

~370,000,000 < Wikipedia

ESL Speakers

~900,000,000 < Wikipedia

- How do you identify a native speaker?
- Do all native speakers have the same proficiency?
- Do all ESL speakers share the same proficiency?
- How do ESL speakers acquire their proficiency in English?
- Can a native speaker become less proficient in their first language?



# Tying particular communication skills to proficiency level

## Easy meanings

- Description
- Directives
- Inquiries

## Harder meanings

- Emotions
- Indirect speech
- Social norms

**“A foreign language is like a frail, delicate muscle. If you do not use it, it weakens.”**

— Jhumpa Lahiri, *In other words*

# The emotional connection to language

- German seems angry, Japanese (formal Japanese anyway) seems insecure and nerdy, French seems snobby
- Swahili sounds warmer than Swedish
- Russian sounds like a foreign language played backwards on a phonograph
- Dutch sounds like some weird mutant English
- I can't fail to notice that people start shouting at me when I try to use French and are rather polite if I stick to English
- Czech seems a hilarious language, to the extent that you can't imagine anything serious being spoken in Czech

**“I can express myself more fully in Welsh ... because English has a coldness about it. Expressing things through Welsh seems to come from the heart - from one's whole being.”**

— Robat Powell, quoted in Mark Abley, *Spoken here*.

Check out **Quora.com** for randomly posed questions about how hard or easy a certain language is.

# “It’s time to eat” -- implications & inferences

<b>Linguistic</b>	<i> / It’s time to eat /</i> is an example of an English sentence.	Goal is purely linguistic
<b>Social support</b>	If you’re hungry, you could say: “It’s time to eat.”	Goal is to state a social norm
<b>Rhetorical</b>	He said, “It’s time to eat.”	Goal is to report speech
<b>Context setting</b>	In Germany at 6 o’clock, it’s time to eat.	Goal is factual reporting
<b>Context referring</b>	It’s time to eat. You must be hungry.	Goal is explanatory
<b>Action spurring</b>	It’s time to eat. Let’s go.	Goal is to initiate action

# Manipulating language

