

## ENGLISH IS NOT FRENCH; FRENCH IS NOT ENGLISH

By Michael Kelly

This is a common sense observation. It is obvious that English and French are not the same. But the other day I was asked by someone, not a linguist, to examine a primary school introduction to French with a view to estimating its relevance to starting English in the primary school. Naturally I was dumbfounded.

Once one has looked at situational emphasis to the introduction of a foreign second language and come to the elementary conclusion that they operate whatever the language to be learnt, one has not begun to compare the languages as languages. Of course you start a new language at school with situational exercises (the class, the teacher, the school, coming to school, behaviour in school, objects and events within the class-school-home environment), and of course you proceed from listening/understanding to speaking, to reading, to writing. But these teaching and learning strategies do not tell us about the distinctiveness of two such different languages as French and English.

While thinking about this matter I came across two highly relevant papers: one of a primarily linguistic bias; one sociolinguistic. I offer a distillation of the arguments of these two papers here because they are profoundly illuminating and suggestive. I make no claims that they are definitive or tell the whole story. However they have at least immediate and obvious relevance to anyone interested in bilingualism, in school or in the wider society.

### Contrastive Analysis.

This is the title of a paper by Paul van Buren in *Techniques in Applied Linguistics*, ed. J. Allen & S. Pit Corder (Oxford University Press, 1974). The paper is quite complex and theoretical. For present purposes it will be enough to concentrate on some of Mr. van Buren's examples and arguments with regard to French and English.

He takes what he calls an 'everyday example' of an English sentence:

- (1) I've been waiting for six hours.

He offers as a translation of this the French sentence:

- (2) J'attends depuis six heures.

He immediately points out that it would be rash to make generalisations about tenses for example in the languages or about the one-to-one translatability of meaning between the French and the English sentences. The example given neatly illustrates this need for care as the French sentence could be correctly put into English as (1) I've been waiting for six hours or (1a) I've been waiting since six o'clock. What then can we really compare or identify as translatable grammatical equivalences with regard to these sentences? In English we have an example of the 'perfect continuous tense' + 'for' and in the French we have an example of the present tense + 'depuis'. We should be very rash to make generalisations about the grammars and vocabularies of the two languages from such grammatical labels. We have already seen that the meaning of the French sen-

tense form is ambiguously translatable in English. So in what sense are the sentence forms and their equivalents.

If the ambiguity had not been pointed out, how would we translate a French sentence of simple surface form?

- (3) *J'attends depuis Noël.*  
 (4\*) *J've been waiting for Christmas.*  
 or (4) *J've been waiting since Christmas.*

The starred example (\*) is wrong. Just as it would be wrong to translate sentence (2) as (1) *I've been waiting since six hours.*

I do not want to labour the point, I hope it is clear enough: one-to-one equivalents of tense, grammatical markers, vocabulary, meaning, seldom operate in complex and idiomatic languages like English and French.

If we generalise prematurely about 'tense' and 'aspect' with the two languages we soon commit errors. Mr. van Buren offers the following sentences that might look appropriate at first sight yet five of the six 'possibilities' are errors:

- The boy has waited for six hours.  
 \*The boy has been waiting for six hours.  
 \*The boy is waiting for six hours.  
 The boy waited for six hours.  
 The boy has waited since Christmas.  
 \*The boy has been waiting since Christmas.  
 \*The boy is waiting since Christmas.  
 \*The boy waited since Christmas.  
 Le garçon attend ici depuis six heures.  
 \*Le garçon attend ici depuis Noël.  
 \*Le garçon a attendu ici depuis six heures.  
 \*Le garçon a attendu ici depuis Noël.

We have at the very least to concentrate on the meaningfulness of the sentences we use and translate from one language into another. Syntax and meaning must be brought together. Where translation from English to French and French to English is involved this must be understood as implying that translation equivalents will not necessarily share structural properties and that idioms will make apparently grammatical sentences incorrect from time to time if we generalise about the languages superficially or make analogies carelessly from the structures of one language to the structures of another. The languages are different.

Let any interested reader, whether doubtful or otherwise, consider the following permutations of grammatical/semantic forms of twenty translation equivalents in English and French. After looking at them closely I wonder how anyone could suggest that the languages might have points of interdependence as far as primary level language teaching is concerned. The sentences, correct and incorrect, are taken from Mr. van Buren's paper:

- 1- I started waiting five hours ago  
*J'ai commencé à attendre il y a cinq heures*
- 2- I stopped waiting five hours ago  
*J'ai fini d'attendre il y a cinq heures*
- 3- I started waiting at five o'clock  
*J'ai commencé à attendre à cinq heures*

- 4- I stopped waiting at five o'clock  
*J'ai arrêté d'attendre à cinq heures*
- 5- I'm waiting (for the bus)  
*J'attends (l'autobus)*
- 6- I've been waiting for you (for some time)  
*Je t'attends (depuis un moment)*
- 7- I've been waiting since five o'clock  
*J'attends depuis cinq heures*
- 8- I've been waiting for five hours  
*J'attends depuis cinq heures*
- 9- I waited (but he didn't turn up)  
*J'ai attendu (mais il n'est pas venu)*
- 10- I waited from three onwards  
*J'ai attendu à partir de trois heures*
- 11- I waited for six hours (but he didn't come)  
*J'ai attendu (pendant) six heures (mais il n'est pas venu)*
- 12- I waited for six hours (and he finally came)  
*J'ai attendu (pendant) six heures (et il est enfin arrivé)*
- 13- I waited for six hours (before he came)  
*J'ai attendu six heures (avant qu'il n'arrive)*
- 14- I waited from three until five  
*J'ai attendu de trois heures à cinq*
- 15- I've waited since five o'clock  
*J'attends depuis cinq heures*  
 (more commonly: *ça fait depuis cinq heures que j'attends*)
- 16- I've waited for six hours  
*J'attends depuis six heures*
- 17- I had waited since five (when he finally came)  
*J'attendais depuis cinq heures (quand enfin il est arrivé)*
- 18- I had waited for six hours (before he finally came)  
*J'ai attendu six heures (avant qu'il se présente)*
- 19- I'd been waiting since five (when he came)  
*J'attendais depuis cinq heures (lorsqu'il est arrivé)*
- 20- I'd been waiting for six hours (before he came)  
*J'avais attendu six heures (avant qu'il n'arrive).*

The following are idiomatically ungrammatical with reference to the permutations theoretically conceivable:

- \* I'm waiting for five hours (permutation 8)
- \* *J'ai attendu depuis cinq heures* (permutation 8)
- \* I waited for six hours (when he came) (permutation 13)
- \* *J'avais attendu depuis six heures* (permutation 18)
- \* I'd been waiting since five o'clock (before he came) (permutation 17)
- \* *J'ai attendu depuis cinq heures* (permutation 11).

### Sociolinguistic Features

The preceding section was an attempt to argue by illustration that English and French are highly dissimilar languages and it would be an unproductive exercise to try for equivalences of grammar and idiom in initial teaching of the two languages. The languages have highly independent structures and it would be confusing if they were not taught independently from the beginning of formal learning.

I should now like to turn to a piece of research on emotional attitude and social attitude differences between English and French speakers. Here I rely heavily on Susan Ervin's paper, 'Language and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) Content in French-English Bilinguals' in *Cross-Cultural Studies of Behaviour*, ed. I. Al-Isa and W. Dennis (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970). Of course, the findings of the paper are tentative and the author expresses an awareness of the need for further research. However it may, when brought down from the heights of the specific research, have some general, common life level, suggestiveness. It refers to English and French speakers in an American context but I would submit that the differences between language users predicted in that context may well be worth considering wherever speakers of those particular two languages are met.

The differences predicted were as follows :

- 1- For women, greater achievement need for the anglophones.  
This prediction was based on the ambivalent attitudes towards the role of housewife incorporated in anglophone education, in contrast with the French view and the greater sex-role difference in France.
- 2- More emphasis on recognition or respect from others on the part of anglophones.
- 3- More domination by elders among francophones.
- 4- More individualism, self-determination and withdrawal from occasions of face-to-face aggressiveness on the part of francophones.
- 5- More disrespect towards seniors among anglophones.
- 6- More verbal aggression towards equals among francophones.
- 7- More physical aggressiveness among anglophones.
- 8- More guilt-feelings among francophones and more frequent attempts to escape blame among anglophones.

I have paraphrased the expressions actually used by Miss Ervin and have made them more general and comprehensive. Her results showed the most significant effects in the predicted direction in items 6, 4, & 1.

Miss Ervin's predictions were based on earlier studies of child rearing, socialisation and value-systems among English-speaking and French-speaking communities. I offer a view of her paper here not because I believe that it is conclusive or convincing in any sweeping way but because I do believe that differences of values and emotional attitudes and behaviour exist between the world's English-speakers and French-speakers and I further believe that awareness of these, and systematic examination of them and discussion of them and reflection on them, must be useful and productive in situations where speakers of the languages, representatives of the socio-psycho-cultural traditions, find themselves face to face or thrust together in one society. The exploration and analysis of differences need not be controversial, but it should be illuminating and lead to realistic mutual respect and understanding. Denying differences will not help, nor will cultivating unexamined and prejudiced stereotypes. What is called for is open-minded observation of attitudes and behaviour, examination of the causes behind them, in detail with particularised instances, not in rhetoric or vague generalisations so that mutual adaptation towards a harmony based on real understanding can be hoped for. Cameroon seems to me an ideal testing ground for this.

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