

“Simplicity in one part of the language may be balanced by complexity in another part.” – Lars-Gunnar Andersson

This can be interpreted to imply that the following is a tendency among natural languages:

Phonological Complexity + Morphological Complexity = Constant

While this has been taken as an article of faith by some, to my knowledge there is no empirical evidence to confirm the hypothesis. Many researches disagree, as evidenced by the following quote:

“It is far from true that all languages are equally complex.” –Jacques Guy

北京首都机场欢迎您

Text from a sign in the Bei Jing airport welcoming travelers to the city



Road sign in Farsi (Persian)



Billboard in Swahili advertising a restaurant in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

United States Defense Language Institute (DLI) Language Difficulty Scale

Category 1 (“Easy” languages): Spanish, French, Dutch, Romanian, Portuguese

Category 2 (“Moderately difficult” languages): German, Indonesian

Category 3 (“Difficult” languages): Hebrew, Hindi, Turkish, Thai, Finnish, Georgian, Uzbek

Category 4 (“Most difficult” languages): Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Pashto

Source: *Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center Catalog* (Monterey, California: Defense Language Institute. 2010). Retrieved from <http://www.dliflc.edu/index.html> on January 19, 2012.

Although **German** is more closely related to English than any Category 1 language (which includes all of the Romance languages), the United States DLI believes that it is more difficult for native English speakers to learn. This partially contradicts Andersson’s assertion that “[t]he difficult thing about learning a language is the vocabulary...” since English has more recognizable cognates with German than with Romanian and very few (other than English borrowings) with Indonesian, a Malayo-Polynesian language related to Hawaiian.

Are the languages on the top really easier to learn than the languages on the bottom?



Category 1 Language (Spanish)



Category 2 Language (German)



Category 3 Language (Hindi)



Category 4 Language (Korean)

How can we apply this understanding to our teaching?

- The amount of difficulty experienced by ELLs will be based, at least in part, on the grammatical structure of their L1 and how closely their L1 is related to English. All other things being equal, native speakers of Germanic and Romance languages will probably find English easier to learn than native speakers of other Indo-European languages (such as Russian, Hindi, Farsi, Greek, Armenian, etc.), who will probably find English easier to learn than native speakers of languages completely unrelated to English.
- Nevertheless, the concept of language complexity is itself complex and contentious. For example, do phonological complexity and morphological complexity contribute equally to the difficulty of learning a second language? Do speakers of more morphologically complex (highly synthetic) languages generally find it easier to learn a more analytic language like English than speakers of other more analytic languages, or vice versa? These are open questions.
- Teaching strategy applying this understanding: **not all students will find English equally easy or difficult to learn. Some will make faster progress because they speak a language structurally similar or historically related to English. Especially in classes with students who speak a range of native languages, we must be patient with and have empathy for those students who experience greater difficulty for any reason, including the fact that their L1 may contribute to the challenges they encounter in their learning. We also have to be careful to distinguish language and ethnicity: native Japanese speakers may find English more difficult to learn than native German speakers not because of cultural or biological reasons, but because German is closely related to English and Japanese is completely unrelated to English.**

Are some languages harder than others?

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