

Language

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Language is a very important part in our life, we carry it with us through all the steps, processes, moments experiences of our life, language built us and make us grow and the most important thing is that it grows with us, changes, modifies itself, and becomes more appropriate and specific. As we pointed out language help us to create and understand the world around us, gives meaning to everything and gives birth to emotions and feelings; a world without language would be meaningless and very lonely.

Language it's what help us grow up, the more we learn through it, the more we desire to experience and study in deep, leading us to new prospective, opening our mind to more specific and deep concepts, ideas, projects, goals. We really can't live our life to the best without it, we are not the same without language and we can only give it the right importance, the importance making our life being in contact and in relation with people, the importance of making us feel alive and passionate of the world we are living with, the importance to fulfill our life to the top.

Language is very often considered something that all of us take for granted, something we learn when we are so little that we can't even remember how, something that for all of us was always part of our lives. Helen Keller with her need of language to give sense to life, Frederick Douglass with his ways of learning and Amy Tan with the importance of the "Mother Tongue" language, convey to us a totally different view of how language changes, develops and gives meaning to our lives. For Helen Keller, when she was around seven years old, language was a mystery.

In a selection of her biography “ The Story of my life”, she describes how, because of her blindness and deafness before she was taught to communicate and think, she was like being lost in the dark, in a world she didn’t know, in a world without feelings. She uses a very impressive metaphor of a ship surrounded by fog that tries to figure out the way to reach the shore, as we can read “ I was like that ship before my education began, only I was without compass or sounding-line and had no way of knowing how ear the harbor was”.

A this point of her life she cannot hear and see, she has no real emotions, she cannot be able to access her feelings also because she has no way in to thought process. In her description of herself we can see that she totally lack a sense of self, she doesn’t know who she is, she is totally lost in her world, in her “ sea in a dense fog” waiting “ with beating heart for something to happen”.

To emphasize better this emotion she uses a second metaphor: “ Light! Give me light! Was the wordless cry of my soul” This is what she deeply hope for herself, she hope that something can happen and change her life, that can give her happiness or in a more contextualized way, can be an enlightenment experience for her. This something can only be knowledge and the learning process started by her teacher.

When this starts she begins to feel emotion, sorrow and grief, before she didn’t know even what a doll was but now that doll has finally a meaning, a meaning full of emotions, the darkness of having feelings and don’t know what to do with them is now light, it’s now idea of freedom, empowerment,

finally freedom to communicate with her family. This experience gives Helen a new life, gives her – her – identity, a life with emotion and feelings, a life that has reason to be lived so that she can eventually say “ For the first time longed for a new day to come”.

Language and knowledge saved her life, enlightens her way of living and gave meaning to her world. This is one the real power of language. Frederick Douglass describes the process of learning, of his coming to literacy. He was born as a slave and his mistress started the process to instruct him. She is helping him in the beginning but in the end she ceased to instruct him, thinking that in knowledge laid the danger. In this moment he becomes aware of the reason why slavery and literacy are incompatible.

At that time slaves were kept uneducated to avoid rebellion and escape, to keep the level of discontent out and also because masters couldn't justify how they were better than slaves. But all these reasons were unknown to him in the beginning, he only saw learning as a positive thing, he is exciting and when she stopped teaching him he started developing strategies to learn. The first one was to make friends between the little white boys in the street, he used bread he stole from his house in order to “ bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge”.

When he was twelve “ the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon [his] heart”, now reading from book put him in touch with a lot of different topics and makes him aware of how is the world around him. Here we have a change in his way of seeing knowledge, he wants to kill

himself because he doesn't have the remedy to free himself and to stop slavery in the larger system. He thinks that " learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given [him] a view of [his] wretched condition, without the remedy.

In this situation we assist at the second strategy to learn, he understood how to write from the initials of those parts of the ship for which they were intended and later copying from the books of his mistress' son, in this way finally succeeded in learning how to write. The most important thing in the passage is that after regretting his own existence because of " the power of truth" he read in books, from the same source, in other words from knowledge, he found the strength to react and to live his life with the hope of being free.

His experience shows how knowledge and learning can be in the beginning and in particular case a " double-edged sword" but eventually it always brings to light the real meaning and in this case, condition, of things. It's also interested notice how knowledge is used by people sometimes to hide the real truth of things taking advantage of other people situation. The most import point is noticed how a lot of different kind of learning strategies can be possible and how learning is achievable trough many different sources, experiences and interesting thoughts that bring the mind to find the right way and path to reach knowledge.

Amy Tan in Mother Tongue gives us a wonderful interpretation of the connection between languages and cultures. She starts describing the different kind of English she speaks, one is the English she learned in school,

formal and grammatically perfect, the English she speaks with her husband, a language of intimacy and the English she uses with her mother, the English she grew up with.

Now the attention moves to her mother English, she describes it as “ broken, as if it were damaged and needed to be fixed, as if it lacked a certain wholeness and soundness”. In the beginning she appreciated that, she doesn’t think that her mother English has limited her life in a negative way or that the “ broken” language of her mother was synonymous of stupidity; she is able to read about economics, to communicate with stockbroker.

For all her friends, her mother’s English was impossible to understand but for her, that language is “ vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world”. In the second part of her essay Amy Tan considers instead how her mother English impacted her and how when she was growing her mother’s English limited her possibilities in life. She gives us examples of that, affecting result on achievement test,

IQ tests, SAT, problems that she had with word analogies and even on the innumerable possible answers she thought for a single simple question on an English test, because of the different kind of mentality. From here she talks about the stereotype of Asian students that are good in math and not in English, which follows in the fact that professors and people in general push them to continue their study in math and Science because the answer for a question is precise and only one.

But because she is “rebellion in nature” she chose English major “disproving assumption made about [her]”. In the end she tells us that later she needed a reader for her stories; that reader is her mother. She began writing stories using all the English she knows, connected her mother’s English, full of intent, passion and imagery with the formal English structure to preserve the essence of that internal language.

This is for Amy Tan her winning point, the key for her success as a writer. Her mother tongue it’s not only the language spoken by her mother but it refers also to her culture, providing in this way a deeper, more meaningful and wider side of communication full of aspects and details deriving from both sides and creating a unique and successful kind of language. After considering all of these, her mother tongue is not a limitation but only a positive improvement to her way of writing.