

Spiritual Transformation

Sandra Fotos

I Introduction

This presentation uses a cognitive model from the field of psycholinguistics to explain how individual spiritual transformation might occur, and identifies the importance of observation of the appropriate behavior of others in facilitating the transformation process. Using quotations from the Writings of the Baha'i Faith, I will first establish the connection between personal transformation and the development of solutions to the problems facing human society as we move into the 21st century. I will also present evidence suggesting that there is a causal relationship between personal transformation and the opportunity to observe examples of spiritual qualities and attributes in the immediate social environment. Next, I will introduce a language processing model which explains how it is possible for learners to convert formal linguistic knowledge about a language into the ability to actually use the language naturally in communication. Finally, I will apply the model to personal spiritual transformation to see if it can inform this critical process.

II Personal Transformation, Social Order and the Role of Example

Spiritual transformation has always been the essence of the religious experience. Throughout history, the founders of the world religions have inspired their followers to purify their hearts and conduct themselves with righteousness. The Revelation of Baha'u'llah, which addresses the collective destiny of the human race as well as the personal salvation of the individual, emphasizes the central role of personal transformation for both processes. Baha'u'llah writes:

Is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? (cited in *Call to the Nations*; p. 12)

Addressing the same theme, 'Abdu'l-Baha emphasizes:

Today the most pressing of all tasks is the purification of character, the reforming of morals, and rectification of conduct...The reason for God's having made Himself manifest...is none other than the training of all men's souls and the refining of the characters of all on earth (*Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*; p. 10).

Shoghi Effendi writes:

Humanity, through suffering and turmoil, is swiftly moving on towards its destiny...One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely the

extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth...the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Baha'u'llah (from a letter dated September 24, 1924 written to the US; *Baha'i Administration*, p. 66).

These quotations make it clear that personal transformation and global transformation are related. In fact, here in Japan, the slogan of our Three Year Plan is, "I Will Change: Japan Will Change." We all understand what the necessary first step must be. A most critical question at this point, then, is how such transformation occurs. We are told by Baha'u'llah that an indispensable key to the spiritualization process is the daily reading of the Holy Writings and recitation of Obligatory prayers (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*; 173-174, p. 21; 33, p. 30; 115, p. 61; 149, p. 73-4). Clearly, the Creative Word is endowed with the power to trigger a restructuring process within the individual (Jordan, 1968).

The role of example appears to be another key. Consider the following passage from the Writings of Baha'u'llah:

Whose ariseth, in this day, to aid Our Cause, and summoneth to his assistance the hosts of a praiseworthy character and upright conduct, the influence flowing from such an action will, most certainly, be diffused throughout the whole world. (*Gleanings*, CXXXI, p. 287)

'Abdu'l-Baha writes:

If a small number of people gather lovingly together, with absolute purity and sanctity...that gathering will exert its influence over the earth. The nature of that band of people, the words they speak, the deeds they do, will unleash the bestowals of heaven...(*Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*; p. 81)

Shoghi Effendi notes:

Just one mature soul, with spiritual understanding and a profound knowledge of the Faith, can set a whole country ablaze...(From a letter dated 25 October 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer. *Guidelines for Teaching*, p. 315)

These and similar passages (see Jordan, 1968) refer to the significant effects which the actions of spiritually transformed individuals have upon others. Baha'u'llah's son, 'Abdu'l-Baha, The Perfect Exemplar of His Father's Faith, profoundly influenced all who met Him.

...in dealing with each individual, 'Abdu'l-Baha demonstrated a facet of what each person must become in his dealings with others. He raised every act to a universal level by showing that people must become spiritual beings...(*239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Baha's Journey in America*, p. 165).

A second critical question, therefore, is how observation of the actions of people who exemplify spiritual virtues and qualities assist in the transformation process. Today I will attempt to answer these two questions by

presenting a cognitive model of how personal transformation might take place and identifying the crucial role of example in the individual's restructuring process. This model is derived from recent psycholinguistic theory and has been empirically tested in a series of investigations of the process of second language acquisition (Fotos, 1991, 1993, 1994; Fotos & Ellis, 1991). To clarify why an essentially spiritual process can be interpreted through cognitive psychological analysis, let us recall that 'Abdu'l-Baha has said that cognition, or the function of the human intellect, is a gift from God.

All blessings are divine in origin but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation...(Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 60).

God's greatest gift to man is that of intellect, or understanding. (*The Reality of Man*, p. 10)

It is also necessary at this point to address considerations as to why, of the various cognitive domains, language is so important. We must recognize that the distinctive characteristic of human learning is that it is a process of creating meaning. When children learn language, they are actually learning the foundations of learning itself (Halliday, 1993). Thus, in a language-based theory of learning (Halliday, 1993), language is not merely a domain of human knowledge, it is the essential condition for the creation of knowledge. From this perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that spiritual transformation probably occurs as a language-based cognitive process. If this is so, a cognitive model used to explain language learning might also have application to personal transformation as well.

III Formal Instruction and the Development of Communicative Ability: A Language Processing Model of Two Types of Knowledge.

First let me make a few introductory remarks about cognitive psychology. The field began in the mid-1950s and, as the name suggests, its goal is to provide an account of the processes and structures involved in cognition (Eysenck, 1990). Cognitive psychology is based on an information-processing approach which suggests that information from the environment becomes knowledge by being processed by a series of systems: attention; perception; short-term memory; and long term memory. Several types of knowledge have been identified. First, there is formal knowledge about something, for example about the rules and forms of a language. This is called explicit knowledge. And there is also knowledge of how to do something, such as how to drive a car or how to speak a language. This is called implicit knowledge.

An important question in the field of language learning is how the first type of knowledge is converted to the second. For example, if you study a new vocabulary word in a foreign language class, you have only developed explicit knowledge. You can't go out and immediately use that word in natural conversation because your implicit knowledge system has not been developed yet. Unlike explicit knowledge, which is consciously gained, creation of implicit knowledge is an unconscious process, rather like the way a child learns a first language. It occurs over time, through exposure to meaning-focused situations.

These two knowledge systems are separate, and developing one system does not develop the other. This is why those of us in the field of English language education in Japan encounter students who have studied the formal properties of English for over six years, yet cannot use the language to communicate even very simple

things. This is an example of the fact that the ability to speak a language depends on the development of implicit knowledge, not explicit knowledge.

Now we must ask if there is any connection between formal instruction on a language point and its eventual acquisition by the learner. The answer is yes. The process of noticing has been suggested (Ellis, 1990; Fotos, 1993; Schmidt, 1990) to be the interface between formal instruction and the development of communicative ability. Noticing makes it possible to convert formal knowledge of language points into communicative language use. Let me explain how this takes place.

(1) Formal instruction, such as a language lesson, only develops explicit knowledge of rules and grammar. However, after the development of explicit knowledge about a language point, the learner's consciousness of the new point has been raised. Often the learner continues to be aware of the new point after the lesson. This type of awareness resulting from formal instruction has been called "consciousness raising" in psycholinguistic theory (Ellis, 1990; Fotos, 1993; Schmidt, 1990; Sharwood Smith, 1981; 1991). Consciousness raising is increasingly seen as critical to the language acquisition process because it leads to noticing. Once a learner is conscious of a language point, if she then has subsequent opportunities to hear the new language point used in communicative language use, she tends to notice it.

(2) Why is noticing so important? Because it is through noticing that restructuring of the learner's implicit knowledge system is initiated. When a language point is noticed frequently, the learner unconsciously compares the new input with her existing system of linguistic knowledge. She unconsciously constructs new linguistic hypotheses on the basis of the differences between the new information and her current system. Then she tests the new hypotheses—again unconsciously—by attending to language input and also by getting feedback on her own output using the new form. In this way, implicit knowledge has been created. Yet everything has been done unconsciously, within the long term memory system. It is very important to recognize that, because of the nature of the restructuring process, the learner begins to produce the new language form only after a delay.

To review what I've just said, people learn to speak languages through meaning-focused use of the language in communicative situations. Consequently, formal instruction cannot be expected to enable the learner to immediately use and understand a new language point. What formal instruction *does* do is to develop explicit knowledge, which then leads to consciousness of the language point, so that it is noticed in subsequent communicative input. After it has been noticed a number of times, the new language point eventually becomes implicit knowledge through unconscious restructuring of the learner's internal linguistic system. It is only at this time that the new form is available for use in communicative situations.

IV. A Language Processing Model of Spiritual Transformation

This model can be applied to the process of spiritual transformation. Linguistically, the model was based on five events: formal instruction on a language point, consciousness raising and continued awareness of the new point, repeated acts of noticing the new point in communicative input, and the unconscious process of restructuring the learner's implicit knowledge system, this stage resulting in appearance of the new point in the learner's own speech. Are there analogous events in the process of spiritual transformation? Let us examine the process.

(1) Formal instruction: I would like to suggest that when an individual reads the Holy Writings, recites prayers, or listens to others, this constitutes formal instruction on desirable spiritual attributes and qualities. It is beyond our scope here to say anything about the tremendous range of virtues and qualities which humanity is

called to, other than to note that we are commanded to pray and read the Writings on a daily basis. Yet, as we found with language learning, merely reading the Writings may not be enough. Explicit knowledge by itself may not be sufficient for transformation, just as explicit linguistic knowledge is not sufficient for the development of communicative ability. We need consciousness raising and noticing.

(2) Consciousness raising and continued awareness: In the Most Holy Book, Baha' u'llah commands:

Give ear unto the verses of God...Through them the soul of man is caused to wing its flight towards the Dayspring of Revelation, and the heart of every true believer is suffused with light. (*Kitab-i-Aqdas*, 148, p. 73)

Please note that it is the souls of the true believers who will be suffused with light through exposure to the Holy Writings. This suggests that the condition of being conscious of a virtue or quality depends on the spiritual receptivity of the particular person. We all know of cases where someone—perhaps a person we were trying to teach—read many prayers and passages from the Writings, yet did not accept their contents. As with successful language learners, the development of consciousness in response to formal instruction is probably related to both motivation and the application of various learning strategies such as attention and effort. For those who are motivated, there is no doubt that daily exposure to the Writings can create a powerful awareness of the presence of desirable attributes, and one's own need to acquire them.

(3) Noticing: Given the critical role ascribed to noticing in the restructuring process, it is clear why the Central Figures of the Baha'i Faith put such stress on deeds. Deeds provide the examples of spiritual attributes and qualities which are then noticed by others. However, we know that people can “pick up” languages without formal instruction simply by being involved in communicative acts. In the same way, the passages from the Writings cited in the beginning of this presentation indicate that the deeds of the spiritually mature can influence those around them to become aware of and even “pick up” spiritual qualities, even if “formal instruction” through saying prayers and reading the Writings hasn't occurred.

(4). Developing intrinsic knowledge through restructuring: Unconsciously, by comparison of noticed spiritual attributes with our own internal system, we form new hypotheses. And finally, we test these hypotheses by manifesting the attributes in our own behavior. However, let us not forget that although we may develop explicit knowledge quickly, achievement of implicit knowledge is gradual and under internal processing constraints. Thus, people must be allowed to transform themselves in their own time. We must learn to be patient, not only with those around us but with ourselves as well, while the necessary processing occurs.

References

- 'Abdu'l-Baha. (1912). *Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Baha during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- Call to the Nations: Extracts from the Writings of Shoghi Effendi* (1977) Universal House of Justice.
- Effendi, Shoghi. (1960). *Baha'i Administration*. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust.

- Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed Second Language Acquisition: Learning in the Classroom*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Eysenck, M. (1990). *Cognitive Psychology: An International Review*. New York: Wiley.
- Fotos, S. (1991). Formal instruction and second language acquisition: Towards a cognitive model of the relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge. *Bulletin of Kogakuin University*, 29, 119-133.
- Fotos, S. (1993). Consciousness raising and noticing through focus on form: Grammar task performance versus formal instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 14: 385-407.
- Fotos, S. (1994). Integrating grammar instruction and communicative language use through grammar consciousness-raising tasks. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27: 323-352.
- Fotos, S. & R. Ellis. (1991). Communicating about grammar. A task-based approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25, 605-628.
- Gleanings from the Writings of Baha' u' llah*. Wilmette, Il. Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- Halliday, M. (1993). Towards a language-based theory of learning. *Linguistics and Education*, 5, 93-116.
- Jordan, D. (1968). Becoming your true self. *World Order*, 3, 43-51.
- Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. (1993) Haifa: Universal House of Justice.
- The Reality of Man*. Wilmette, Il: Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- Schmidt, R. (1990). Psychological mechanisms underlying second language fluency. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 4, 357-386.
- Sharwood Smith, M. (1981). Consciousness-raising and the second language learner. *Applied Linguistics*, 2, 159-168.
- Sharwood Smith, M. (1991). Speaking to many minds: On the relevance of different types of language information to the L2 learner. *Second Language Research*, 7, 118-132.
- Ward, A. (1979). *239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Baha's Journey in America*. Wilmette, Il. Baha'i Publishing Trust.
- Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*. Wilmette, Il. Baha'i Publishing Trust.