

How Raymond learns languages (and why it's not working)

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Whenever I wander into the subject of languages here, a commenter will ask me what my language-acquisition technique is. I have refrained from describing it since it is very peculiar to my way of learning, and I doubt it will work for most people. But since people seem to be interested, here it is. I like to learn a language by learning its rules first, then converting the rules to instinct while picking up vocabulary. This is backwards from how children learn a language, which is entirely instinctual and heavy on vocabulary acquisition with the rules coming only much later when they reach school and need to fine-tune their skills. First, sign up for a language class. In addition to providing a structured environment for learning, it'll be the only place to get pronunciation practice without having to impose on friends and relatives. It also forces you to keep up. You might skip a week if you're just meeting with a friend, but you're not going to skip a week if you are attending a class, because the class is just going to keep going without you. Next, get a pocket grammar book. I picked up my Swedish grammar book for \$2 at a used bookstore. It's called *Simplified Swedish Grammar* by Edwin J. Vickner, published by Augustana Book Concern in 1934. (That's right, 1934. Which means that it covers aspects of Swedish grammar that are now obsolete, such as plural forms of verbs like "Vi skrevo".) Read the grammar book and try to digest it. You don't have to get every last detail, but you should at least get the basic structure of the language. Don't worry so much about the fine points of adjective and verb endings, but do know how the past tense is formed, and learn the structural elements of the language like word order, prepositions, and conjunctions. The goal here is to learn enough so you can follow a sentence even if you don't know what all of the words mean. After a few weeks of the language class, you'll have a rough feel for the language. Get some children's books and try to work your way through them. Find the [news for dummies](#) and listen to it every day. It will be rough going at first. I remember when I started listening to [Klartext](#), I had to concentrate really hard to understand just fragments of the first news story, at which point I was too tired to deal with the rest of the program. I would still listen to it, though, just to get a sense for the flow of the language, even though I wasn't trying to understand what they were saying. (Note: Proceeding with this step too soon will not accomplish anything. All you'll hear is gibberish.) Knowing the basic structure of the language will make it easier to understand the news for dummies. You can get by without the right adjective endings, but if you can't find the verb in

a sentence, you're going to be in trouble. If you can find a transcript of the news for dummies, use it. It will make it much easier to follow along (assuming a language whose spelling is phonetic or nearly so), and it will also help train your ear to recognize the language as it is actually spoken, as opposed to how it is officially spoken, because there are many pronunciation rules that are simply invisible to native speakers. (For example, officially, the English word "what" has a "t" at the end, but in practice, the "t" often turns into a "d" or a glottal stop or vanishes entirely. Meanwhile, the leading consonant is often pronounced as a "w" instead of a "wh". As another example, the word "news" can be pronounced as "nooz" or "nyooz" or "neooz", and most native speakers don't even realize that there's a difference.) As you become more comfortable with the sound of the language, go back and re-read the grammar points you skipped over, like the adjective endings. Learn the charts and listen for them in the news for dummies. Hopefully the audio reinforcement will help you develop an ear for them and eventually be able to use them properly without having to consciously refer to those charts. The goal is not to rely on the charts but rather to say the right thing because that's how you've always heard it said. But the charts are there when your instinct fails you. Listening is also the only way you will pick up "unwritten rules" such as the motion of weak pronouns in Swedish and German, which I picked up a sense for despite it being covered by no grammar book I own. (Though it is covered by the amazingly detailed [Igloo Swedish Grammar](#) page where it is given the name [Long Object Shift](#).) You should also read the news. (This was a lot harder to find back in the pre-Internet days, but now it's ridiculously easy.) Reading is easier than listening in many respects, because you can read as slowly as you want, and all the word endings are right there in front of you. No matter how many different ways there are of saying "what", there is only one way of spelling it. Be careful, however, because the language of the news is typically more formal than everyday conversation. (And the language of headlines is even stranger. In English, German, and Swedish, for example, headlines tend to omit articles and helping verbs. "Ball hit into pond" is a valid headline but an awful English sentence.) If you do all this, you'll be far ahead of the class you signed up for. By the time they start learning noun plurals, you've already internalized the rules for formation of the past tense of regular verbs. (But still show up for class, for you can use the class to fill in gaps in your knowledge.) Anyway, that's how I taught myself Swedish in six months. Maybe it'll work for you, but probably not. Actually, I'm having much difficulty applying this technique to Mandarin Chinese because the language doesn't fall into the neat grammatical patterns of Western languages. I have yet to find a Chinese grammar book that takes a structural approach. [I also haven't been able to find Mandarin Chinese news for dummies](#). I vaguely recall that VOA or some similar organization had a special version of the news in Mandarin Chinese, not for Chinese listeners, but for American servicemen who are studying Mandarin Chinese. But I can't find it. And I don't get much help from my parents. I remember asking my mother a question about word order, and she said, "Oh, there aren't any rules like that. You just say what makes sense." Well, yeah, you say what makes sense *assuming you already know the language*... I replied, "Oh, so I can say this," and spoke a sentence where I used both a time and place, and I think I put the time first. "Oh, no, you have to say it this way," and she restated the sentence with the place first. "Ah, so there are

rules on word order after all,” I pointed out. “Oh, yeah, I guess so. But I don’t know what they are.” Native speakers are not always the best choice for learning the grammar of a language because they don’t understand their language formally, only instinctively. Consider the four sentences below.

I took the ball home.	I took it home.
I took home the ball.	I took home it.

That last box is crossed out because “it” is acting as a weak pronoun and must remain close to the verb. Good luck finding a native English speaker who can explain weak pronouns. (Heck, good luck finding one who can explain what a finite verb is!) On other language topics: Commenter Michael Puff notes that in Germany, as a rule, hotel employees should speak English. While they may be true in general, the off-hours staff at the small hotel I stayed at in Munich a few years ago were clearly not comfortable with English. They seemed relieved that I was able to speak with them in (bad) German. And my friend who went on a vacation in Germany thought Michael’s remark was just a cruel joke, for in her experience, practically nobody spoke English, not even in the cities. (She said that the hotel staff could usually speak “hotel English”.) One of the places my friend and her husband visited during their stay in Munich was Das Deutsche Museum. I warned them about the mining exhibit (English), 900 meters of more than you really wanted to know about mining. I remember being absolutely drained by the experience, and I asked my friend what she thought. “It wasn’t that bad. It goes a lot faster if you can’t read German.” Andreas Johansson points out that in Amsterdam, people will switch to English as soon as they recognize that you aren’t Dutch. A different friend of mine lived in the Netherlands for a while and they way he described it, people “autodetected” the accent and instantly switched to English. His solution? Buy a one-way train ticket to a small town, have lunch there, explore the local attractions (maybe a small museum or something), then buy a return ticket. In the small towns, people are less likely to speak English, which forced my friend to carry out these simple transactions (ordering lunch, taking a museum tour, buying a train ticket) in Dutch. I don’t like to talk about stuff like my family’s native language because it leads to additions in Wikipedia that give it a creepy stalker-like feel. “He can often be found in the Tully’s on 152nd St, typically on Wednesdays around 8pm, enjoying a venti no-whip mocha with vanilla. He tends to sit at the table near the fireplace facing away from the door.” Note also that the picture of me in the Wikipedia article claims “The copyright holder allows anyone to use it for any purpose,” and “Free to use as per <https://channel9.msdn.com>“. I don’t know how they came to that conclusion, because if you actually read the terms of use, you’ll see that it says that it is permissible to use Documents “provided that (1) the below copyright notice appears in all copies” (no such copyright notice appears in the Wikipedia entry), and “(2) use of such Documents from the Services ... will not be copied or posted on any network computer or broadcast in any media”

(I think Wikipedia counts as “posted on a network computer”). And then there’s the clause, “No logo, graphic, sound or image from any Microsoft Web site may be copied or retransmitted unless expressly permitted by Microsoft.”

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