Talking Reality

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Sometimes I wonder how I ever got here. Other times I wonder what I'm doing here. Then I remember what happened and say to myself, "You don't come from here. You know you come from somewhere else. And soon you will be leaving here for good."

It's not that I've been here all that long. It's been two years. That's not very long.

I was born in Latin America. My father was a fisherman. He is retired now but lives in my old country. He lives with a housekeeper. My mother died just a little over two years ago.

Do you know much about Latin America? My country is a lovely place. The people are wonderful. There are times when I miss my home very much. It is rarely cold, but you can see snow on the mountain tops most of the year. I don't think there is anything as beautiful as the sight of the sun shining on the snow-covered mountains.

I go to high school now. The school is near my sister's new home. After my mother died, she invited me to live with her for a few years. My father thought it a good idea to go to school in another country and learn another language.

"Why?" I asked. To myself I thought, "He just doesn't want me around. He doesn't want to take care of me."

"You'll learn to see things from another perspective."

"So what?"

"It will help you understand things better." I remember his saying that and I remember thinking he was just making an excuse to get rid of me. But I didn't say anything. In my country, one does not speak back to one's father. I knew I was going away and there was

nothing I could do about it. I was angry. I was angry my father was sending me away and I was angry that my mother had died. I thought it wasn't fair.

Now that I'm here, I have to admit, I like my new place. My sister is very kind and her husband is also very good to me. I have my own room and they respect my privacy. They've given me what I need and never speak of it openly. It's as if they expected it of themselves. I am very fond of both of them.

And I have to admit that I also like my new school. It is very different from the school I attended in my country. For one thing, we talk a lot in school. For another thing, the students are very nice. They are always asking me to tell them about my country, how we do things and why we do things the way we do. At first, I wasn't used to expressing my opinion so readily. I had little experience in talking my views. At home, we rarely shared any ideas in school. We did that only with our friends outside school.

I've discovered that I like sharing my ideas. In the very beginning, I was afraid that the students would think me very odd. After all I was very different. But in time I learned that they seem to really appreciate my point of view. Maybe it is just because I am so different. I don't know.

I like the things we talk about in school. For example, the other day we talked about language — what it is and where it comes from. Can you imagine? I was very happy after the discussion. I can't tell you how happy I was.

Maybe it is because I am trying to become totally bi-lingual that I'm particularly interested in language. I find myself wondering about the origin of words and why in some cultures we use certain words to describe things and in other cultures we don't.

I also wonder how much your language frames how you view the world. There are times when I think I perceive the world very differently from my classmates not just because I come from another country, but because I think in another language. Does that make any sense?

It all began when we walked into literature class the other day. Mr. Richards was sitting at his desk reading. It was as if he didn't even notice us. I couldn't tell whether he was pretending or not. He just kept reading. We had all settled in our seats and were just sitting there looking at him read.

Then, Monica goes up and not looking at Mr. Richards, but addressing the entire class, said, "Hey, kids, did you ever wonder how words began?"

I've always thought Monica very pretty. But I found this behavior very strange.

More strange is what happened next. One by one, people began talking to one another as if Mr. Richards wasn't even present.

"I have many times," Stefan answered.

"Did you come up with any theories?" Monica asked. I noticed that she was smiling as she asked her question and I couldn't help but feeling that she was teasing Stefan.

"I'm afraid not," Stefan said. "The most I could think of was that perhaps words are what we make up to gather up the silence."

"That's not much of a theory," Bill interjected.

I thought to myself, "That isn't a very nice thing to say. I think it's an interesting way of thinking of language. After all you can't have language without silence. Or could you?"

Then, surprising myself as much as anyone, I found myself saying, "I have a theory, Monica. It's a little strange but would you like to hear it?"

The whole class yelled out "Yes, Eduardo," and with that settled down as if they were getting ready for a good story. I stood up and began talking.

"I think words begin in blood. Don't giggle now. I'm telling you the truth. At first there were no words. They began to grow very slowly in a large body. One day they flew out through the lips and mouth."

"Why?" Marcos asked.

"I know," Susanna responded. "The person wanted to say something to another person for the first time."

"So what came first? The wanting to talk or the words?" Stefan asked.

At this point I said, "I think the words came first, Stefan. It was only after a while that people began to arrange the words in such a way that they could talk with some sense to one another. In the beginning there were only sounds."

"Hmm!" Stefan responded, as if this had given him an idea. "So are you saying that no words have meaning by themselves, but only when they are arranged together in sentences?"

"I don't know. I can just say one word, and it can mean something. For example, if I yell 'fire'

you had better get out of this classroom."

At this point, Christina raised her hand. It's not that I felt like the teacher, but I thought she should be given the floor. So I say, "Yes, Christina." Christina is a very shy girl who rarely says a word in any class. She also comes from another country and had a terrible struggle learning English. Her first language is Russian and there was no one in the school who knew a word of Russian. At least, in my case, some teachers knew Spanish.

"Eduardo," Christina said, "why did the words begin only in one body? Why not many bodies?"

"I don't know, Christina. Maybe this was the body that was appointed."

When I said this, Mr. Richards finally looked up. Maybe he had been listening all along because he said, "Eduardo, I find that very interesting. Is there something that happened here at school or at home that caused you to think up this theory?"

"Yes," I said. "When I was in the slow learner's class trying to learn English, I was very unhappy. I hated going into the room. I hated doing the exercises. I though we sounded like a bunch of squawking animals in the forest. The words had nothing to do with us. They meant nothing to me. They only started to mean something when I came to this class and started speaking my ideas. In a sense, I guess you could say the words hadn't been born yet in my mouth."

Mr. Richards looked at me very hard, got up out of his seat and slowly went to the blackboard and wrote in very large letters: "What is language?" Then he underlined it.

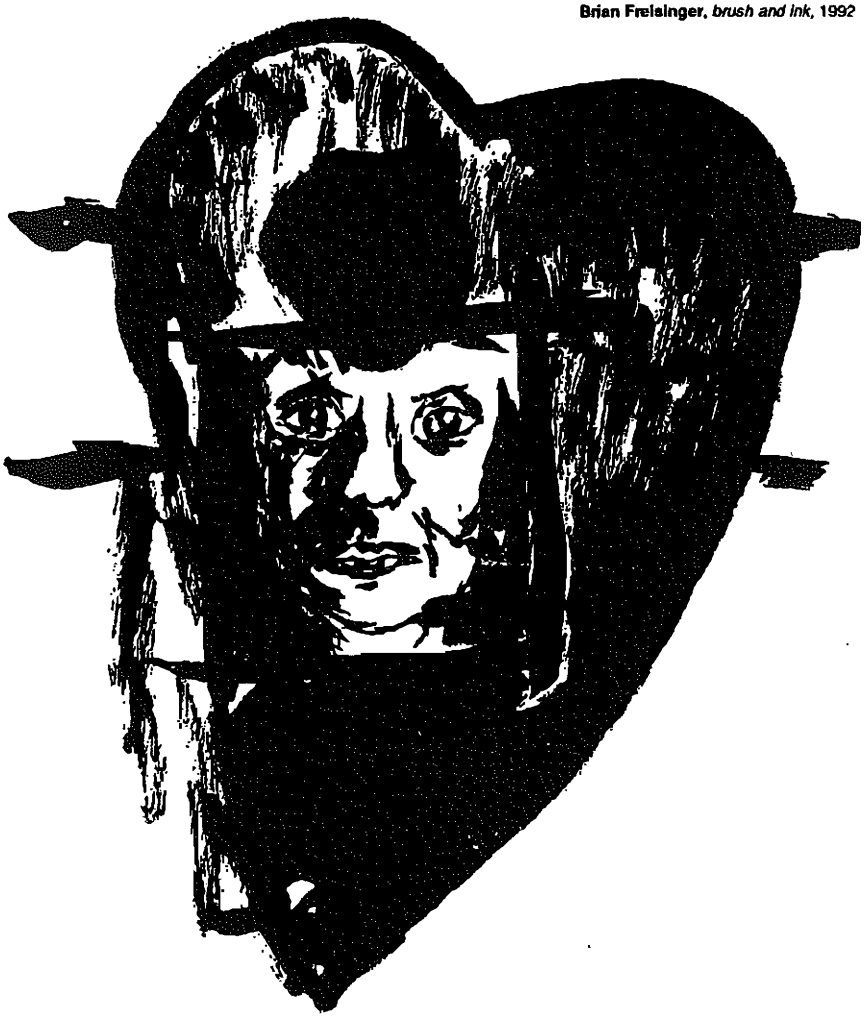
"I guess this is the topic of discussion for the day," he said with a big smile.

"Mr. Richards," Monica said, "do you think babies make the sounds of language?"

"I don't think so. Not at the beginning, anyway. I know they make sounds, but I'm not sure you could say that's enough to speak a language."

"I remember my little sister, Tanya, when she was a very little baby," Christina said slowly. "She used to make wonderful sounds in her crib. It did look like she talked to her feet and her toys. I could always tell when she was happy or when she needed something. I would just listen to the sounds."

Brian Freisinger, *brush and ink*, 1992



"But you could say the same thing about puppies or kittens," Monica said. "Would you say they have a language?"

"Maybe it would be more accurate to say it's a preparation for what we call language. There's certainly thinking going on," Mr. Richards responded. "Maybe ..."

"Could it be, Mr. Richards," I asked, "that what happens is that the words fill up with what's happening to you?"

"But we don't only speak about what's happening to us. We also speak about what's happening in the world, don't we?" Christina asked.

"Do we?" I asked looking right at her. "I'm not so sure. What do you think, Mr. Richards?"

"I really don't know, Eduardo."

There was a long silence. I sat down. I thought the conversation was over. And yet, I didn't want it to be over. I sensed everyone in the room was thinking. It wasn't an empty silence. I thought to

myself that I would have liked to hear what each person was thinking to herself or himself.

Finally it was Monica who broke the silence. She seemed excited. "I like your theory, Eduardo. I think it gives us a clue about language. In a way you could say that words are the blood of our ideas. Words tell us what we think. They make sense of things for us."

Mr. Richards got up again and walked toward the class. "That's a funny way of talking, Monica. But perhaps there is something in what is happening to us. That's the connection between language and experience."

It was as if Mr. Richards was talking to himself now very softly. His head was down and you could tell that he was puzzled. It was as if we weren't there again.

"And that's how we make sense of the stories that we read in this class. Remember the story we read the other day in class. It made sense to us because it had something to do with our lives. If the words had nothing to do with what we experience, they would have sounded like a bunch of babbling or squawking, to use Eduardo's phrase," Christina said.

I had never heard her say so many words in English since I had known her and I couldn't help but notice that she seemed very pleased with herself.

"I like words," Susanna said. "When I write them down it's as if they help me to know myself. Sometimes, they even take on the shapes of people and these shapes lead me to put down other words I hadn't even thought of before. Sometimes, I'm amazed at what I say or write."

"Let's not get too far-fetched now," Marcos said loudly. "Words are things that make up language. All languages have rules. They are what we call the rules of grammar. The rules allow us to make sense. As we grow up, we discover the rules. It's as simple as that."

"I'm not so sure, Marcos," I said. "Where do the rules come from? Do we make them up? And is language something we really discover as we grow? Isn't it possible that we are born with it?"

"Impossible," Marcos said. "That would mean you'd be born speaking."

"Maybe we're born with the structure to speak," I said, "the more I think about it, the more I think there are many things about language we don't know and we don't even have a way of finding out. That's why it's a mystery."

"What kind of things are you thinking about?" Mr. Richards asked.

"Take the question we asked before. Is there a connection between our language and the world? How can we know that our language describes something outside of how we experience things? Maybe language is an invention for us to communicate with other people about the way we humans experience things. It might have nothing to do with the real world."

"I wonder what you mean by 'real world?'" Christina asked.

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. Again there was a long silence in the class. But this time it was a different kind of silence. It was as if the conversation had nowhere to go.

Finally, Mr. Richards said, "Well, if no one wants to say anything, perhaps we should call it a day. The bell is going to ring pretty soon anyway."

Everyone started to put their books together. I couldn't help noticing that Christina was smiling. For a minute our eyes met, and I found myself smiling also. There was a lot of shuffling of feet when Mr. Richards put up his hands, a signal that he wanted to say something more.

"I think we've raised some important issues this afternoon. I realize we might have more questions than answers, but these questions are central for this course. The conversation has led me to rethink many things I haven't thought about in years. I thank you very much for that experience. But maybe we can build on it. For tonight's assignment, rethink our discussion and write a short essay on the 'Origin and Function of Language.'" As he said these last words, he wrote them in large letters on the board.

No one said anything.

"And, again, I thank each of you very much. I've learned a great deal. Eduardo, thank you for sharing your theory with us."

I can't tell you how I felt when Mr. Richards said that. It was as if I had grown one foot. I can't remember having ever been so happy.

Now that I've told you all that, I think again about my father's words. He said going to school in a different country and learning a different language would help me to see things from a different perspective. He said it would help me understand things better.

I'm not sure I understand language any better now than I did before. But at least I realize that it is very problematic. I don't think I realized

that before. And I realize that there are many different ways of looking at it.

Maybe my father was much wiser than I thought.

I'll be going home for vacation this summer. It won't be long now. I'm anxious to see my father, my old friends and my country. I'll be happy to speak in my mother tongue again. I'll be happy to share my experiences with my friends and my father. But when vacation is over, I don't think I'll be angry about coming back to my new school.

DISCUSSION PLAN: LANGUAGE

1. How do you think language began?

2. Is what you said a theory or a fact?

3. What's the difference between a theory and a fact?

4. Do theories ever become facts?

5. Do words have meaning?

6. Do sentences have meaning?

7. What is meaning?

8. Is there a relationship between experience and language?

9. When we say "the real world," what do we mean?

10. Is there a connection between language and the world?

11. When we speak and write, what do the words express?

12. When we speak and write, where do the words come from?

13. Is language an invention or a discovery?

14. What's the difference between a mystery and a problem?

15. Is language a problem or a mystery?

EXERCISE: *Indicate whether the following questions are mysteries or problems:*

1. How did language begin?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

2. What is the sum of 2 + 2?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

3. Where do ideas come from?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

4. How far is Rome from Florence?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

5. What is real?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

6. What is a sentence?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

7. To be a person must one have a language?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

8. What is experience?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

9. Is there a connection between language and reality?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

10. If two people speak different languages, do they talk about different realities?
❑ Mystery ❑ Problem ❑ ?

EXERCISE: What is it to be wise?

Tell whether you think the following statements are true, false, or indeterminate. Make sure you give the reason for your choice.

1. A wise person is an intelligent person.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ?

2. A wise person is someone who makes good choices.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ?

3. A wise person is as person who knows a lot of facts.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ?

4. A wise person is someone who gives himself good reason for his decisions.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

5. A wise person is a person who thinks of consequences.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

6. A wise person is someone who has a good imagination.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

7. A wise person is someone who practices good judgment.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

8. A wise person is someone who knows the better from the worse and chooses the better.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

9. A wise person is someone who succeeds.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

10. A wise person is someone who has a good sense of what is important.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

11. If you are foolish, you can't be wise.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

12. If you are ignorant, you can't be wise.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

13. If you are eccentric, you can't be wise.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

14. If you are impulsive, you can't be wise.
❑ TRUE ❑ FALSE ❑ ¿

EXERCISE: *Tell whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. Make sure to give the reason for your choice.*

1. It's better to see things from many perspectives.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

2. School is a place where you should be able to share ideas with your classmates and teachers.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

3. If two people speak two different languages, they live in two different worlds.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

4. Language describes the world.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

5. Language is an invention of human beings.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

6. Some animals have language.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

7. Language is our means of creating our world.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

8. Language is our means of discovering the world.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

9. You can't have language without silence.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

10. Words began in blood.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

11. Puppies can communicate. Therefore, they have language.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

12. Language can only express human experience.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

13. Language enables us to make up stories to explain the world to ourselves.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

14. Mr. Richards is a good teacher.
❑ Agree ❑ Disagree ❑ ¿

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