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UNDERSTANDING UNDERSTANDING: A BRIEF PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE IN PERFORMANCE

Понимание понимания: краткий обзор роли языка в спектакле

Ключевые слова: Александр Введенский, Елка у Ивановых, русский язык, английский язык, анализ личного опыта восприятия, концепт «понимание».

Keywords: Aleksander Vvdensky, Christmas at the Ivanovs, Russian language, English language, analysis of the personal perception experience, the concept of "understanding".

Аннотация. Автор рассматривает роль концепта «понимание» в восприятии спектакля. В статье дается анализ спектакля «Елка у Ивановых», который был поставлен в 2016 году в Учебном театре Школы-студии МХАТ на английском языке (режиссер Михаил Милькис). Автор представляет также опыт анализа личного восприятия текста.

Abstract. The author examines the concept of "understanding" role in the performance's perception. The article analyzes the "Christmas at the Ivanovs", which was staged in 2016 at the Training Theatre of Moscow Art Theatre School in English (director Michael Milkis). The author presents the analysis of the personal perception of the text.

LOGLINE

In this perspective, I reflect upon my relationship with foreign languages, especially in the theatre. What I primarily discuss is the concept of “understanding,” and how our brains learn to understand other languages without learning them in the traditional sense. Using this, I examine the effect that seeing Russian-language theatre has had on me in comparison with seeing Christmas at the Ivanovs – an English-language play performed in a more traditionally Russian style.

ARTICLE

A confession: In my life, I have tried and failed to learn five different languages. First it was Hebrew, a Sunday School requisite for any good Jewish boy growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Next came Spanish, and then Latin, French, and finally Russian – each one a flop. I will not justify my washout with that old cliché about not having “a head for languages.” I could always have practiced more, studied harder, or

shelled out an exorbitant fee for some shiny language program. Rosetta Stone, maybe. My unwillingness to put in that extra effort only just wins out over the embarrassment I feel any time somebody tries to speak to me in Russian. Most of the time, I just listen to them silently with a dumbfounded expression. If I sense that they have asked me a question, I automatically respond “да.” If I’m in a hurry, I blurt out “Sorry, English!” and then scramble away like a nervous animal, with the vague hope that they understand.

Evading this language barrier becomes trickier inside of a theatre. By way of background, I am a 21-year old postgraduate student from the American Repertory Theatre Institute at Harvard University. My field of study is dramaturgy, which in America means a combination of editor, academic, assistant, and literary manager. For the next three months, I will be pursuing this subject at the Moscow Art Theatre Institute, and during my stay in this country I will also be attending an average of five or six theatrical performances every single week. Many of these I know by heart: The works of Shakespeare, for instance, or Chekhov, or Wilde. However, productions that I have no familiarity with become a unique challenge for me to comprehend. Even after several weeks of experience I still struggle with figuring out the best way to process these productions. After all, I barely speak a word of Russian – naturally, understanding Russian theatre is a challenge for me. But then how does the value I place in this creative form change for me when I do understand its underlying language?

This question was raised only a few weeks ago, one evening at MXAT. Also along for my same study abroad program are 20 American actors, my friends and fellow students. Under the direction of Mikhail Mikhkis, they are performing in a new production of Aleksander Vvdensky’s controversial, absurdist Soviet comedy *Christmas at the Ivanovs*. What this American ensemble has created is an English-language rendition of a 20th century Russian text, guided by the vision of a contemporary Russian director. Both form and function are a fusion of extremely disparate elements, spanning time and space. I was surprised, upon seeing it that night, to discover that I had a much more difficult time forming opinions on this production than on others in which I understood not a single word. This unusual dilemma raised the question, “Why am I, as an American-trained dramaturge, struggling to reconcile the parallel aspects of this performance?” Why did I feel that my understanding of the language of *Christmas at the Ivanovs* was somehow hindering my ability to evaluate it?

What I believe now is that the first part of this dilemma of “understanding” is rooted in science. Listening to people talk can be exhausting – literally. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) studies reveal that depending on a person’s familiarity with a particular language, more or fewer parts of their brain will be activated when they listen to that language being spoken. Each specific language is comprised of different phonemes, perceptually distinct units of sound, and depending on our ability to distinguish these phonemes, our brain works harder or relaxes. Earlier I joked about the concept of not having “a head for languages,” but that might not be so far off the mark after all. This is a simplification of an incredibly complicated concept, but in summary, human brains will sometimes take a break when faced with a language that they cannot understand. This process is akin to choosing to skip a difficult problem on a test rather than exhaust yourself trying to figure out an answer.

My expectation was that productions in a language I do not understand would be more exhausting mentally for me to follow along with. To a degree, I still believe that this is correct. But the exhaustion I experience with these shows is different from that I might encounter during an English-language performance like *Christmas at the Ivanovs*. Freed from the burden of trying to grasp the specific text, my mind is open to grapple with staging and performance in a more disparate manner than would otherwise be possible. When I watch a production performed in Russian, I feel that I personally do not understand it as a typical language – my brain it reforms itself into a kind of nonverbal symphony, a collection of pitches and tones underscoring the actions on-stage. While this shift prohibits me from fully comprehending every performance that I see, it also diverts my focus towards the audio-visual aspects of these productions. My understanding of Russian theatre as a whole is rooted in a physical/visual language, as opposed to a lingual one. I am absorbing form first and then filling in function after the fact.

Listening to Vvdensky's translated text detracted from my ability to process the distinctly Russian performance styles being utilized during this performance. Instead of extrapolating meaning from action, or from subtle emotional cues and shifts in lighting, I realized that I was instead attempting to impose meaning on the relationship between the words and staging. The way that I perceive and understand a performance in my native language is almost a complete inverse of the way that I do with Russian theatre. When I was watching my classmates in their production, I was inherently able to appreciate each individual element less because my theatrical lexicon as broadened. In order to view their show in the same way that I would a production by Dodin or Butusov, I would need to consciously ignore the fact that the actors are speaking in English.

Of course, I cannot do that nor would I want to. The text of the show is, in my opinion, of equal importance to any other element. What was actually valuable for me is the realization that my ability to understand a piece of art is compartmentalized, almost in the same way that the human brain is. Acting, set design, choreography... Different parts of the brain light up in response to different stimuli, and to different degrees. My impression of a production is just a combination of these things put together, arranged in importance according to how much of any one element I comprehend.

With this discovery in mind, I began to wonder if I had been genuinely appreciating Russian theatre at all, or only a few disparate parts of it. There is a big difference between not understanding a creative decision and not being capable of understanding it – for instance, a blind man or woman can obviously be an art critic, but can they ever truly be a visual art critic? I considered whether or not it could be said that I had “understood” a show if one of its most important elements, its lingual language, was entirely unknown to me. Perhaps, I thought, what was frustrating me about this English-language show was the shocking clarity with which I viewed it, accustomed as I had become to not even trying to grasp the dialect of other local productions.

After grappling with this for a few weeks, the conclusion I have reached returns to the same MRI studies referenced earlier in this perspective. Further testing in these studies showed that only a brief intermediary period of training was necessary to rewire a human brain for new phonemes. No more than an hour spent learning to distinguish separate sounds resulted in the formation of brand new neural pathways. Participants in

the study were not learning words in other languages, or how to speak or practically apply these newly developed phonemes. They simply improved their capability to recognize the phonetic distinction in contrast with their native, pre-cultivated phonemes. Again, to clarify, they learned to understand a language without ever really needing to understand it at all.

Because of this information, I am realizing that it is not necessary for me to speak fluent Russian to understand a Russian-language production – not that that is an excuse for me to stop trying to learn it. By virtue of the fact that I am constantly surrounded by the sounds of another language, as well as visual representations of it on every sign and billboard, I am forming new neural pathways. Even if my knowledge of what each and every word or phrase means does not improve significantly, I am still learning to recognize the Russian language in the abstract. When I described the way the dialogue of shows stopped seeming like actual words and more like music, I was being inaccurate without knowing it. While I may not get the particulars of what these characters say on-stage, my brain still subconsciously understands that what I am hearing is a language, and I perceive it as such. It is, essentially, understanding without understanding.

Christmas at the Ivanovs is a wonderfully idiosyncratic production that I wholeheartedly recommend for anybody to see, especially if that person does not speak English. Such audience members will not be flailing around in the dark, missing out on some vital aspect of the show. Their understanding will still be that, understanding, albeit in a different way than they might expect. And as my time in Moscow has shown me thus far, the unexpected can be extraordinary.

ЛИТЕРАТУРА

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