**Q: What is (a) language? A: Not just words**

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**Transcript**

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In her introduction to language, languages and linguistics, the linguist Carol Genetti states that language, in its many different forms, is ‘a pervasive and essential component’ not only of our lives but also of humankind in general (Genetti 2014: 4-5). You only need to think of all the daily activities that involve language, from different types of communication like text messages and conversations to formulating thoughts and ideas in your head.

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But language is not only important on an individual level. As Genetti points out, language is also ‘the principal means by which societies are constructed and cultures are developed’ (Genetti 2014: 4). Think of all the knowledge that is held in the written and spoken word. Think of libraries or of the knowledge that is passed on through oral transmission. This is why language is not just words. It’s culture and, just to quote Genetti one more time, ‘[a]s language passes from generation to generation, it shifts and adapts to the ever-changing worlds in which it is embedded’ (Genetti 2014: 5). After all, language has been around for millions of years in countless variations.

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The aim of this video is to explore what language is and how it works within the context of the showcase ‘Not Just Words: Learning Languages through Art and Objects’. The showcase features, in fact, a series of videos called the Language and Culture Show and Tell which explores different languages by taking an item from UCL’s Art Collections as their starting point. As I will explain in a moment, the videos featured in this showcase all demonstrate that language is not just words, not only through their content but also through their methodology. While the series so far engages with 13 modern foreign languages, in this video I will explain why the answer to the question ‘What is language?’ is ‘Not just words’ using… hieroglyphs. Yes, you heard me right, hieroglyphs. And you might now be thinking, why hieroglyphs?

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Well, hieroglyphs were one of the earliest writing systems. And 2022 has been a big year for Egyptology as it marked one hundred years since the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun *and* two hundred years since the philologist Jean-Francois Champollion decoded the meaning of hieroglyphs thanks to the Rosetta Stone.

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Now, let me start by saying something about the methodology behind the series Language and Culture Show and Tell… I have to admit that the idea of a ‘show and tell’ series using UCL Art Collections first came to me when, during lockdown, my daughter participated in online Show and Tell sessions with her nursery group. For those of you who are not familiar with this type of activity, this is quite a common one in education settings: a child brings an item to the classroom and then explains to the class why they chose it, where they got it, and anything else they want to share. It’s an activity that helps children develop their speaking and listening skills while building a sense of community and supporting social skills through sharing.

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Because Show and Tell practices centre around objects, they are quite closely related to a methodology called ‘object-based learning’, which – put simply – means learning through objects. This methodology relies on research showing that objects can play an important role in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Among other things objects allow us to learn while engaging several senses at the same time and can help us develop different skills – such as teamwork, communication and practical observations skills.

In recent years UCL has carried out pioneering research into the value of learning through objects and, while working with objects is possible in a range of spaces, today we even have a dedicated Object-based Laboratory which can be used for teaching. You can read more about the benefits of learning through objects on UCL’s dedicated page on this. The Language and Culture Show and Tell videos are an example of how we can learn through objects today and, if you want to know more about the methodology behind them, I would advise you have a look at our ‘The Making of’ video.

But let’s go back to the hieroglyphs, because the idea of using objects as an effective teaching aid is far from new…

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A few years ago, research at the UCL Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology discovered a collection of 137 plaster casts of hieroglyphs that were most likely made and used by Margaret Alice Murray (1863-1963). Murray was an Assistant Professor at UCL from 1898 to the time of her retirement in 1935 and played a key role in modernising the way Egyptian language was taught, particularly at elementary level. A report produced in connection with the finding of the casts, emphasises that Murray believed that an understanding of the language was essential to the study of Egyptology and archaeology. Murray’s language lessons were crucial for the initial training of future archaeologists who needed a solid grasp on the Egyptian language in order to produce accurate and innovative findings. It is most probable that these plaster casts were used by Murray in her teaching of hieroglyphs and excavation techniques in preparation for future fieldworkers to interpret and understand key texts found on excavations and possibly also to show how to make plaster cast reliefs in the field.

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Murray – who relied heavily on visual aids and objects from museum collections in her teaching – was particularly gifted at teaching beginners, as also shown by the publication of her popular elementary grammar, and was driven by the belief that making the Egyptian language more accessible would only ‘increase the interest in Egyptian language and literature’ (Murray 1905: vii).

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Murray’s book is a grammar, and grammars normally focus particularly on two key aspects of language, namely how words and sentences are created. Murray begins, however, with a brief history of Egyptian Hieroglyphs and, by doing so, she demonstrates another one of Carol Genetti’s key points, namely that ‘language is in a constant process of change’ and ‘adapts to the world around it’ (Genetti 2014: 8).

According to recent scholarship, the ancient Egyptian language reaches back 5,000 years, emerging around 3,200 BCE. Hieroglyphs – which Murray describes in her grammar as ‘pictures of human figures, animals, birds, and the common objects of daily life among the people’ – were in use until about AD394 and were only one part of the ancient Egyptian language (Murray 1905: 2). There are, in fact, four scripts of ancient Egyptian: hieroglyphic, hieratic, Demotic and Coptic scripts. New scripts developed consecutively over time; Hieratic was a simpler and more cursive script which was further simplified in the Demotic script. Finally Coptic, which has its roots in Demotic and was derived from Greek, can be linked to the emergence of Christianity in Egypt in the First Century AD. The ancient Egyptian language thus shows us how all aspects of language can undergo change for a number of reasons and how the need for functionality and contact with other languages can trigger some of these changes.

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As I mentioned earlier, although it opens with some language history, Murray’s book is a grammar, and grammar books tend to help us to understand what makes language ‘structured and systematic’ and to identify patterns that can help the learner understand how a language works (Genetti 2014: 9).

Now, I am no expert on hieroglyphs, but the information Murray provided in her first chapter actually gave me a general idea of how to go about identifying hieroglyphs. Now I know that hieroglyphs can be written in different directions (though right to left is the most common) but that ‘the rule is to read towards the faces of the animals and birds’ (Murray 1905: 2). And I also know that there are no vowels in Egyptian and that apparently there are different classes of hieroglyphs (Murray 1905: 3-8).

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The classes are:

* Alphabetic signs which represent only one sound;
* Syllabic signs that represent two or more consonant sounds;
* Word-signs where the picture of an object is used as the word for that object;
* Determinatives where the picture of the object follows the word. It is not pronounced and is written merely as a guide to the reader so that they can distinguish the meaning of the word at a glance by identifying to which category it belongs.

Some of the plaster casts I talked about earlier are marked with a label which indicates the hieroglyph’s class, so I would like to imagine that these were used with actual students to illustrate these introductory details.

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Murray covers many other aspects one would expect to find in a traditional grammar, including how words and sentences are constructed. Now, I don’t have the expertise to explain everything about hieroglyphs, but if, like me, you really like these plaster casts and would like to use them in your language teaching, here are a couple of ideas.

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In a language class, you could use the plaster clasts to construct sentences thinking about ways in which the words represented by the hieroglyphs can be combined in a meaningful way.

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You could also cover up the labels on the casts and ask learners to guess what they think the hieroglyphs represent, what they mean and how they were used before revealing their actual meaning, if you want.

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The plaster casts could also provide the inspiration for lots of stories. You could ask learners to make up stories using the images on the casts as illustrations.

These are just a few examples that not only show how creative teachers and learners can be when using objects but also how, as Genetti suggests, ‘language is structured to take advantage of human creativity’. And this is really the point I want to emphasise: learning languages is not just about learning lists of words and rules of grammar, but also a creative and fun process – and objects around us have the potential to facilitate this in innovative ways.

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I hope you’ve enjoyed this video. If it has sparked an interest in learning more about hieroglyphs at UCL, you can visit the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology and explore their collections online and on campus. And if you want to have a closer look at Murray’s *Elementary Egyptian Grammar*, a later edition of her work is available online.

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And finally, if you would like to read more about language and how it works, here are some useful resources.

Thank you for listening!