

# The Hidden Side of Babel: Unveiling Cognition, Intelligence and Sense by Laura E. Bertone, Ph.D.

Reviewed by Susan Presby Kodish, Ph.D.

Imagine a translator sitting in a booth, wearing headphones, listening to a Spanish-speaking person and, as she listens, translating the speech into English. Or rather, interpreting the speech. What might we learn about communicating from a person able to do this? Dr. Laura Bertone offers us a wonderful opportunity to find out.

I first met Bertone in 1995, when she attended a General Semantics Seminar at which I was teaching. I was taken with her eagerness to learn and agog at her work as an interpreter. (Also her charm.) We became friends and colleagues over the years. I have read short essays by her, presenting a bit of the information provided in *The Hidden Side of Babel*, as well as previous versions of the book as it took shape. And I did some final editing on the book I now recommend. So I admit I am not writing this review from the perspective of a naïve reader and some may consider me an inappropriate choice for reviewer. What I can tell you is that each time I have read this material, in its various forms, I have been enchanted anew.

An Argentinian, Bertone has had a long career as a Paris-based conference interpreter. She has provided simultaneous interpretation at major United Nations' meetings and other international conferences. This goes beyond "translating," since she must capture and convey not just the words but the intended sense of the speaker. This, with the outcome of world events at stake.

Her doctoral work in linguistics allowed Bertone to follow her intuition that to understand language, she had to approach it from different angles and perspectives. Her broad study went beyond linguistic studies to include experimental work on language production and psycholinguistics, neuroscience, cognitive sciences, and, in recent years, general semantics. The integrative result, presented in *The Hidden Side of Babel*, proves useful not only for simultaneous interpreters; it also provides useful perspectives and tools for personal development in general, and for communicating in particular.

*Babel* is one of the most esthetically pleasing books I've ever held in my hands. The quality of the paper, illustrations, font and layout of text add to the pleasure of ingesting the informative content. The Table of Contents gives a sense of the feast to come.

Aspects of general semantics are specifically addressed in Chapters 21 and 22. Here's how Laura introduces these notions.

All living creatures are continually exposed to intra and extra-corporeal stimuli but only we, humans, can put those sensations into words and communicate to others what we feel both physically and emotionally.

On the other hand, out of the endless number of stimuli that bombard us simultaneously – visual, tactile, auditory, and olfactory and taste – we only become aware of some of these, i.e. we select some of them, elaborate them and transform them into sensations. The same happens with stimuli produced by processes within our own bodies.

Now, how does this selection occur? What sets this process in motion? How are stimuli turned into sensations that we can then "decode" and translate into words?

I will be bold enough to take the interpreter's case and use it allegorically. Let us imagine for a moment that there is a witness within us that silently perceives, observes, reacts, interprets – a witness who can stay silent and calm. Let us call that witness our inner interpreter. Deep inside, this inner interpreter witnesses how thousands of perceptions of a different nature are permanently being selected, processed and combined. The inner interpreter then translates perceptual units of one sense into the other senses, and also instincts, feelings and emotions into ideas, actions and thoughts.



Susan



Laura

## ***The Hidden Side of Babel***

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Out of an enormously rich variety of elements of all sorts that bombard us, the interpreter within will select and present some organized “units” which he will eventually translate again, if necessary. (p. 335)

She follows this with a discussion of abstracting; a section on use of the scientific orientation in everyday life; and dating and indexing.

Laura takes us into the theatrical world in Chapter 13, “Raising the Curtain.” She enrolled in acting courses, and experienced a variety of activities, including non-verbal ones, inspired by the method developed and applied by Stanislavski and his successor, Lee Strasberg. In a scene between two actors, she notes that the lack of any action, look, or word to justify Actor A’s tone and reaction may bewilder Actor B. As she says,

*This shows that comprehension is not exclusively rooted in words, that it is not only linked to logic and reasoning as expressed through words but it is also related – perhaps even predominately so – to the logic and energy of actions... (p.221)*

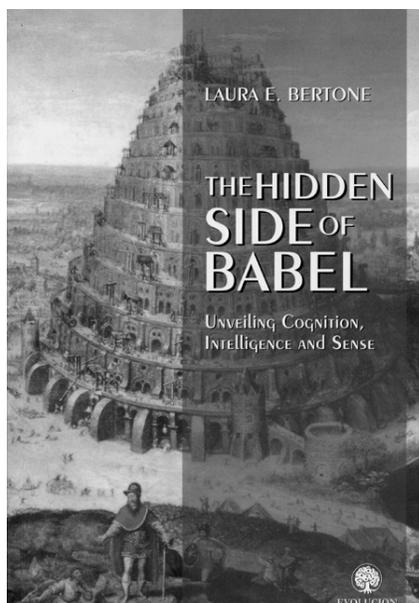
So perhaps others of us would do well to participate in acting classes to improve our silent-level abilities – and therefore our abilities to understand and be understood – when speaking in our individual versions of our common English language.

Laura provides a useful take on improving understanding by considering the things that block, prevent or delay it.

Either too much or too little information. Not knowing answers to the following: Who? To whom? Where? When? How? For what purpose? Erroneous attribution of motive and intent; lack of background information or failure to retrieve it; wrong or stereotyped scenarios; reversal of the natural orders of abstraction; taking the map for the territory; confusion, identification, jumping to conclusions; interference; contradictory signals; double binds; dispersion, fixation. (p. 365)

A flaw in *Babel* is the lack of an index, which would enable the reader to find material on specific topics. However, browsing through the cartoons, illustrations, and text, one can readily appreciate the richness of the material.

I, who usually don’t like to reread books, have an urge to dig in once again as soon as I have *The Hidden Side of Babel* in my hands. I find Laura’s excitement about language contagious, a contagion which I urge you to expose yourself to.



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purchase.*

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