Chapter 1: The Last Lesson

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Exercise 1.1 — Understanding the text

Q1 The people in this story suddenly realise how precious their language is to them. What shows you this? Why does this happen?

SOLUTION

Several details in the story show that the people of Alsace suddenly recognise the value of French. Franz, who had earlier found his grammar book a nuisance and never bothered to learn his lessons, begins to feel a deep regret: his books, which once seemed heavy and burdensome, feel like 'old friends' he cannot bear to give up. He wishes desperately that he could recite the rule for participles perfectly.

M. Hamel, too, reveals the depth of feeling. He dresses in his finest Sunday clothes to honour the last French lesson, speaks of French as 'the most beautiful language in the world — the clearest, the most logical,' and urges the children to guard it and never forget it. He writes 'Vive La France!' on the board with all his might as his final act.

The old villagers — Hauser, the former mayor, the former postmaster and others — come and sit quietly at the back of the classroom. Old Hauser brings an old, worn primer and spells the letters along with the babies, his voice trembling with emotion. This is their way of thanking M. Hamel for forty years of faithful service and of showing respect for a country and a language that is theirs no more.

This sudden realisation happens because loss makes people aware of what they have taken for granted. The order from Berlin banning French from the schools of Alsace and Lorraine makes the language feel irreplaceable. The impending loss — the knowledge that this is the very last French lesson — transforms an ordinary school day into a moment of profound grief and longing.

Answer: The villagers' and Franz's grief, M. Hamel's Sunday clothes, the old men's attendance, and M. Hamel's final 'Vive La France!' all show how precious French becomes the moment it is about to be lost.

Q2 Franz thinks, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" What could this mean? (There could be more than one answer.)

SOLUTION

Franz's thought — 'Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?' — carries more than one layer of meaning.

First, it is a direct expression of Franz's anguish at the Prussian order. Hearing the pigeons cooing on the roof during the writing lesson, he wonders whether the conquerors will reach so far as to force even birds to abandon their natural sounds. It conveys the absurdity and the cruelty of trying to erase a language by decree.

Second, it reflects the deep identification Franz now feels between French and the natural world around him. The cooing of the pigeons has always been part of the landscape of his childhood; to impose German on it would be to impose an alien identity on everything — nature included.

Third, the thought can be read as Franz's indirect way of saying that language belongs to a people as naturally as birdsong belongs to birds. Just as it is impossible and absurd to make pigeons sing in German, it seems equally wrong and impossible to truly rob a people of their mother tongue by force. The question hints that French will survive in the hearts of the people even if it is banned in the classroom.

Finally, the image carries a touch of gentle irony: pigeons cannot be instructed in any language, yet the Prussians think they can instruct human beings to abandon theirs.

Answer: The thought conveys the absurdity of the conquerors' order, Franz's identification of French with his natural world, and a quiet faith that a mother tongue cannot truly be erased — just as pigeons cannot be made to sing in German.

Exercise 1.2 — Talking about the text

Q1 "When a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison." Can you think of examples in history where a conquered people had their language taken away from them or had a language imposed on them?

SOLUTION

M. Hamel's words point to a political truth confirmed by many moments in history.

One prominent example is colonial rule in India. The British introduced English as the medium of education and administration through policies such as Macaulay's Minute of 1835, marginalising Indian languages in formal public life. Yet Indian nationalists, writers, and reformers continued to use Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Urdu, and other regional languages as vehicles of cultural identity and resistance — a fact that helped sustain the freedom movement.

Another example is Ireland under British rule. The English actively suppressed the Irish language (Gaeilge), and over centuries of colonisation most Irish people shifted to English. The loss of Irish as a living everyday tongue is widely seen as a cultural wound. The Irish literary revival of the late nineteenth century was partly a conscious effort to reclaim that identity.

A third example is found in Latin America, where Spanish colonial rule displaced many indigenous languages. Communities that managed to keep their native languages alive — such as the Quechua-speaking peoples of the Andes — retained a stronger sense of distinct cultural identity.

In more recent history, Welsh speakers in Britain faced pressure to use English in schools and public life; the survival of Welsh is largely credited to determined community effort to keep using and teaching the language.

These examples show that when a people cling to their language, they preserve a sense of self, history, and belonging that no conqueror can fully extinguish — very much the 'key to their prison' that M. Hamel describes.

Answer: Historical examples include British suppression of Indian languages during colonial rule, the marginalisation of Irish (Gaeilge) under English rule, the displacement of indigenous languages in colonial Latin America, and the pressure on Welsh speakers in Britain — all showing how language becomes the key to a conquered people's cultural survival.

Q2 What happens to a linguistic minority in a state? How do you think they can keep their language alive? For example: Punjabis in Bangalore / Tamilians in Mumbai / Kannadigas in Delhi / Gujaratis in Kolkata

SOLUTION

A linguistic minority in a state often faces pressure to adopt the dominant regional language for daily transactions, schooling, and professional advancement. Their children, growing up in a different-language environment, may gradually shift to the majority language and lose proficiency in the mother tongue. The community may also find that its language receives little

official support — fewer schools teaching in that language, limited media, and reduced visibility in public life.

Despite these pressures, linguistic minorities have found effective ways to keep their languages alive. The most important is the home: if parents consistently speak their mother tongue at home, children acquire it naturally. Community institutions — cultural associations, temples, gurudwaras, and religious gatherings — serve as spaces where the language is regularly used and celebrated.

Schools and classes run by the community itself — weekend language schools, for instance — help children develop literacy in the mother tongue alongside the dominant regional language. Community newspapers, magazines, radio programmes, and, increasingly, social media content in the minority language also help sustain usage.

Punjabis in Bangalore, Tamilians in Mumbai, Kannadigas in Delhi, and Gujaratis in Kolkata all have vibrant cultural associations, festivals, and community media that perform exactly this function. Literature, film, and music in the mother tongue give it prestige and emotional resonance, making the younger generation feel that the language is worth preserving.

Ultimately, the will of the community itself is the decisive factor. As long as speakers value their language and pass it on consciously to the next generation, it can survive and even thrive within a majority-language environment.

Answer: Linguistic minorities face pressure to assimilate into the dominant language; they can keep their language alive through home use, community institutions, weekend language schools, and cultural media that give the mother tongue daily presence and emotional value.

Q3 Is it possible to carry pride in one's language too far? Do you know what 'linguistic chauvinism' means?

SOLUTION

Pride in one's language is natural and healthy — it connects a person to their culture, history, and identity. However, like any form of pride, it can be carried too far, and when it is, it becomes 'linguistic chauvinism.'

Linguistic chauvinism means an extreme, aggressive belief that one's own language is superior to all others, combined with a refusal to recognise or respect other languages. A linguistic chauvinist may insist that their language alone should be used in all public spaces, refuse to communicate in any other language, or actively work to suppress minority languages — sometimes through political or social pressure.

Such an attitude causes serious harm. It alienates speakers of other languages, creates barriers between communities, and can be used to justify discrimination. In India, for instance, controversies over the imposition of a single national language have often led to social tension and political conflict. Similarly, in several European nations, movements to make only the majority language acceptable in public life have marginalised communities that have lived in those regions for generations.

The story itself offers a nuanced perspective: M. Hamel celebrates French as 'the most beautiful language in the world,' and his love for it is moving and justified by the context of colonial suppression. But the same sentiment, turned outward as contempt for other languages, would become chauvinism.

Healthy linguistic pride means cherishing and preserving one's language while remaining respectful of other languages and their speakers. It becomes chauvinism when it turns exclusionary and intolerant.

Answer: Yes — when pride in one's language becomes contempt for or suppression of others, it becomes 'linguistic chauvinism': an aggressive belief in the superiority of one's own language that marginalises minorities and breeds intolerance.

Exercise 1.3 — Working with words

Q1 English is a language that contains words from many other languages. Find out the origins of the following words: tycoon, tulip, logo, bandicoot, barbecue, veranda, robot, zero, ski, trek

SOLUTION

tycoon — Japanese (taikun, meaning 'great lord')
tulip — Turkish/Ottoman Turkish (tülbend, via French tulipe), ultimately from Persian for 'turban' (from the flower's shape)
logo — Greek (logos, meaning 'word' or 'reason')
bandicoot — Telugu (pandikokku, meaning 'pig-rat')
barbecue — Arawak/Taino (barbacoa, a wooden frame used for smoking/grilling meat, via Spanish)
veranda — Portuguese or Hindi (varanda); the word entered English from both and its exact origin is debated, though it is widely used in South Asian and Portuguese contexts
robot — Czech (robota, meaning 'forced labour' or 'drudgery'); coined by Karel Čapek in his 1920 play R.U.R.
zero — Arabic (sifr, meaning 'empty'), via Italian zero
ski — Norwegian (ski, meaning 'a stick of wood')
trek — Afrikaans/Dutch (trekken, meaning 'to pull' or 'to travel')

Answer: The words come from Japanese (tycoon), Turkish/Persian (tulip), Greek (logo), Telugu (bandicoot), Arawak/Spanish (barbecue), Portuguese/Hindi (veranda), Czech (robot), Arabic (zero), Norwegian (ski), and Afrikaans/Dutch (trek) — illustrating English's extraordinary borrowing across world languages.

Q2 Notice the underlined words in these sentences and tick the option that best explains their meaning. (a) 'What a thunderclap these words were to me!' (b) 'When a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison' (c) 'Don't go so fast, you will get to your school in plenty of time.' (d) 'I never saw him look so tall.'

SOLUTION

(a) 'What a thunderclap these words were to me!'
The words were: (ii) startling and unexpected.
M. Hamel's announcement that this was the last French lesson struck Franz with the sudden, shocking impact of a thunderclap — completely surprising and overwhelming.

(b) 'When a people are enslaved, as long as they hold fast to their language it is as if they had the key to their prison'
It is as if they have the key to the prison as long as they: (i) do not lose their language.
As long as a people retain their language, they retain their cultural identity and the means of their eventual liberation — the language is their 'key.'

(c) 'Don't go so fast, you will get to your school in plenty of time.'
You will get to your school: (iii) early enough.

The blacksmith Wachter knows that school will not begin as usual that day, so he reassures Franz that there is no need to rush — he will arrive with time to spare.

(d) 'I never saw him look so tall.'
M. Hamel: (b) seemed very confident.
Standing pale and erect as he faced the moment of forced departure, M. Hamel's dignity and composure made him appear taller — not physically, but in moral stature and resolve.

Answer: (a) ii — startling and unexpected; (b) i — do not lose their language; (c) iii — early enough; (d) b — seemed very confident.

Exercise 1.4 — Noticing form

Q1 Read this sentence: 'M. Hamel had said that he would question us on participles.' The verb form 'had said' indicates an 'earlier past'. Pick out five sentences from the story with this form of the verb (past perfect) and say why this form has been used.

SOLUTION

The past perfect tense (had + past participle) is used to indicate an action completed before another past event in the narrative. Here are five sentences from the story with this form, and the reason for its use in each:

1. 'M. Hamel had said that he would question us on participles.'
M. Hamel's saying happened earlier than the morning of the story. The past perfect marks it as a prior event relative to Franz's setting out for school.

2. 'For the last two years all our bad news had come from there — the lost battles, the draft, the orders of the commanding officer.'
The bad news arriving over two years all preceded the morning of the story. The past perfect signals this extended earlier period of events.

3. 'I had counted on the commotion to get to my desk without being seen.'
Franz's plan — counting on the usual classroom noise — was formed before he actually entered the school. The past perfect places this intention prior to his arrival.

4. 'That day M. Hamel had new copies for us, written in a beautiful round hand.'
The copies were prepared before the writing lesson began. The past perfect indicates M. Hamel completed this preparation earlier in the day.

5. 'He had the courage to hear every lesson to the very last' — and relatedly, 'the hopvine that he had planted himself twined about the windows to the roof.'
The planting of the hopvine happened years before the day of the last lesson. The past perfect marks this as an earlier action whose visible result (the vine now covering the windows) exists in the narrative present.

Answer: The past perfect is used for actions completed before the main narrative moment: M. Hamel's earlier announcement, two years of bad news from the bulletin board, Franz's plan to slip in unnoticed, M. Hamel's preparation of the new copies, and the planting of the hopvine years before.