LANGUAGE

By

EDWARD SAPIR

LANGUAGE

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY
OF SPEECH

EDWARD SAPIR

NEW YORK
HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY

[E·3·47]

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

PREFACE

THIS little book aims to give a certain perspective on the subject of language rather than to assemble facts about it. It has little to say of the ultimate psychological basis of speech and gives only enough of the actual descriptive or historical facts of particular languages to illustrate principles. Its main purpose is to show what I conceive language to be, what is its variability in place and time, and what are its relations to other fundamental human interests—the problem of thought, the nature of the historical process, race, culture, art.

The perspective thus gained will be useful, I hope, both to linguistic students and to the outside public that is half inclined to dismiss linguistic notions as the private pedantries of essentially idle minds. Knowledge of the wider relations of their science is essential to professional students of language if they are to be saved from a sterile and purely technical attitude. Among contemporary writers of influence on liberal thought Croce is one of the very few who have gained an understanding of the fundamental significance of language. He has pointed out its close relation to the problem of art. I am deeply indebted to him for this insight. Quite aside from their intrinsic interest, linguistic forms and historical processes have the greatest possible diagnostic value for the understanding of some of the more difficult and elusive problems in the psychology of thought and in the strange, cumulative drift in the life of the human spirit that we call history or progress or

evolution. This value depends chiefly on the unconscious and unrationalized nature of linguistic structure.

I have avoided most of the technical terms and all of the technical symbols of the linguistic academy. There is not a single diacritical mark in the book. Where possible, the discussion is based on English material. It was necessary, however, for the scheme of the book, which includes a consideration of the protean forms in which human thought has found expression, to quote some exotic instances. For these no apology seems necessary. Owing to limitations of space I have had to leave out many ideas or principles that I should have liked to touch upon. Other points have had to be barely hinted at in a sentence or flying phrase. Nevertheless, I trust that enough has here been brought together to serve as a stimulus for the more fundamental study of a neglected field.

I desire to express my cordial appreciation of the friendly advice and helpful suggestions of a number of friends who have read the work in manuscript, notably Profs. A. L. Kroeber and R. H. Lowie of the University of California, Prof. W. D. Wallis of Reed College, and Prof. J. Zeitlin of the University of Illinois.

EDWARD SAPIR.

OTTAWA, ONT.,
April 8, 1921.

CONTENTS

PAGE

PREFACE iii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTORY: LANGUAGE DEFINED 1

Language a cultural, not a biologically inherited, function. Futility of interjectional and sound-imitative theories of the origin of speech. Definition of language. The psycho-physical basis of speech. Concepts and language. Is thought possible without language? Abbreviations and transfers of the speech process. The universality of language.

II. THE ELEMENTS OF SPEECH 24

Sounds not properly elements of speech. Words and significant parts of words (radical elements, grammatical elements). Types of words. The word a formal, not a functional unit. The word has a real psychological existence. The sentence. The cognitive, volitional, and emotional aspects of speech. Feeling-tones of words.

III. THE SOUNDS OF LANGUAGE 43

The vast number of possible sounds. The articulating organs and their share in the production of speech sounds: lungs, glottal cords, nose, mouth and its parts. Vowel articulations. How and where consonants are articulated. The phonetic habits of a language. The "values" of sounds. Phonetic patterns.

IV. FORM IN LANGUAGE: GRAMMATICAL PROCESSES . . 59

Formal processes as distinct from grammatical functions. Intercrossing of the two points of view. Six main types of grammatical process. Word sequence as a method. Compounding of radical elements. Affixing: prefixes and suffixes; infixes. Internal vocalic change; consonantal change. Reduplication. Functional variations of stress; of pitch.

CHAPTER PAGE

V. FORM IN LANGUAGE: GRAMMATICAL CONCEPTS 86

Analysis of a typical English sentence. Types of concepts illustrated by it. Inconsistent expression of analogous concepts. How the same sentence may be expressed in other languages with striking differences in the selection and grouping of concepts. Essential and non-essential concepts. The mixing of essential relational concepts with secondary ones of more concrete order. Form for form's sake. Classification of linguistic concepts: basic or concrete, derivational, concrete relational, pure relational. Tendency for these types of concepts to flow into each other. Categories expressed in various grammatical systems. Order and stress as relating principles in the sentence. Concord. Parts of speech: no absolute classification possible; noun and verb.

VI. TYPES OF LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE 127

The possibility of classifying languages. Difficulties. Classification into form-languages and formless languages not valid. Classification according to formal processes used not practicable. Classification according to degree of synthesis. "Inflective" and "agglutinative." Fusion and symbolism as linguistic techniques. Agglutination. "Inflective" a confused term. Threefold classification suggested: what types of concepts are expressed? what is the prevailing technique? what is the degree of synthesis? Four fundamental conceptual types. Examples tabulated. Historical test of the validity of the suggested conceptual classification.

VII. LANGUAGE AS A HISTORICAL PRODUCT: DRIFT 157

Variability of language. Individual and dialectic variations. Time variation or "drift." How dialects arise. Linguistic stocks. Direction or "slope" of linguistic drift. Tendencies illustrated in an English sentence. Hesitations of usage as symptomatic of the direction of drift. Leveling tendencies in English. Weakening of case-elements. Tendency to fixed position in the sentence. Drift toward the invariable word.

VIII. LANGUAGE AS A HISTORICAL PRODUCT: PHONETIC LAW 183

Parallels in drift in related languages. Phonetic law as illustrated in the history of certain English and German vowels and consonants. Regularity of

CHAPTER PAGE

phonetic law. Shifting of sounds without destruction of phonetic pattern. Difficulty of explaining the nature of phonetic drifts. Vowel mutation in English and German. Morphological influence on phonetic change. Analogical levelings to offset irregularities produced by phonetic laws. New morphological features due to phonetic change.

IX. How Languages Influence Each Other . . . 205

Linguistic influences due to cultural contact. Borrowing of words. Resistances to borrowing. Phonetic modification of borrowed words. Phonetic interinfluencings of neighboring languages. Morphological borrowings. Morphological resemblances as vestiges of genetic relationship.

X. Language, Race, and Culture 221

Naïve tendency to consider linguistic, racial, and cultural groupings as congruent. Race and language need not correspond. Cultural and linguistic boundaries not identical. Coincidences between linguistic cleavages and those of language and culture due to historical, not intrinsic psychological, causes. Language does not in any deep sense "reflect" culture.

XI. Language and Literature 236

Language as the material or medium of literature. Literature may move on the generalized linguistic plane or may be inseparable from specific linguistic conditions. Language as a collective art. Necessary esthetic advantages or limitations in any language. Style as conditioned by inherent features of the language. Prosody as conditioned by the phonetic dynamics of a language.

Index 249

LANGUAGE,

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF SPEECH

I

INTRODUCTORY: LANGUAGE DEFINED

SPEECH is so familiar a feature of daily life that we rarely pause to define it. It seems as natural to man as walking, and only less so than breathing. Yet it needs but a moment's reflection to convince us that this naturalness of speech is but an illusory feeling. The process of acquiring speech is, in sober fact, an utterly different sort of thing from the process of learning to walk. In the case of the latter function, culture, in other words, the traditional body of social usage, is not seriously brought into play. The child is individually equipped, by the complex set of factors that we term biological heredity, to make all the needed muscular and nervous adjustments that result in walking. Indeed, the very conformation of these muscles and of the appropriate parts of the nervous system may be said to be primarily adapted to the movements made in walking and in similar activities. In a very real sense the normal human being is predestined to walk, not because his elders will assist him to learn the art, but because his organism is prepared from birth, or even from the moment of conception, to take on all those expendi-

tures of nervous energy and all those muscular adaptations that result in walking. To put it concisely, walking is an inherent, biological function of man.

Not so language. It is of course true that in a certain sense the individual is predestined to talk, but that is due entirely to the circumstance that he is born not merely in nature, but in the lap of a society that is certain, reasonably certain, to lead him to its traditions. Eliminate society and there is every reason to believe that he will learn to walk, if, indeed, he survives at all. But it is just as certain that he will never learn to talk, that is, to communicate ideas according to the traditional system of a particular society. Or, again, remove the new-born individual from the social environment into which he has come and transplant him to an utterly alien one. He will develop the art of walking in his new environment very much as he would have developed it in the old. But his speech will be completely at variance with the speech of his native environment. Walking, then, is a general human activity that varies only within circumscribed limits as we pass from individual to individual. Its variability is involuntary and purposeless. Speech is a human activity that varies without assignable limit as we pass from social group to social group, because it is a purely historical heritage of the group, the product of long-continued social usage. It varies as all creative effort varies—not as consciously, perhaps, but none the less as truly as do the religions, the beliefs, the customs, and the arts of different peoples. Walking is an organic, an instinctive, function (not, of course, itself an instinct); speech is a non-instinctive, acquired, "cultural" function.

There is one fact that has frequently tended to pre-

vent the recognition of language as a merely conventional system of sound symbols, that has seduced the popular mind into attributing to it an instinctive basis that it does not really possess. This is the well-known observation that under the stress of emotion, say of a sudden twinge of pain or of unbridled joy, we do involuntarily give utterance to sounds that the hearer interprets as indicative of the emotion itself. But there is all the difference in the world between such involuntary expression of feeling and the normal type of communication of ideas that is speech. The former kind of utterance is indeed instinctive, but it is non-symbolic; in other words, the sound of pain or the sound of joy does not, as such, indicate the emotion, it does not stand aloof, as it were, and announce that such and such an emotion is being felt. What it does is to serve as a more or less automatic overflow of the emotional energy; in a sense, it is part and parcel of the emotion itself. Moreover, such instinctive cries hardly constitute communication in any strict sense. They are not addressed to any one, they are merely overheard, if heard at all, as the bark of a dog, the sound of approaching footsteps, or the rustling of the wind is heard. If they convey certain ideas to the hearer, it is only in the very general sense in which any and every sound or even any phenomenon in our environment may be said to convey an idea to the perceiving mind. If the involuntary cry of pain which is conventionally represented by "Oh!" be looked upon as a true speech symbol equivalent to some such idea as "I am in great pain," it is just as allowable to interpret the appearance of clouds as an equivalent symbol that carries the definite message "It is likely to rain." A definition of language, however, that is so

extended as to cover every type of inference becomes utterly meaningless.

The mistake must not be made of identifying our conventional interjections (our oh! and ah! and sh!) with the instinctive cries themselves. These interjections are merely conventional fixations of the natural sounds. They therefore differ widely in various languages in accordance with the specific phonetic genius of each of these. As such they may be considered an integral portion of speech, in the properly cultural sense of the term, being no more identical with the instinctive cries themselves than such words as "cuckoo" and "killdeer" are identical with the cries of the birds they denote or than Rossini's treatment of a storm in the overture to "William Tell" is in fact a storm. In other words, the interjections and sound-imitative words of normal speech are related to their natural prototypes as is art, a purely social or cultural thing, to nature. It may be objected that, though the interjections differ somewhat as we pass from language to language, they do nevertheless offer striking family resemblances and may therefore be looked upon as having grown up out of a common instinctive base. But their case is nowise different from that, say, of the varying national modes of pictorial representation. A Japanese picture of a hill both differs from and resembles a typical modern European painting of the same kind of hill. Both are suggested by and both "imitate" the same natural feature. Neither the one nor the other is the same thing as, or, in any intelligible sense, a direct outgrowth of, this natural feature. The two modes of representation are not identical because they proceed from differing historical traditions, are executed with differing pictorial techniques. The interjections of Japanese and

English are, just so, suggested by a common natural prototype, the instinctive cries, and are thus unavoidably suggestive of each other. They differ, now greatly, now but little, because they are builded out of historically diverse materials or techniques, the respective linguistic traditions, phonetic systems, speech habits of the two peoples. Yet the instinctive cries as such are practically identical for all humanity, just as the human skeleton or nervous system is to all intents and purposes a "fixed," that is, an only slightly and "accidentally" variable, feature of man's organism.

Interjections are among the least important of speech elements. Their discussion is valuable mainly because it can be shown that even they, avowedly the nearest of all language sounds to instinctive utterance, are only superficially of an instinctive nature. Were it therefore possible to demonstrate that the whole of language is traceable, in its ultimate historical and psychological foundations, to the interjections, it would still not follow that language is an instinctive activity. But, as a matter of fact, all attempts so to explain the origin of speech have been fruitless. There is no tangible evidence, historical or otherwise, tending to show that the mass of speech elements and speech processes has evolved out of the interjections. These are a very small and functionally insignificant proportion of the vocabulary of language; at no time and in no linguistic province that we have record of do we see a noticeable tendency towards their elaboration into the primary warp and woof of language. They are never more, at best, than a decorative edging to the ample, complex fabric.

What applies to the interjections applies with even greater force to the sound-imitative words. Such words as "whippoorwill," "to mew," "to caw" are in no sense

natural sounds that man has instinctively or automatically reproduced. They are just as truly creations of the human mind, flights of the human fancy, as anything else in language. They do not directly grow out of nature, they are suggested by it and play with it. Hence the onomatopoetic theory of the origin of speech, the theory that would explain all speech as a gradual evolution from sounds of an imitative character, really brings us no nearer to the instinctive level than is language as we know it to-day. As to the theory itself, it is scarcely more credible than its interjectional counterpart. It is true that a number of words which we do not now feel to have a sound-imitative value can be shown to have once had a phonetic form that strongly suggests their origin as imitations of natural sounds. Such is the English word "to laugh." For all that, it is quite impossible to show, nor does it seem intrinsically reasonable to suppose, that more than a negligible proportion of the elements of speech or anything at all of its formal apparatus is derivable from an onomatopoetic source. However much we may be disposed on general principles to assign a fundamental importance in the languages of primitive peoples to the imitation of natural sounds, the actual fact of the matter is that these languages show no particular preference for imitative words. Among the most primitive peoples of aboriginal America, the Athabaskan tribes of the Mackenzie River speak languages in which such words seem to be nearly or entirely absent, while they are used freely enough in languages as sophisticated as English and German. Such an instance shows how little the essential nature of speech is concerned with the mere imitation of things.

The way is now cleared for a serviceable definition

of language. Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. These symbols are, in the first instance, auditory and they are produced by the so-called "organs of speech." There is no discernible instinctive basis in human speech as such, however much instinctive expressions and the natural environment may serve as a stimulus for the development of certain elements of speech, however much instinctive tendencies, motor and other, may give a predetermined range or mold to linguistic expression. Such human or animal communication, if "communication" it may be called, as is brought about by involuntary, instinctive cries is not, in our sense, language at all.

I have just referred to the "organs of speech," and it would seem at first blush that this is tantamount to an admission that speech itself is an instinctive, biologically predetermined activity. We must not be misled by the mere term. There are, properly speaking, no organs of speech; there are only organs that are incidentally useful in the production of speech sounds. The lungs, the larynx, the palate, the nose, the tongue, the teeth, and the lips, are all so utilized, but they are no more to be thought of as primary organs of speech than are the fingers to be considered as essentially organs of piano-playing or the knees as organs of prayer. Speech is not a simple activity that is carried on by one or more organs biologically adapted to the purpose. It is an extremely complex and ever-shifting network of adjustments—in the brain, in the nervous system, and in the articulating and auditory organs—tending towards the desired end of communication. The lungs developed, roughly speaking, in connection with the

necessary biological function known as breathing; the nose, as an organ of smell; the teeth, as organs useful in breaking up food before it was ready for digestion. If, then, these and other organs are being constantly utilized in speech, it is only because any organ, once existent and in so far as it is subject to voluntary control, can be utilized by man for secondary purposes. Physiologically, speech is an overlaid function, or, to be more precise, a group of overlaid functions. It gets what service it can out of organs and functions, nervous and muscular, that have come into being and are maintained for very different ends than its own.

It is true that physiological psychologists speak of the localization of speech in the brain. This can only mean that the sounds of speech are localized in the auditory tract of the brain, or in some circumscribed portion of it, precisely as other classes of sounds are localized; and that the motor processes involved in speech (such as the movements of the glottal cords in the larynx, the movements of the tongue required to pronounce the vowels, lip movements required to articulate certain consonants, and numerous others) are localized in the motor tract precisely as are all other impulses to special motor activities. In the same way control is lodged in the visual tract of the brain over all those processes of visual recognition involved in reading. Naturally the particular points or clusters of points of localization in the several tracts that refer to any element of language are connected in the brain by paths of association, so that the outward, or psycho-physical, aspect of language, is of a vast network of associated localizations in the brain and lower nervous tracts, the auditory localizations being without doubt the most fundamental of all for speech. However, a speech-

sound localized in the brain, even when associated with the particular movements of the "speech organs" that are required to produce it, is very far from being an element of language. It must be further associated with some element or group of elements of experience, say a visual image or a class of visual images or a feeling of relation, before it has even rudimentary linguistic significance. This "element" of experience is the content or "meaning" of the linguistic unit; the associated auditory, motor, and other cerebral processes that lie immediately back of the act of speaking and the act of hearing speech are merely a complicated symbol of or signal for these "meanings," of which more anon. We see therefore at once that language as such is not and cannot be definitely localized, for it consists of a peculiar symbolic relation—physiologically an arbitrary one—between all possible elements of consciousness on the one hand and certain selected elements localized in the auditory, motor, and other cerebral and nervous tracts on the other. If language can be said to be definitely "localized" in the brain, it is only in that general and rather useless sense in which all aspects of consciousness, all human interest and activity, may be said to be "in the brain." Hence, we have no recourse but to accept language as a fully formed functional system within man's psychic or "spiritual" constitution. We cannot define it as an entity in psycho-physical terms alone, however much the psycho-physical basis is essential to its functioning in the individual.

From the physiologist's or psychologist's point of view we may seem to be making an unwarrantable abstraction in desiring to handle the subject of speech without constant and explicit reference to that basis. However, such an abstraction is justifiable. We can profitably dis-