

Introductory Readings on Language

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*Introductory Readings
on Language*

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

This book is designed primarily as a text for freshman English, though it should also prove useful in the increasing number of undergraduate English courses devoted to the study of language. It has three major purposes:

1. To present basic information about language as a subject interesting and important in its own right. The intent is to make the students aware of the nature of language and some of its multifarious aspects.
2. To arouse the students' intellectual curiosity about language to the point where they want to know more about it.
3. To influence the students' own use of language and to enable them to cope more successfully with the welter of words, both spoken and written, that surrounds us all.

It is our conviction that the major concern of freshman English should be language. Most freshman English courses are planned to help students to write with clarity, if not with grace, and to read with understanding and discrimination. Usually, composition is taught in conjunction with a book of readings containing examples of good writing in a variety of styles and on a variety of topics. This variety of topics can prove troublesome. Oftentimes discussion tends to center in the content of the essays, so that the instructor finds himself of necessity taking on the role of sociologist, historian, scientist, and philosopher. The topics dealt with are important ones, to be sure, but they are probably better treated elsewhere by specialists in those fields. To the extent that this shift in roles occurs, the course becomes blurred; it loses its focus. Moreover, it inhibits the instructor's dealing with one of the subjects in which he is at home, namely, language. And this is one thing students need to know more about.

College freshman are, for the most part, linguistically unsophisticated. Their attitudes toward language are often naïve; indeed, they have many misconceptions about language—misconceptions which they share with the general populace. One function of the English instructor is to rid college students of these misconceptions, to replace false beliefs with a more enlightened view of language in general, and of their own language in particular. For many college students, the freshman course is the sole course in English that they will take. Freshman English is the only place where these students will have the opportunity to gain real insight into the workings of language. They should not come to us naïve and leave older but still naïve in a matter of such vital import. Hence this book of readings on language.

We realize that other kinds of content may be justifiably defended in a freshman English course, but we also believe that the rationale offered here has a cogency that cannot be lightly dismissed.

These essays constitute an introductory course in language. Although they deal with various linguistic topics, they are not a course in linguistics. They are intended to be complementary to a composition text or handbook; hence matters of rhetoric and mechanics have for the most part been excluded. The readings have been selected on the basis of three criteria: (1) that they be soundly informative, (2) that they be in line with current linguistic thought, and (3) that they be within the intellectual reach of the average freshman. We have been particularly mindful that these readings are for beginning college students. The topics chosen are basic to an understanding of the nature of language; yet they do not presuppose previous technical knowledge. In the main the selections themselves are nontechnical. The single exception is Charlton Laird's essay on the classification of English vowels and consonants; here of necessity phonetic terminology and symbols are used. (This essay should precede the others in the section.) The few technical terms that do occur are clearly defined in the text or in footnotes of definition and illustration which we have provided.

In addition to the explanatory footnotes, we have included three kinds of editorial assistance: headnotes, suggested assignments, and lists of further readings. These are an integral part of the book. The headnotes prepare the students for the reading to follow by providing background material and by raising questions. Their purpose is to arouse interest, to stimulate thought, and to direct attention to

the particular issues involved. The "assignments" are in a sense extensions of the readings themselves. Their purpose is to make the readings more meaningful by giving the students an opportunity to come to grips with specific issues by means of a variety of oral and written assignments. Many of the assignments are adaptable to either discussion or written work. The readings are included as a source of information for research papers; they may also serve to open more doors for those students desirous of gaining further insight into the nature of language.

The arrangement of topics is one that makes sense to us. However, it is not inflexible. The most appropriate order will depend, as it should, on the ingenuity of the instructor and his view of the course.

W. L. A.
N. C. S.

Cedar Falls, Iowa
March, 1962

TO THE STUDENT

To use language is the mark of a man; to understand language, in the deepest sense, is the mark of an educated man. From about the age of six, you have been using language with really a high degree of efficiency. And so have 300 million other speakers of English. But your understanding of your native tongue is probably fragmentary and riddled with misconceptions. In the course of twelve years of schooling, if you are like many college freshmen, you have gathered into your intellectual granary sundry notions about language, varying in worth from known truths to halftruths down to palpable nontruths. An illustration will make this clear. With which of the following propositions would you agree?

1. When writing, one finds his thoughts and then puts them into words.
2. The languages of primitive peoples are simpler than those of more advanced nations.
3. An excellent way to find the correct pronunciation of a word is to look it up in the dictionary.
4. If you pronounce *pursuing* to rime with *ruin*, you are dropping the *g*.
5. The word *humor* should be pronounced with an *h* because it is spelled with an *h*.
6. Since the real meaning of *awful* is "full of awe," this word should not be used as a general term of condemnation.
7. Many words have a specific and universal connotation.
8. In the question "Who is it for?" one should say *whom* because it is the object of the preposition *for*.

If you agree with any of these, you are in error, for each states or implies a concept that is to some degree untrue. These errors, how-

ever, are no cause for alarm, since each of us entertains misconceptions in areas of knowledge with which he is unfamiliar. But the situation is one that demands correction because, as you go through college, you will gain much of your education through the medium of language. You will listen to classroom lectures where you will have to catch and interpret words on the fly. You will have heavy reading assignments where you will have to read closely, with sharp attention to nuances of meaning and validity of reasoning. You will have compositions to write where you must use language with scrupulous precision. You will have to do serious thinking, which can be done only through language. All of these activities you should be able to perform more capably when you understand the language matters presented in this book—such matters, for example, as the symbolic nature of language, the basis of good usage, the uses of metaphor, the ever-present hazards of ambiguity, the pitfalls of analogy, the uniqueness of meanings, and the fallacies of causal reasoning.

Language study, in addition to being a practical pursuit, is also a cultural subject. It is a social science, concerned with an aspect of man's behavior that sets him apart from the lower animals—his use of an intricate system of speech sounds to communicate with his peers and his use of written symbols to transmit the accumulated knowledge of the race to his descendants. You will get an inkling of the scientific side of language study when you read the selections on linguistic geography, usage, and structural grammar. You will discover fragments of history embedded in words when you dig into etymology. You will touch upon philosophy when you inquire into the symbolic nature of words. And if you were to venture into the higher reaches of descriptive linguistics, you would become involved with mathematics.

Of the whole fascinating drama of language behavior, you will receive a series of quick, revealing glances as scholars draw the curtain aside on various scenes. And you will emerge, it is hoped, with a deepened comprehension of the foundation stone of man's humanity—language.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

To the Instructor v

To the Student ix

1 *The Nature of Language*

1. LANGUAGE DEFINED	Edward Sapir	1
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
2. SIGNS AND SYMBOLS	Stephen Ullmann	16
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
3. LANGUAGE, LOGIC, AND GRAMMAR	L. M. Myers	21
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
4. THE USES OF LANGUAGE	Irving M. Copi	33
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
5. THE GIFT OF TONGUES	Clyde Kluckhohn	41
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
<i>Further Readings</i>		

2 *Words: Forms and Meanings*

6. WORD-MAKING IN ENGLISH	Henry Bradley	63
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
7. ANALOGICAL CHANGE	Eugene Nida	86
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
8. EARLY AMERICAN SPEECH: ADOPTIONS FROM FOREIGN TONGUES	Thomas Pyles	93
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		

9. ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	Simeon Potter	112
10. PERSONAL NAMES <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	George H. McKnight	123
11. EUPHEMISMS <i>Suggested Assignments</i> <i>Further Readings</i>	Henry L. Mencken	135

3 Metaphor

12. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE	Monroe C. Beardsley	148
13. THE COMMAND OF METAPHOR	I. A. Richards	157
14. VOCABULARY IN MOTION <i>Suggested Assignments for Section 3</i> <i>Further Readings</i>	Margaret Schlauch	171

4 Semantics

15. CLASSIFICATION <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	S. I. Hayakawa	179
16. BIAS WORDS <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	F. A. Philbrick	190
17. CONTEXTS <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	Robert H. Moore	199
18. INTERPRETATION <i>Suggested Assignments</i> <i>Further Readings</i>	F. A. Philbrick	211

5 The Sounds of Language

19. THE GODS WHO TROUBLE THE WATERS OF OUR VOICE STREAM <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	Charlton Laird	224
20. PHONETIC CHANGE: ASSIMILATION <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	Charles Kenneth Thomas	238

21. SPELLING PRONUNCIATION <i>Suggested Assignments</i>	John Samuel Kenyon	248
22. STANDARDS OF ACCEPTABLE ENGLISH: PRONUNCIATION <i>Suggested Assignments</i> <i>Further Readings</i>	Charles Carpenter Fries	254

6 Usage

23. BARGAIN BASEMENT ENGLISH	Wilson Follett	273
24. GRAMMAR FOR TODAY	Bergen Evans	281
25. DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE PRACTICES	Charles Carpenter Fries	290
26. NOTES ON THE INFLECTED GENITIVE IN MODERN AMERICAN PROSE	Russell Thomas	304
27. "THERE IS" AGAIN <i>Suggested Assignments for Section 6</i> <i>Further Readings</i>	Robert J. Geist	311

7 Linguistic Geography

28. SOME WORDS STOP AT MARIETTA, OHIO	Gledhill Cameron	318
29. REGIONAL AND SOCIAL VARIATIONS	Albert H. Marckwardt	327
30. ON ACCEPTING PARTICIPIAL <i>Drank</i>	Harold B. Allen	345
31. <i>Linguistic Atlas</i> FINDINGS	Hans Kurath	349
	E. Bagby Atwood	
<i>Suggested Assignments for Section 7</i> <i>Further Readings</i>		

8 Structural Grammar

32. REVOLUTION IN GRAMMAR	W. Nelson Francis	360
33. SENTENCE ANALYSIS AND PARTS OF SPEECH	Charles Carpenter Fries	380
34. INTONATION	Paul Roberts	394

35. FORMS IN PIDGIN ENGLISH	Robert A. Hall, Jr.	400
36. A QUICK LOOK AT ENGLISH	Waldo B. Sweet	409
<i>Suggested Assignments for Section 8</i>		
<i>Further Readings</i>		

9 Clear Thinking

37. ARE ALL GENERALIZATIONS FALSE?	Lionel Ruby	419
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
38. EVALUATION OF EVIDENCE	W. W. Little W. H. Wilson W. E. Moore	433
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
39. POST HOC RIDES AGAIN	Darrell Huff Irving Geis	444
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
40. BLACK OR WHITE	Stuart Chase	452
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
41. ANALOGIES	Monroe C. Beardsley	463
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
42. AMBIGUITY	Lionel Ruby	472
<i>Suggested Assignments</i>		
<i>Further Readings</i>		
INDEX		491

1. *The Nature of Language*

LANGUAGE DEFINED

Edward Sapir

Language is so much a part of us that we tend to regard it as both natural and simple. Moreover, because education in our culture is carried on primarily by means of books, many of us think of language primarily in its written form—black marks imprinted on paper, or wiggly lines made with pen or pencil. But in many parts of the world it is impossible for people to communicate in that way. They have no written language; they communicate solely by means of the spoken word—sound waves in the air. Are we to conclude, then, that writing is not language? Or are there two kinds of language? What is the relationship between speech and writing? And how, in either case, does communication take place? How do these sound waves or wiggly lines mean anything? These are some of the basic questions that Edward Sapir deals with. One of the pioneers of modern linguistic science, Sapir was an authority on American-Indian languages; he was also one of the first to study the relationships between linguistics and anthropology.

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

From *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* by Edward Sapir, copyright 1921, by Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.; renewed, 1949, by Jean V. Sapir. Reprinted by permission of the publishers.

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 expenditures 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 prevent 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 onomatopoeic 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 onomatopoeic 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