Linguistic Science
and the
Teaching of English

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To honor the memory of Alexander Inglis, 1879–1924, his friends and colleagues gave to the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, a fund for the maintenance of a Lectureship in Secondary Education. To the study of problems in this field Professor Inglis devoted his professional career, leaving as a precious heritage to his co-workers the example of his industry, intellectual integrity, human sympathy, and social vision. It is the purpose of the Lectureship to perpetuate the spirit of his labors and contribute to the solution of problems in the field of his interest. The lectures on this foundation are published annually by the School.

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I

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW of all of us in the educational world nothing is quite so far-reaching nor so unifying as language. This, you might say, is a natural conclusion to be reached by a linguistic scientist, but only a little reflection is needed to remind us of the overwhelming importance of language in all levels of education, whether we think of teaching language — the native language or a foreign language — or whether we think of the role language plays in mediating all learning. We hear on all sides of the importance of training people to use language effectively, and this realization of the need for developing skilled *communicators* is recognized not only among those who are primarily concerned with the humanities but is reiterated daily by those in charge of engineering schools, medical schools, and law schools, and by leaders in government and industry. To be a truly skilled communicator, for example, is the first requirement of

a successful Foreign Service officer, and those who have reached ambassadorial rank are frequently those whose mastery of English is sure and who have acquired control over more than one foreign language.

Along with this mastery and control goes a real insight into our own culture as well as cultures other than our own. For language and culture are inextricably interwoven. Language cannot be taught in a vacuum any more than it is learned in a vacuum. True understanding of the nature and function of language furnishes the best and surest avenue to an understanding of the culture and the way of life of the people who speak it. For in a very real sense, as a man talks, so he thinks and feels. Languages are different because cultures are different, and understanding differences is the greatest task we have confronting us in this unhappy, divided, and shrinking world.

This awareness of the importance of language is evidenced by the emphasis educators have placed on the language arts programs which have become almost universal in American elementary education. Listening and understanding as well as speaking are being stressed along

with reading and writing in most of these programs. The advances in the elementary school curriculum have not always been accompanied by understanding or approval, but they are there for all who care to see.

Other great strides have been made by educators and psychologists along the line of understanding the differing aptitudes of children. Though the pendulum at times has seemed to the layman to be swinging erratically between the extremes of progressiveness and "grandfather's way," real progress has been made in what is technically called "learning theory," particularly in the realization that all children who reach the chronological age which entitles them to enter school have not necessarily reached the same level of maturity. This attention to the child as an individual, with his own personality structure, his individual motivations, and with a unique background has been one of the contributions of America to elementary education. It has, in fact, been a very necessary corrective to mass education methods that a democracy like our own is in constant danger of developing. For the conviction that all should have equal opportunities coupled

with the mass production of texts, teachers' guides, syllabuses, and training aids can easily lead to a kind of democratic regimentation which leaves little scope for the individual child whose very inability to fit the pattern of the moment might be the best indication of his real superiority. But all this has been said before and said better by those far more qualified to speak of these matters than I am.

But the matter that concerns me this evening is the lack of awareness on the part of our most forward-looking educators of the strides that have been made by linguistic science in the last decades, and the extent to which this progress in the field of analyzing and describing the structure of languages can be applied to the very core of the language-arts program in the elementary grades and the education concerning language and carried on through language in the secondary school. For the science of linguistics has shown us not only how individual languages are structured, but has furnished invaluable insights into how language functions in all cultures everywhere. How the linguistic system interrelates with the other systems of the culture, reflecting and

transmitting the content of these systems, is a field that cries out for systematic treatment on all levels of our education. The awareness of the fact that different languages structure experience in different ways, and hence present a different picture of the world to their various speakers, bids fair to open new avenues to the understanding of differences between peoples.

But these considerations would take us too far afield if they were pursued further, though I shall return to this theme from time to time. The particular matter which concerns us here is to explore specific ways in which linguistics can help educators in the extremely important job they have in developing persons to function effectively in the world of today. In order to see the areas in which linguistics can be of assistance we first must realize the level upon which the linguistic scientist operates. This level may be termed the "culturological" level. That is, the linguistic scientist is primarily a cultural anthropologist. The cultural anthropologist is concerned with the way the systematized, patterned, configured events, values, attitudes, and assumptions which we call cul-

ture are *structured*, *interrelated*, and *transmitted*. All culture must be learned, and the different cultures learned by the various aggregations of human beings on this earth is what sets groups off as different from one another. Now the psychologist is interested in the individual per se; the individual within a culture. He is interested, on the one hand, in the similarities all individual human beings display in common, and on the other, with the differences which set each individual off from every other individual. The culturologist and the psychologist, then, can be seen as asking different questions about the same phenomena. Both approaches are valid; indeed both approaches are essential, if vast areas of the utmost importance are to be systematically and fruitfully explored. But the time has now come for the two approaches to be integrated. This is not just *interdisciplinary* coöperation, it is *inter-level* coöperation, a truly different dimension.

The linguistic scientist is primarily concerned with the most important component of one of the ten basic systems which compose all cultures — language. As can be inferred from

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what I have said before, language is in many ways the most important of all cultural systems, for without it the rest of culture and human societies as we know them would be impossible. The possibilities that lie in a truly integrated science of human behavior will never be fully realized until more investigators and observers are systematically aware of the nature and functioning of language. As an example, we will concentrate here on bringing into awareness some facts about the structure of our own language and see some of the implications this awareness has for the teaching of English and the language arts. These implications, and the applications that can grow from their realization, stretch from the teaching of reading in the elementary grades through the secondary school and beyond. They would inevitably lead to a change of emphasis in our teacher-training programs; in short they could imply no less than a revolution in American education.

The first thing that strikes the linguistic scientist when he sees how the language-arts curriculum is set up and administered is that even our best and most forward-looking educators seem to be operating on the assumption

that since the child can't read when he comes to school, that he must be taught his language. This is an understandable result of the universal confusion shared by all literate peoples everywhere — the confusion between language and writing. The reason for this universal confusion is not hard to find. We learned our language — all of us — out of awareness. We learned it thoroughly and we learned it at a very early age. We can't remember very much before we had learned to talk well enough to reinforce our experiences through language. From many points of view, the learning of the complex systems through which human communication goes on — language, kinesics (or gestures and motions), and vocalizations (the phenomena generally referred to as "tone of voice") — is the greatest intellectual achievement any of us ever makes. And yet these systems are thoroughly learned and internalized by all physiologically normal human beings in all cultures at about five and a half years of age! Individuals learn the systems at different rates and in different orders, but from the point of view of the culturologist, the important fact is that about 98 per cent of all our

species are in full control of the *structure* of their group's communication systems at about the same age. This is of extreme importance both as a demonstration of what has been termed "the psychic unity of mankind" and as clear indication that all languages as structured systems must be of about the same order of difficulty, simplicity or complexity. It helps point out the fact that all languages do the job that languages must do just about as well — or as badly — as all others. It makes us realize that the underlying patterns that compose language are the important part of this marvelous system and that once these are internalized, vocabulary items are easy to add, and are added rapidly, as the individual's experience in his culture increases. But probably most important of all from the point of view of a rapport between educator, psychologist, and linguistic scientist is the realization that though language may be considered "the vehicle of thought" and "the means of communicating ideas," "thought" and "ideas" depend in a very real way on the nature and structure of the "vehicle." A real awareness of language and of how languages function

and interrelate with the rest of culture leads us away from the naïve assumption that "thought" and "ideas" are universal and can be "put into words" by all languages in much the same way. Nothing could be further from the truth! For the different ways in which languages structure experience, the obligatory categories into which the flux of experience is forced, make speakers of different languages see the world and relationships in the world of experience in quite amazingly different ways. In truth, thought is largely the product of the language we speak; and logic is for us speakers of Indo-European languages quite different from the logic of speakers of Hopi or Chinese or Eskimo. In fact, since logic is an extrapolation of the basic categories inherent in linguistic structure, one language is just as "logical" or "illogical" as any other.

The whole complex we have been speaking of can be stated as one of the central problems which is seen differently by linguist and psychologist — the problem of meaning in relation to language. The educational psychologists have made tremendous strides in showing that learning and meaning — or meaningful learning —

go hand in hand. The individual — child or adult — learns in context. The normal person's experience is not atomized or fragmented; it is integrated. Realization of this has led to a redesigning and reëmphasizing of the content of what is learned in reference to the matrix in which it is presented. The new methods of teaching arithmetic are an excellent example of this trend, and it has been the principal rationale for the present methods employed in reading. Reading, in this view, has often been defined as "getting meaning from the printed page," and materials are designed and graded with this object primarily and uppermost in mind.

But the linguist, though fully in agreement with the end, has some criticism to make of the means employed. For he as a culturologist has had to focus his attention on the system qua system in order to see how the "vehicle" is put together to carry the "thought." The thought, then, is the meaning of what is communicated between those speaking a common language and participating in a common culture. In order to describe the system that language is, the linguist has had to exclude during

this particular stage of his investigation all considerations of "meaning" in the usual sense of the word. This kind of meaning I am going to call "referential meaning" and contrast it with "differential meaning" — the kind of meaning employed by linguists and other culturologists in the analysis and description of all cultural systems.

Differential meaning is simply a statement from a person who has been brought up according to a particular culture to the effect that one cultural event or component of a cultural system is the same as or different from another event. If you ask a fellow American, for example, whether *pin* is the same as *bin* you are likely to get one of two responses: "Oh, no, *pin* is something you use to stick things together, and *bin* is a place where you store coal or grain"; or, "No, one begins with a *p* and the other begins with a *b*." The first answer is phrased in terms of referential meaning and the second in terms of differential meaning. *Pin* and *bin* are not the same word, first because they contain different "isolates" of the sound structure of English — they begin with different initial sounds. Secondly, all who

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