

FROM LANGUAGE TO COMMUNICATION



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Donald G. Ellis
University of Hartford



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Introduction

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There is a story in Judges 12:1-7 about the Gileadites who held the fords of the Jordan river against the Ephraimites. Whenever someone from Ephraim tried to cross the river the Gileadites would say, "Pronounce the word *Shibboleth*." If the person said "*sibboleth*," not being able to pronounce the word correctly, he was seized and slain by the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites fell. If nothing else, the story certainly demonstrates the practical importance of language. People draw conclusions about how others use language to communicate, and they act on those conclusions! But language is more than a social indicator. Language is the toolbox of communication.

This book is about language and its relationship to human communication. It is preoccupied with essential principles of language and the subtle ways that language is responsible for creating and sustaining social interaction and meaning. The book is designed for advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate students who are interested in learning more about the relationship between language and communication. Yet the volume should be useful to anyone who is pursuing an introduction to these matters, or as a companion text to others that might be used to study communication, psychology, sociology, or linguistics.

I am concerned in this volume with issues in language of many kinds, but not all kinds. It is my fervent conviction that language is the fundamental tool of communication; that language and a linguistic system are definitionally a part of

the communication process. This book offers a current sample of the significant issues in language and communication. Writing a book such as this requires the author to assume that his vision is an acceptable lens through which many others can see a field. As such, I should say something more about my own vision of communication, and how that vision influences what follows.

Communication is a very misunderstood discipline. The term *communication* can conjure up images of such diversity as telephones, computers, television, radio, public speeches, therapy sessions, and intimate relations. And all of these are in one fundamental way or another communicative. But each has something else in common. Because each is communicative in nature *it is concerned with using language to constitute and interpret reality*. The technology of computers, television, and telephones makes it possible for language to reach larger numbers of us more quickly. New communication technology means we can now store and retrieve the mountains of information that is packaged in language. But whether a message is fashioned from the grunts of two cave men arguing over a bone, or finds its way into your living room after passing through computers and a short voyage in space, that message uses some symbolic form to establish meaning.

My view of language in general and communication in particular is that segmenting it is the best way to understand it. This motivated my decision to define and organize the chapters the way I have. It is possible to draw some sharp distinctions between some issues of language and language use, more specifically between language use and grammar, and form and strategy. There is on the one hand a clear need for people to communicate and express thoughts and perceptions of the world. But on the other hand principles of grammar and language structure are only remotely concerned with communication. Many sections of chapters 1 through 4 describe issues in language structure. And chapters 5, 6, 7, and particularly 8 are more shaped by concerns for accomplishing the act of communication.

Another way to say this is that language is form and strategy. The *form* of language is of patterns, rules, and structures that are the scaffolding on which we build messages. These structures range from phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules (chapters 2 and 3), to sequence structures and rules of initiating and terminating a conversation (chapter 7), to larger structures that allow entire discourses to cohere such as propositional analysis and story structures. A good portion of this book (chapters 5, 6, and 7) is devoted to these principles.

The *strategic* aspect of language use, on the other hand, assumes that communicators use language for a purpose or to achieve a goal. All language is pragmatic and strategic in that it is used to accomplish something; language directs people to some selected reality. There are also rules, principles, and patterns of strategic language use. These rules are not inviolate but they act as tools and resources that language users can draw on. Strategic rules can be adhered to or violated and in either case there is some interesting communicative consequence. Sections of

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 pertain to strategic language. But Chapter 8 is most completely devoted to a theory of language use. It outlines a concept of practical codes that communicators use to express individuated meaning.

Unfortunately there is no unified theory of language and communication and I am afraid I make little progress toward that goal in this volume. Instead, I present language and communication as a series of topics that have some connections. I have organized the entire text as a movement from specific issues in language (linguistic traditions) to topics more generally concerned with coherence and orderliness of communicative texts. Hence, the title *From Language to Communication*. In one sense the title is misleading because I do not mean to imply that language is logically prior to communication or can be separated from it. On the contrary, I believe that communication is the *only* function of language and even abstract linguistic structures serve the communicative nature of language (see chapter 8). Nevertheless, the title reflects the organization and presentation of topics in the book and is consistent with my decisions about how to segment the subject matter.

Textuality is an important concept in this book because it is achieved when language is alive and performing some function or doing a job in a context; that is, when language is being truly communicative. I do not focus in this book at all on social psychological issues in language. My concern is not to examine attitudes and perceptions that accompany particular language that is used by certain social groups or within certain institutions; I do not discuss the relationship between language and social categories such as sex, class, demographics, or regional variations. Rather, I focus on discourse and the structure of texts. A text can be an object in its own right and an instance of meaning. It is a product of the resources and choices we make during the communication process. I try to provide some flavor for the work in these areas with particular emphasis on issues in coherence.

I believe that a book of this nature should present the current important and interesting thinking on a subject even if the author is less interested in some topics. I have tried to summarize and organize the ideas in many areas as accurately and as interestingly as possible. I use data illustratively in many places and have gone to considerable effort in some instances to clarify issues.

Some of my colleagues will disagree with a few of the choices I have made. Chapter 1, for example, is an essay on the history of thinking about language and somewhat tangential to principles of communication. Moreover, chapters 2, 3, and 4 are an overview of issues in linguistics, cognition, and semantics and they too are a step removed from the primary communicative experience. But each of these subjects comprise the tools of communication; they are the carpentry on which texts are built. *From Language to Communication* is not a complete treatment of either language or communication. Nor is it a highly specified analysis of a limited topic. Rather, it emphasizes the recent tradition of language and discourse studies. The book represents my desire for students to have an understanding of

the relationship between language and communication. I will have satisfied my own goals if a reader, on completion of this book, feels as if he or she has a sense of key issues in the history and nature of language, and how language works to stitch together a coherent text that is an instance of social meaning.

For me, this book represents various paths along the intellectual route I have been traveling. I have encountered many helpful people and institutions along the way. My colleagues in the Department of Communication at the University of Hartford are always a source of discussion and pleasure. I would also like to thank the university for a sabbatical in the Spring of 1990 which allowed me to complete the book. Jennings Bryant and all of the people at Lawrence Erlbaum Associates have been helpful, supportive, and tolerant. Bill Villaume of Auburn University read a draft of the manuscript and offered valuable insights and suggestions. And the Stockbridge Group (you know who you are) has been a pleasant source of discussion and criticism all of which has found its way into various places in this book.

Above all, my family deserves special attention, especially my wife Karen who is the most talented communicator I know, and David and Alexandra who simply communicate.

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The Nature of Language: From Magic to Semantics

This book is essentially an argument that language is the primary mechanism of experience. Moreover, language is assumed to be in the first instance communicative. Traditional approaches to the study of language, and formal linguistics in particular, have separated the language system from the communicative experience. I suppose it is possible to call this book a functional approach to language. Although the perspective is conceptually akin to functionalism, I avoid discussion of *functionalism* as a philosophical position in the social sciences. When scholars such as Ernst Cassirer and Kenneth Burke ruminate about the nature of human knowledge and intelligence they find it impossible to avoid associating human action with purposeful (i.e., functional) human behavior. Chomsky's contributions to linguistics notwithstanding, the foundations of language are in social life.

The study of language straddles the line between logic and sociologic; it relies on, to borrow a classical metaphor, both the closed fist of logic and the open hand of culture. Natural language—that is, the meaningful sounds uttered by humans as opposed to artificial or specially created symbol systems—is both a rigorous system that is susceptible to mathematical modeling, and a delicate system that demands intimate knowledge of language users and their communities. Although it is somewhat simplistic, the approaches to language in the past 50 years have

generally agreed to this distinction—functional versus structural. The structuralist has been concerned with language as an autonomous system of sounds that have clear referents for their meaning. A structural linguist, epitomized by Noam Chomsky (1965) and others, is concerned with language universals and those aspects of language that can be shown to be invariant and not associated with individual or social idiosyncrasies. The functionalist, perhaps most represented by sociolinguists such as Dell Hymes (1974), recoil at the thought of language separated from social use. Sociolinguists maintain that language cannot be separated from a community of users, and that “organized diversity” is more important than the search for linguistic universals.

The title “From Language to Communication” is intended to imply the mutuality of both “language” and “communication.” Neither has the more vital role in studying social interaction. In fact, the definitions of each imply the other; that is, any definition of language must include a communicative function, and it is equally impossible to define communication without reference to a linguistic component. But it is communication that provides the more general frame of reference. It is language that serves communication. Language is only useful or practical to the extent that it ministers to communicative goals. The aim of understanding a communicative system in any culture or species is to clarify and keep in view the relationships between messages and contexts, and not divorce them. Studies of social life make little sense if they are separated from the communicative systems that establish them, just as examining language and communication is futile if they are separated from the contexts and situations that drive them. Let us begin with some orientation toward the historical treatment of language.

ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE

Early theories of language were preoccupied with its origins. Before the 18th century, theories attributed the origins of language to divine intervention. Language was considered a gift from God. Most cultures have a story or myth about the creation of language and the nature of the first language. In the Judeo-Christian tradition Hebrew was the language of the Garden of Eden. Andreas Kemke, a 17th-century Swedish philologist, boldly claimed that Swedish was spoken in the Garden of Eden. Other cultures have creation stories that include the origin of language. The Egyptians are the oldest race and maintain that Egyptian was the original language. One of their ancient stories is about a ruler who removed children from their home at birth and placed them with shepherds who were ordered not to speak to babies. The story has it that the children spontaneously uttered Egyptian words at about the age of 2. This presumably proved that Egyptian was the original language.

All cultures have a language origin story. Although the facts of the story are irrelevant and certainly apocryphal, the existence of the stories and the elements they share are interesting. The sun goddess, Amaterasu, was the creator of language in Japan. In China the Son of Heaven was T'ien-tzu and he gave language and the power of words to man. Creation myths almost invariably have a god from the heavens or the god of light both creating man and giving him speech powers. These tendencies are recurring in the creation myths of the American Indians. Michabo was the god of light in Algonquian mythology, and the culture god of the Iroquois was the god of the dawn. From these collections of stories and myths come reports of similar experiences and behaviors. It is possible to interpret the myths as saying that language accompanied reason. The metaphor of light is typically associated with "knowledge" and "understanding" and it seems to be no accident that theories of the origin of language would accompany beliefs about when intelligent human behavior began. It must have been impossible for the ancients to conceive of human life without language so language must have coincided with the birth of human beings.

Plato marks the beginning of the serious considerations about language. Early myths, including the Genesis narrative, simply stated the fact that language existed and a god gave it to man. In Genesis it was the power to name things that God bestowed upon us. The author of the Genesis narrative provided no analysis or exposition of the history and nature of language. Plato, on the other hand, accepted the facts of language as given and then asked: "How did language come about?" or "What was the principle that guided the making of the first words?" Plato's approach was radical for its time and his analysis in the *Cratylus* is a combination of philosophy and science. Although Plato and the Greeks were somewhat vague about the origin of language, at least they were not mystical about it. Socrates, who does the talking about language in the *Cratylus*, reports that some words were not of Greek origin and must have been borrowed from their barbarian neighbors. The word *barbaros* in Greek implies "babbler" and certainly suggests what the Greeks must have thought about their own language compared to others. Socrates reasons that because barbarians were an older race that came before the Greeks (more primitive of course), it would be necessary to trace these original forms in order to do a complete analysis and account of the language. Socrates was on the right track!

The *Cratylus* is an intriguing work by Plato and became the foundation for future arguments about the nature and origin of language. In the play, Cratylus is the character who argues tenaciously that the names for things are naturally correct. That there is a natural and fundamental relationship between a thing and the name for it. Cratylus continues by insisting that knowledge of things is the same as knowledge of names and "lying" is impossible. Socrates plays devil's advocate by maintaining that "naming" is a special art and responsive to human desires. Socrates points to the great variation in languages and asks how the

differences could have come about. But Cratylus is unimpressed and insists that these differences are due to unimportant variations in societies and these have nothing to do with the truth function of language. Socrates skewers Cratylus by asking: If knowledge of things is through names, how could the first name giver have known anything? Cratylus resorts to the same answer given by many before him and after. He claims that the first names for things were given by a power greater than ours.

The *Cratylus* was important because it posed a question worth asking at the time. It marked the first time that the conventional nature of language was treated as a serious possibility. In many ways the question of "nature" versus "convention" is immature. Some, as did Cratylus and Hermogenes, make the illogical leap that we know truth if we know names; or, if names are arbitrary, there is no truth. Such is simply not the case and even Socrates warns Cratylus and Hermogenes that there are bigger and more important questions. Interestingly, Aristotle reports later that Cratylus grew old and became convinced of the naturalness of change and abandoned the use of language altogether. When asked a question he would only point to things.

Later Theories

Rousseau's essay on the *Origin of Languages* can be considered a marker that separates ancient theories from more modern ones. Until Rousseau, most theories of language were still under the control of Christian Europe and divine origin was the prevailing account. But although Rousseau identified a number of themes and issues pertaining to language, he struggled with the ultimate question. He wrote that he was "frightened" by the problems one encounters when attempting to show that language was born of human means. Rousseau was more interested in the practical needs of man than in language itself. He wanted to know how language changed as a function of societies and governments. His essay is on the origins of languages, not language. But even though his observations are sometimes inconsistent he offered a number of important insights.

Language, according to Rousseau, was born out of passion. He did not maintain that God "gave" language to man, rather that language emerged from the cries and vocalizations of primitive man. Primitive language was more expressive and emotional than instrumental. It utilized all of the senses including gesture and movement; it was rhythmic, sensuous, and figurative. Rousseau believed that man had a natural state, which could be associated with primitive man, but that this natural state was prior to social and conventional man. It was language that had become man's first social institution. Language followed the natural state and must, therefore, have been derived from our native passions. Rousseau was continually frustrated by what he thought was an unsolvable problem. How could

we discover truth when man was constantly changing and trying to better himself. If man changed then there were no permanent truths. Language was an accomplice in this dilemma because language was changing. Rousseau worked to strip away the artificial in man in an effort to discover his nature. Language posed a particular problem because of its complexity. It had lost its original coherence and beauty as the generations passed and language became more conventional, syntactic, and rule bound. History, law, and art, according to Rousseau, were originally sung and announced publicly in instinctive and spontaneous ritual. Now that the law and history were codified there was a loss of innocence and public unity. Even written language fell under Rousseau's critical stance. Writing, according to Rousseau, caused true expression to be sacrificed for precision and language that was commonplace and undistinctive. He agreed with Plato who wrote in the *Cratylus* that language was dangerous because it drew attention away from seeking the truth of things.

Herder. Rousseau clarified issues confronting the nature and origins of language, but he erected more obstacles than bridges. In the end Rousseau, as did Socrates, warned that the question of the origin of language may not be the most useful question to ask. A German scholar named Johann Gottfried Herder deserves very special attention when considering the history of language. Herder offered the classic statement on the question and it has permanent scientific value. A mere 22 years after Rousseau's *Origin of Languages*, Herder won a prize for an essay called "*Treatise on the Origin of Language*." In the treatise Herder responded to issues raised by numerous others in the decade before its publication. Herder's essay answers the questions posed by the Berlin Academy when they announced the contest: Could men have invented language? If so, how did they do it?

It is important to remember that the scientific work of Darwin and Lamarck, and the German philosophy and science of Kant and Goethe establish the historical context for Herder's classic essay on language. Kant in 1755 explained that the present world was the result of a long and gradual evolution through natural causation. Herder was a student of Kant's and carried forward his ideas of evolution and unity. Language was examined as a natural evolutionary process and the question of divine origin was not worth asking because it was not an answer—on the contrary, it required an explanation itself. Herder's essay presented the arguments that follow.

His first argument is quite elegant and, more importantly, established communication as the basis for language development. Men in their animal states expressed themselves by cries and howls that were physiological responses. Yet these were acts of self-expression and had no communicative value beyond the individual making the sounds. But this self-expression preceded language because it gave some form or structure to inward feelings. This form was repre-

sented in sound and presumably developed into a cognitive component. When this external form (sound representing feeling) was directed outward it became communication. Language developed as an evolutionary process where simplicity gave way to complexity through adaptation, change, and natural selection. Language and reason were born when man isolated an object and held a conception of that object in his mind. The next step was to associate sounds with the object and concept.

The second aspect of Herder's argument begins with the presumption that because only man possesses language, theories of language should include something about the differences between man and other animals. Man, wrote Herder, does not have the same instinctive nature as animals. Animals have more highly developed and sophisticated instincts, but they are focused on a very narrow range of experience. So a bee is quite skilled at extracting honey from a flower and building a hive but that is all it can do. It has no *use* for language. An animal such as man can engage in a greater variety of activities; his senses take in everything around him, Man is inferior to other animals with respect to instinctual capacity but can direct activity toward multiple points in his environment.

Herder identified the specific nature of man as reflectiveness. Man is capable of thinking and cognition to such a degree that he can "think about thinking." Language was not invented it was discovered. Humans confront a sea of chaotic sensations and impressions and their reflectiveness allows them to identify objects and to describe characteristics of that object. Where natural cries and howls were the internal becoming external, language is taking the external and making it internal. The outer world is mapped onto the human psyche. A child learning language has his or her attention drawn to objects but a parent does not "supply" reflectiveness or linguistic ability. Herder placed the origins and purposes of language squarely in the realm of communication. Language is the ordering principle of the mind and becomes the medium of communication. Herder wrote:

Yet I cannot imagine the first human thought nor the first reflective judgement without at least trying to create a dialogue within my soul. And so the first human thought by its very nature prepares the way for the possibility of a dialogue with others. The first distinguishing mark (*Merkmal*) that I apprehend is a distinguishing word (*Wort*) for me and a communicating word (*Mitteilungswort*) for others. (cited in Stam, 1976, p. 124)

In the final part of the treatise Herder stated four principles of human nature, all of which pertain to the centrality of language. These principles also help explain differences and changes in language and how these differences and changes are natural. The first principle, briefly, is that man has freedom of thought and is thus dependent on language. Language is crucial because man has reflectiveness and not instincts. The second principle places man in the center of

society; he needs the associations of others for physical and emotional sustenance and for these reasons language must always change and develop. The third principle is an extension of the second because it states that because all men cannot be in a single society there cannot be a single language. Languages must be flexible enough to accommodate the communication needs of a variety of social organizations. The final principle holds that because the human race developed from a single origin, all language and social groups are tied to a single stream of culture. Language and culture were invented progressively and, therefore, have historical and genetic commonalities.

Darwin and Muller. Herder's work stimulated critical response from all corners of philosophy and science. But the next significant turn in thinking about the history and origin of language came from Darwin. The essence of Herder's thinking about language was that it was a unique human capability derived from our advanced and sophisticated reasoning and abstractive abilities. But in 1871, Darwin published *The Descent of Man* and expanded the boundaries of arguments about language. Darwin challenged the notion that linguistic abilities were a special human gift and wrote that the distinctions between the human world and the animal world with respect to language were artificial and arbitrary. Darwin thought the difference between the language of man and the cries of animals was one of degree only. Humans had more distinct connotative meaning and precise articulation, but these were the extent of the differences. A dog, according to Darwin, who recognized his owner was employing symbolic capabilities, and a parrot was ample proof that animals could have articulatory virtuosity.

Darwin did acknowledge important differences between human speech and other forms of expression, but he did not see a distinct break in the evolutionary branches. He made the very wise and important distinction between the essential impulse of language and the varieties of articulation and conventionality. So linguistic ability was a native predisposition distinctive of human beings, but particular sounds and communicative uses were not part of this native predisposition. One question Darwin had to answer was that of the "original cause" of language. Where earlier theorists evoked divine agency or inherent nature, Darwin turned to the biological nature of humans. He thought it possible that the speech organs used for cries of emotion were capable of improving. But did improved speech organs influence intellectual development or did the brain improve speech organs? In the end, Darwin figured the influence was reciprocal and thereby placed the development of language in the evolutionary process. Darwin wrote that the evolutionary process endowed man with the capacity and inclination for language. Evolution, not God, gave birth to language.

It was not long before various extensions of Darwinian theory began to appear. Just as there were social Darwinists there were linguistic Darwinists who espoused the rule of the strong in matters of grammar and vocabulary. The fittest

of the species and the language were bound to survive. Even Darwin wrote that some languages were dominant and would flourish, whereas others were doomed to extinction. "The survival or preservation of certain favored words in the struggle for existence," wrote Darwin, "is natural selection" (Darwin, 1899, p. 92).

Max Muller advanced most of the objections against Darwin. But he did it more from the mountain of authority than from the trail of logic. Muller was a professor of philology at Oxford and was simply enraptured with the unique linguistic capabilities of humans. He simply could not imagine that human language was anything but special. Muller's arguments were similar to Socrates' in that he proposed a special harmony between sound and meaning. But Muller was a fine stylist with a sarcastic wit to which he turned for most of his objections. He never really addresses issues raised by Darwin except by way of sarcasm and humorous examples that were entertaining but not very illuminating. Muller, however, was a strong proponent of linguistics as a physical science and not as a historical science. He thought that language should be the study of natural human processes such as sound production. This is an important perspective that begins to develop seriously in the 19th century. There was a growing interest in comparative phonology and more "sound laws" were discovered. Near the end of the 19th century there was a significant loss of interest in abstract and often mystical speculation about the origin and nature of language. Scholars were turning their attention to the technical work of studying language systems and making comparisons among languages.

Modern Theories: The Rise of Linguistics

If it is possible to identify a single year that marks the beginning of contemporary linguistic science, it is the year 1786. This is the year that Sir William Jones of the East India Company presented his famous paper establishing beyond a doubt that classical Indian Sanskrit was related to Greek, Latin, and Germanic languages. Although it was Muller who popularized the new scientific study of linguistics it was this earlier work with Sanskrit that formed the first stage in the systematic growth of historical and comparative linguistics. Moreover, European scholars now came into contact with Indian scholars who had a well-established tradition of linguistic scholarship. Near the end of the 18th century we have the new "comparative philology," as opposed to "classical philology," where the concern is with comparing one language with another. Classical philology was preoccupied with the origins of words. Although Sir William Jones wrote the definitive paper establishing the relationship between Sanskrit and European languages, others before him had noted relationships. The Italian merchant Filippo Sassetti reported similarities between Italian and Sanskrit as early as the 16th century. The word "snake," for example, was *serpe* in Italian and *sarpa* in