ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE

Third Edition

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PREFACE

A new edition benefits—one always hopes—from the comments by users of the earlier book. Since 1975, courses in linguistics or courses with a definable linguistic content have increasingly taken their place in the curriculum, and as a result a clearer agreement about the content of introductory courses has taken shape. The Second Edition of *Aspects of Language*, which reflected the explosion of linguistics during the sixties and early seventies, had expanded to the point of being too heavy a diet for many. In streamlining and focusing this new edition, the authors have benefited from the comments—frank and detailed—that they sought not only from instructors but from the true users, the students who were assigned the text.

So the Third Edition appears as a slimmer book, but one no less rigorous. There has been no sacrifice of careful grounding in the scholarship of language study. The authors believe that many textbooks err by setting too low a value on the undergraduate mind. Young adults deserve a test of intellect suitable for adults; an overplus is not to be justified, but a sense of the important and the unimportant is absolutely necessary. Above all, the beginner in linguistics needs to be guided into a new way of seeing language, a way that turns language inward upon itself to make conscious and tangible those subtle and almost automatic uses that escape the speaker's notice until someone discovers them and holds them up to view.

When the book and the course succeed, one is rewarded with comments like this, from a student at end of term:

> For all of my years of school I never felt that I fully grasped grammar. I feel that most of the time I can write fairly well-constructed papers, yet I always had a difficult time understanding my teacher's explanation of sentences, and syntax, and all of the rest. However, I must say, my growth this last semester has been tremendous. I feel that the material was finally presented in a way that I could understand.

This student was groping to explain her insights into the ways in which language operates. In her introduction to linguistics she had followed the path of training that the Foreword to the First Edition had hopefully enunciated:

> To read the typical book on the wonderful world of words is hardly to see in the spectacle any particular relevance to oneself. Yet there is no science that is closer to the humanness of humanity than linguistics, for its field is the means by which our personalities are defined to others and by which our thoughts are formed and gain continuity and acceptance. Until linguists can bring their point of view clearly and palatably before the student in the language classroom and the reader at large, they will have only themselves to blame for what one linguist has called the towering failure of the schools to inform ordinary citizens about language. Of no other scientific field is so much fervently believed that isn't so. And not only believed but taught.
>
> We do not need to travel abroad nor back in time to discover the facts of language. They lie all about us, in our daily writings and conversations, open to interpretation and uninhibited by rules of what should or should not be written or said. Almost nothing of interest to the linguist goes on anywhere that does not go on in our communication here and now. This book invites all of us to see within ourselves and around ourselves the objects of a science and to glimpse how the scientist interprets them. It is intended to help the users of language detect the inner spark that created the most wonderful invention of all time.

In its presentation, the Third Edition remains eclectic. It tries to speak for an enlightened traditionalism. Its attitude toward usage is not puristic, but it sees purism as one of the inevitable forces that maintain stability. Its attitude toward theory is not transformationalist, but it recognizes transformationalism as the particular species of formalism in linguistics that has channeled discussion for over two decades. Now that the tide seems to be ebbing somewhat, the reader looking for alternatives need not feel left out. Other viewpoints are given their place, and there is plenty of variety for the individual taste.

Responding to the newer subdisciplines of sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, the book pays due attention to language in its social and

socializing aspects. A freshly integrated chapter, "Growth: The Child and the Race," brings together the somewhat parallel ways in which language seems to have been acquired by humankind and by the individual child. The other chapters have been extensively rewritten to hold a straight course and resist the temptation of detours and side alleys however inviting. In keeping with this purpose, three chapters have been dropped: "Schools and Theories," which is for the specialist and specialist-to-be; "Style," which is better suited to a course in writing; and the greater part of "Variation in Time," which is too technical for the beginning student.

The aim is to make the student think about language in a scientific way, using the logical tools that linguistics provides. In each chapter, following the text, there is material to help integrate the matters presented. A list of Key Terms and Concepts—arranged in the order of appearance—gives a means of ready review. A list of Further Reading comprises a brief selection of the most available and readable books for a deeper look into certain topics. Each chapter concludes with Applications—exercises and thought questions to prepare the student for informed classroom discussion.

We wish to thank the many wise and generous persons who helped us shape this new edition: William A. Pullin of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, who was closely associated with both previous editions, conferred with us for many hours. Harold B. Allen, University of Minnesota; Donald C. Freeman, Temple University; Jeffrey Kaplan, Northeastern University; Joseph B. Monda, Seattle University; and Elizabeth Traugott, Stanford University, provided detailed and stimulating suggestions, which would have cost us dearly to do without. Natalie Bowen with Yankee shrewdness raised the right questions as she edited the various drafts. Roberta C. Vellvé focused meticulous care on the preparation of the final copy. And many others, acknowledged throughout the text, made suggestions and gave freely of information that we found invaluable.

Dwight Bolinger
Donald A. Sears

INTRODUCTION

Thomas A. Edison is supposed to have parried the question of a skeptic who wanted to know what one of his fledgling inventions was good for by asking, "What good is a baby?" Appearances suggest that a baby is good for very little, least of all to itself. Completely helpless, absolutely dependent on the adults around it, seemingly unable to do much more than kick and crawl for the greater part of nine or ten months, it would seem better off in the womb a little longer until ready to make a respectable debut and scratch for itself.

Yet if the premature birth of human young is an accident, it is a fortunate one. No other living form has so much to learn about the external world and so little chance of preparing for it in advance. An eaglet has the pattern of its life laid out before it hatches from the egg. Its long evolution has equipped it to contend with definite foes, search for definite foods, mate, and rear its young according to a definite ritual. The environment is predictable enough to make the responses predictable too, and they are built into the genetic design. With human beings this is impossible. The main reason for its impossibility is language.

We know little about animal communication, but enough to say that nowhere does it even approach the complexity of human language. By the age of six or eight a child can watch a playmate carry out an intricate series of actions and give a running account of it afterward. The most that a bee can do is perform a dance that is related analogously to the

direction and distance of a find of nectar, much like what we do in pointing a direction to a stranger. The content of the message is slight and highly stereotyped. With the child, the playmate's actions can be as unpredictable as you please—they will still be verbalized. Attaining this skill requires the mastery of a system that takes literally years to learn. An early start is essential, and it cannot be in the womb. Practice must go on in the open air where sounds are freely transmitted, for language is sound. And if language is to be socially effective it cannot be acquired within a month or two of birth when the environment is limited to parents and crib but must continue to grow as the child becomes stronger and contacts widen. Human evolution has ensured that this will happen by providing for a brain of such extraordinary size that the head, if allowed to mature any further before birth, would make birth impossible—a brain, moreover, in which the speech areas are the last to reach their full development.[1] So we might say to the skeptic's question that a baby is good for learning language.

All that a child can be born with is instincts for language in general, not for any particular language—exactly as with an instinct for walking but not for walking in a given direction. This is another reason why an early beginning is necessary: languages differ, and even the same language changes through time, so that an infant born with patterns already set would be at a disadvantage. One still hears the foolish claim that a child born to German parents ought to be able to learn German more easily than some other language. Our experience discredits this. Ancestry makes no difference. Children learn the language they hear, one about as easily as another, and often two or more at the same time. Complete adaptability confers the gift of survival. Children do not depend on a particular culture but fit themselves to the one into which they are born —one that in turn is maintaining itself in a not always friendly universe. Whatever success that culture has is largely due to the understanding and cooperation that language makes possible.

Another reason for an early beginning and a gradual growth is *permeation*. The running account that a child is able to give after performing a series of actions or seeing one performed betokens an organized activity that is not enclosed within itself but relates at all times to something else. It would seem absurd to us to be told that every time we stood up, sat down, reached for a chocolate, turned on a light, pushed a baby carriage, or started the car we should, at the same time, be twitching in a particular way the big toe of our left foot. But just such an incessant accompaniment of everything else by our speech organs does not surprise us at

[1] Lamendella 1975, Ch. 2, p. 2; Carmichael 1966, pp. 17–19.

all. Other activities are self-contained. That of language penetrates them and almost never stops. It must be developed not separately, like walking, but as part of whatever we do. So it must be on hand from the start.

And it continues through life. A language is never completely learned. There is always someone who knows a bit of it that we do not know.[2] In part this is because with the experimental and inventive way in which learning is done, no two people ever carry exactly the same network of shapes and patterns in their heads. A perfect command eludes us because as we catch up it moves off—"the language" exists only as imperfect copies, with original touches, in individual minds; it never stays exactly the same. All we can say is that interplay is so fast, frequent, and vital that great differences are not tolerated, networks are forced to acquire a similar weave, and all networks within cooperating distance tend to share the same grammars and vocabularies.

[2] Including parts of grammar as well as vocabulary. One study has shown that ninth and tenth graders get almost as many sentences wrong as they do right in their written compositions. Another has shown definite effects of education on adult speakers. See Bateman 1966, and Gleitman and Gleitman 1970.

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SOME TRAITS OF LANGUAGE

Five thousand is a fair guess as to how many languages are in active use in the world today—in Colombia, for example, almost two hundred separate languages and dialects have been identified.[1] But "dialect" is a key word—what is "a language" really? Swedish and Norwegian have a high degree of mutual intelligibility, but we count them as two. "One language," Chinese, includes Cantonese and Mandarin, which are about as dissimilar as Portuguese and Italian. To be scientific we have to ignore politics and forget that Sweden and Norway have separate flags and mainland China one. True differences are quantitative: how much should we allow before graduating *X* from "a dialect of *Y*" to "a language, distinct from *Y*"?

However this is reckoned, the number of different languages is formidable and awesome if we include the tongues once spoken but now dead. Languages are like people: for all their underlying similarities, great numbers mean great variety. Variety confronts us with these questions: Do we know enough about languages to be able to describe language? Can we penetrate the differences to arrive at the samenesses underneath?

The more languages we study, the more the answer seems to be yes. Variety is enormous, but similarities abound, and we can even attempt a

[1] Arango Montoya 1972.

definition—something like "Human language is a system of vocal-auditory communication, interacting with the experiences of its users, employing conventional signs composed of arbitrary patterned sound units and assembled according to set rules." However we word it—and obviously no one-sentence definition will ever be adequate—there is enough homogeneity to make some sort of definition possible.

LANGUAGE IS HUMAN

Languages are alike because people have the same capacities everywhere. All infants babble—even those deaf at birth. The incredibly complex system that constitutes every known language is largely mastered before a child learns to divide ten by two. No one knows yet how far the great apes may progress in communicating with people and with other apes using human sign language, but for all their skill in using it, they did not invent it (see page 177).

LANGUAGE IS THOUGHT AND ACTIVITY

A language can disappear without a trace when its last speaker dies. This is still true of the majority of the world's languages, in spite of the spread of presses and tape recorders. Written and spoken recordings do endure, and writing in particular has evolved to some extent independently; but the essence of language is a way of thinking and acting. Our habit of viewing it as a *thing* is probably unavoidable, even for the linguist, but in a sense it is false.

What *is* something thing-like, because it is transmitted from speaker to speaker, is the system that underlies the thinking and acting: the *competence* each of us acquires that enables us to *perform* at any given moment. Competence is to performance as a composer's skill is to an improvisation or the writing of a musical work. This is what makes language so special, so different from inborn abilities like breathing, grasping, and crying. With language, all we are born with is a highly specialized capacity to learn. As the child acquires language, the system is probably engraved somehow on the brain; if we had the means to make the system visible we could interpret it. For the present we can only listen to our thoughts and observe how others act, and linguists are useful because, since we are not mind readers, we need specialists to study the behavior and infer the system.