

The Survival of English

essays in criticism
of language

Ian Robinson

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University College of Swansea*

O gentile Engleterre, a toi j'escrits
Pour remembrer ta joie q'est nouvelle

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This book does not pretend to be a work of philosophy, but it could fail if its philosophical bearings are hopeless; and so I am grateful to Professor D. Z. Phillips for having warned me of some of the things wrong with a draft of the first chapter. Any absurdities that remain after drastic rewriting cannot be laid to Professor Phillips's charge. I gratefully acknowledge the sabbatical term, arranged by the English Department of the University College of Swansea and permitted by the College Council, which enabled me to finish the book. I am obliged to the editors of *The Cambridge Quarterly* for permission to reprint in chapter 2 some fragments of an essay from their volume ii, no. 4 (1967). A first version of chapter 3 appeared in the excellent and unfortunately defunct *Oxford Review*, Hilary, 1968. I am also grateful to the following for giving me permission to reprint the texts of complete poems in copyright. Jonathan Cape Ltd for 'All Fools' Day' by Adrian Mitchell from *Poems*; Faber and Faber Ltd for 'Talking in Bed' by Philip Larkin from *The Whitsun Weddings*; Hart-Davis Ltd and Ronald Duncan for 'Words are a Net' from *Collected Poems*; Deborah Rogers Ltd, London, and Adrian Henri for 'Remember' Copyright © 1967 by Adrian Henri, from *Love, Love, Love* (Corgi).

Things here and there throughout the book, in particular in chapters 4 and 5, derive from work published in *The Human World*, and it is in them that the influence of Mr David Sims, strong throughout, is most direct. Some few of the phrases in these passages and in chapter 6 are in fact his – the best ones, I suspect. My substantial debts to other contributors to *The Human World* are acknowledged at the places where they are incurred.

The dedication commemorates some conversations in the summer of 1967 during which I realized I was trying to define a subject which, to be properly treated, would need a book; since then, though parts have appeared piecemeal, I have always thought of them as deriving from a whole.

Swansea, 1961-72

I.R.

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Introductory: Language and Life

In the beginning was language . . . That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

'Everything exists, nothing has value.' Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* learns this from the god of the Marabar caves, and it is the end of her. As far as we are concerned – and beyond that 'what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' – we have to be able to rewrite the sentence and say everything has value, nothing merely 'exists'. With her values, her sense of the difference between marriage and rape, Mrs Moore has lost what F. R. Leavis calls a 'grasp of a real', as well as her will to go on living. Her death, merely reported later in the novel, only confirms, without much emphasizing it, that anything truly to be called 'her life' has ended.

'Value' is not always the same as 'significance', but I do not wish to distinguish them yet. To say, though, that nothing exists without significance offends our commonsense, for one of our central beliefs in the modern world, when we are not merely taking it for granted, is that things exist whether they mean anything or not. I don't want to join the ranks of the flightier descendants of Bishop Berkeley who airily deny the existence of things, or to contend that we create the universe unaided, merely by looking at it. Yet things can only exist for 'the human race, to which so many of my readers belong' as what they mean to it, no more and no less. Knowledge organizes the meaning of things, and the specialist academic disciplines are specially developed styles of organized meaning, in which the existence of things is especially cultivated in one way or another.

'But,' a friend objects with the voice of commonsense, 'I find it restless to think that some things exist without significance, especially when you and I aren't watching.' So do I. That way of imagining things is one way of giving them significance, as well as of reminding oneself that there are in the world things other than oneself. But what of the same things when nobody is imagining them? What of the unimaginable things not yet discovered? –

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America before Columbus, say, or Australia before Cook? They begin to exist, as far as we're concerned, as they are discovered – when they can be given the place in life that their discovery entails. What difference could it make to say they existed before that? Yet we *do* like to believe in a creation myth that has the things first lying about in a calmly untrammelled way, a complete world waiting ready-made for Adam, who invents language by giving names to the creatures and later, perhaps, begins asking what all these existent things mean in his life. (This wouldn't do even as an account of the Book of Genesis, where Adam has a conversation with God before naming anything – he comes to the creatures, that is to say, with a ready-made language within which the names can make their sense and in the absence of which it would make no sense to talk of 'naming'.) Even D. H. Lawrence used to comfort himself with the thought that the world would get on quite well without us, handed over to the rabbits – a very human imagination quite beyond a rabbit. Modern science, we are comparably told in popular histories of ideas, has displaced the earth from the centre of the universe, which is seen as a large collection of objects with, presumably, some geometric centre. This, however, is another human vision: it presupposes a point of view.

If things exist as meaning, the context where they do so can only be our lives. We are the people to whom things signify. The centre of the universe is therefore where it always has been, in all the human lives on earth.

Sometimes we can change the meaning of a thing by seeing it in a different aspect (cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edn (1958), section IIxi) and in those cases the meaning of a thing will depend upon the exercise of the individual will within the bounds of the trained human imagination. Some things and experiences do change as we look back on them (or *we* change, which is here the same thing). I am not asserting, though, that in general we simply *decide* what things mean, any more than we simply decide that the world exists. Yet I would say we are all responsible for our world. That problem – how we can be said to will the existence of a world to which there is no alternative for us but madness or death – is one of the themes of the following discussions, suggesting the underlying question: what it can be, in the context of such concerns, to will the good. Things are, at any rate, whatever they mean to an individual.

Events, like things, are always the same as their significance.

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Even in common speech, to be an event in one's life what happens must mean something. Imagine being hit on the head and losing consciousness. What the blow means, its real existence, is certainly the blow in itself – but in your life. The meaning depends on the circumstances, your character, etc., as well as on whatever is physically measurable about it. As you recover and think about what happened you may give the event any number of different meanings as you understand it differently. (If the blow is a rock falling from a cliff, that in itself will make the event different from your wife or husband dropping it on you with precisely the same physical force.) Moreover, the way you create the event by understanding it may affect the pace and style of recovery. (I introduce the ideas of discussion and response, by which I mean criticism, so early into the argument because they are central to my theme.) But nobody who has ever been hit hard on the head will want to deny that that is something unalterable which has happened to the body.

'The same' event is different for different people. I leave my wallet in a telephone box, go back five minutes later and, as the saying goes, 'find it gone'. Anyone else at that moment looking into the box would see the same interior, but nobody else would see the wallet missing. (Someone else during the previous five minutes, unfortunately from my point of view but not theirs, saw the missing wallet, but that is different.) This same event was different in the experience of the local constabulary – almost, one might say, a non-event. It consisted in a bored but sympathetic policeman filling up two forms which thereupon disappeared from his life and (one can say) from existence, until summoned back to their present ghostly imaginative being or momentarily glimpsed during some clearance of files. For some undiscovered third party the same event was a lucky find, possibly accompanied by pangs of conscience. The interesting thing from the point of view of the present discussion is our capacity to make 'the same' event of these different experiences and describe it in such a simple sentence as 'I left my wallet in a telephone box and it was stolen.'

So far, much of what I have written would apply to all forms of life that achieve consciousness. Remove a hen's chickens and the event, for the hen, is the emotions and instincts she then experiences, which it would not be stretching the word too far to call the 'meaning' of the event.

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For a hen her young are not a source of torment. She does for them what it is natural and pleasurable for her to do . . . When a chick falls ill her duties are quite definite: she warms and feeds it. And doing this she knows that she is doing all that is necessary. If her chick dies she does not have to ask herself why it died, or where it has gone to; she cackles for a while, and then leaves off and goes on living as before.

Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, transl. Aylmer Maude, chapter 16

The hen's experience is limited by her nature of a hen, a proper study of zoology. But if *our* experience is comparably limited, the nature in question must be human nature, which is not determinable by zoology. Something an onlooker might call the same event might be experienced very differently by different hens (if it is one pecking another or one getting to the corn-trough before another, for instance). The difference between hens and humans relevant to this discussion is that for us things and events vary coherently in ways they can't for hens.

Think of an old photograph of, let us say, your Victorian great-great-grandmother. Imagine it to be in an excellent state of preservation, so that for the sake of argument we can assume it to be as good as new. It is, nevertheless, not the same photograph as when it was new. It is different according to each viewer: one may recognize the subject, another may see the dress as foreign, one may note the different finish made by a technique of which others know nothing. Nobody can see a photograph without seeing, individually, things of this sort; but the interesting thing here is that some of the variations are general within a culture. All modern viewers who know what 'Victorian' means will see this as an old photograph with the look of an old photograph; and that phrase will be understood by almost anyone able to read it. The photograph has generally changed because it now has the sense of an old photograph.

The last movement of J. C. Bach's first keyboard concerto sounds extremely odd, in one particular way, to all British listeners, but not to anyone else in quite the same way, for it consists of a set of variations on the theme of what is now our national anthem. We cannot not notice that; it is inevitably part of listening to the work, for us. But there must be many listeners to 'the same' music for whom it hasn't that sense at all. The reality there varies with different cultures.

The fact that we all see things from a unique individual point of view does not mean, then, that there are no connections between

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our different individualities; and I argue so obvious a point only because there is something in the present climate of the West that makes it hard for people to accept. The more important step is to bring out the even less well-recognized truth that unless we could communicate – unless there were phrases like 'an old photograph' we can all understand – we would not be able to develop our unique differences.

If I had to tell in this context the difference between us and hens, I would answer either that we are the creatures with souls, or that we are the creatures who talk. I would not mean that the two things are always the same, but that the connection between them, the way that a common view of the world may grant the individual the possibility of his own unique view, does differentiate us from the animal kingdom.

Our view of the world, the way the individual sees things, is also the way we put things together. We call ourselves *homo sapiens* and think that a kind of knowing, or thinking, or reasoning, unique in the natural creation, distinguishes our humanity. The power to make sense, to put things together, to compose, that I am referring to, is what at widest one means by 'thought'. We think when we make connections or comparisons between meanings. And what could be more individual and unfettered than to make a comparison? We are quite free to make any sense – any connection between things and events and experiences – which inspiration may suggest to us, and we do so, for instance, in dreams.

It wouldn't be stretching the word far to call this composing activity itself language; St John seems to be doing so in my epigraph. It must be in our beginning. If dreaming is a language of the soul it is because the soul is the agent for connecting the meanings. Our perceptions and experiences signify to us in a vast variety of ways, and our world is the sum of the connections we make between them.

We think, dream, make the connections, see the bearings which come to us by pure inspiration. But it is also true that we make connections and see bearings every time we use a common noun; and words, though they may come to us as inspirationally as dreams, are limited by ordinary verbal language: this table is like other tables within the limits of our use of the word.

My subject is the connection of the primitive human shaping activity with verbal language, the human reason as it lives in

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words. The book is all about different examples of the interplay between language and life, and I take up the general discussion at the beginning of chapter 5 and in the last chapter. At present I will only record my belief that without the common systems of sense, the natural languages, human beings could not put their nature as *homo sapiens* into practice and could not know that they were rational creatures.

I introduced the blow on the head and the lost wallet because I did not want to prejudge my issues by using examples of 'things' which obviously have no home outside verbal language, and I agree with D. H. Lawrence's doctrine in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*:

We know the sun. But we cannot conceive the sun, unless we are willing to accept some theory of burning gases, some cause-and-effect nonsense. And even if we do have a mental conception of the sun as a sphere of blazing gas – which it certainly isn't – we are just as far from knowing what *blaze* is. Knowledge is always a matter of the whole experience, what St Paul calls knowing in full, and never a matter of mental conception merely. (chapter 2)

I shall nevertheless try to argue – and I don't think it is inconsistent – that our knowledge is dependent on language, in the ordinary sense of the words we use. 'Knowing what "blaze" is' is, as Lawrence says, a matter of the whole experience; but equally it is a knowledge of words. It is also 'knowing that this is "blaze"' – a word not exactly translatable into French. That is to say that for the French the whole experience of knowing what 'blaze' is must be different from ours, even though *any* burnt child fears the fire. There are many areas of experience and feeling where dependence on verbal language is more obvious. 'It doesn't feel like Saturday today.' But it couldn't, without that particular way of organizing the week. (Would it follow that Saturday is unnatural?) 'I felt like a millionaire.' Among the necessary constituents of the feeling is a knowledge of what 'a million' means, which is impossible outside a language with a number-system. I talk about the 'feeling' of these bits of language in order to register agreement with R. G. Collingwood's doctrine¹ that language permits a vastly greater range of emotions than can be experienced by the brute creation.

Partly the difficulty in thinking about the question of individuality and speech is that our individuality isn't quite of the

¹ See *The Principles of Art* (1938), pp. 266ff.

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kind we like to believe. From the fact that we are all unique it does not follow that our uniqueness always expresses itself (as we may fall into assuming) as difference from other human beings. 'When she knew that: $x^2 - y^2 = (x + y)(x - y)$ then she felt that she had grasped something, that she was liberated into an intoxicating air, rare and unconditioned.'² Ursula's knowledge is here an intensely individual experience which depends, however, on precisely the same knowledge being available to other individuals.

Further, our individuality itself has to develop within a common verbal language which we share with others (however individually we use it) and which differs from other languages in ways not explicable by individual whim on the one hand or the prescribed physical limits of human beings on the other.

Children cannot be taught language. They are corrected and guided once they begin to speak, but the primitive activity of making connections and comparisons cannot be taught, nor the possibility of doing it in words. Before the child begins to speak all the parents can do is surround it with humanity and wait for it to latch on. 'When did he say his first word?' mothers ask each other, and any answer implies that before that date the baby was not only *homunculus sapiens*, a rational creature, but capable of understanding (at one level) verbal language, in which the 'first word' alone makes sense. It doesn't follow that if a child repeats syllables after its mother it has begun to speak, any more than when a parrot imitates us. There is more sense than there may seem in saying that children begin to talk when they want to. (And talking is always a *commitment* to a world.)

D. H. Lawrence and R. G. Collingwood give a surprisingly similar answer to the question *when* a child leaves behind him that mysterious infant state and begins to come to a human consciousness.

At first the child cleaves back to the old source. It clings and adheres. The sympathetic centre of unification, or at least unison, alone seems awake. The child wails with the strange desolation of severance, wails for the old connection. With joy and peace it returns to the breast, almost as to the womb.

But not quite. Even in sucking it discovers its new identity and *power*. Its own new, separate *power*. It draws itself back suddenly; it waits. It has heard something? No. But another centre has flashed awake. The child

² D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, chapter 10.

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stiffens itself and holds back. What is it, wind? Stomach-ache? Not at all. Listen to some of the screams. The ears can hear deeper than eyes can see. The first scream of the ego. The scream of asserted isolation. The scream of revolt from connection, the revolt from union. There is a violent anti-maternal motion, anti-everything. There is a refractory, bad-tempered negation of everything, a hurricane of temper. What then? After such tremendous unison as the womb implies, no wonder there are storms of rage and separation. The child is screaming itself rid of the old womb, kicking itself in a blind paroxysm into freedom, into separate, negative independence.

Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, chapter 3

Every one who is accustomed to looking after small children, in addition to distinguishing the cry of pain from the cry of hunger and so forth – various kinds of psychical expression – learns to distinguish the automatic cry of uncontrolled emotion from the self-conscious cry which seems (through a certain exaggeration on the listener's part) deliberately uttered in order to call attention to its needs and to scold the person to whom it seems addressed for not attending to them. The second cry is still a mere cry; it is not yet speech, but it is language. It stands in a new relation to the child's experience as a whole. It is the cry of a child aware of itself and asserting itself. With that utterance, language is born; its articulation into fully developed speech in English or French or some other vernacular is only a matter of detail.³

Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, p. 236

This voluntary assertion of conscious individuality is itself the beginning of the child's re-creation of a world he shares with others. Collingwood says a little later:

The discovery of myself as a person is the discovery that I can speak, and am thus a *persona* or speaker; in speaking, I am both speaker and hearer; and since the discovery of myself as a person is also the discovery of other persons around me, it is the discovery of speakers and hearers other than myself.

(*Ibid.* p. 248)

The child's 'first word' is often 'Mama' or something similar; and no child, obviously, will get far in life in an ordinary family until it begins to recognize mother. Children and mothers are notoriously free to make an infinite variety of different relationships, according to their characters and desires – but limited by their opportunities. Calling her 'mother' is an important part of the child's recognition. But the role of mothers varies with (*inter*

³ It is plain from the rest of the chapter that Collingwood doesn't, as this brilliant sentence alone might suggest, think the 'matter of detail' unimportant.

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alia) the culture they inhabit, the language they are named in. Mothers cannot be the same in matriarchal and patriarchal societies; the corresponding words for 'mother' express the differences to native speakers. The child begins the path towards naturally seeing his mother in one of the particular ways of the language he speaks as soon as he begins to recognize her with the word. This is not an alternative to knowing his individual mother, but part of it.

'We know we have freewill and there's an end on't,' said Johnson, thus offering a definition of human nature which differs from mine less than may appear (if, at least, I can get this paragraph anything like as comprehensible as the arguments of Mr Rush Rhees, and of Wittgenstein in *On Certainty*, on which I base it). But it is a little odd to say we *know* we have freewill, because freewill (like being able to talk) is a precondition of anything we usually call knowledge. (I am writing these words voluntarily. But how do I *know* that? Perhaps I don't. Not that I suspect some mysterious involuntary force, or someone else, of pushing the pen; but questions about knowing – by what evidence? and so on – just don't arise: which is why I can't say, either, that I do know 'infallibly' that I *am* writing. I say so to limit a later use of that dangerous word.) There's nothing odd in saying things like 'I intend to finish this this evening', nothing odd about human beings stating their individual intentions, in time; indeed, if we couldn't make suchlike voluntary, temporal statements *we* wouldn't exist, though other creatures of similar physique might, naked apes or the like. But there can be no freedom of the will and no time without their respective 'grammars'. 'I'll do so-and-so soon' is so natural, so deep down among our foundations, that it is hard for us to see that things like will or time are language-dependent and that they can indeed vary from language to language.

'Second nature' is therefore often a misleading phrase. We say that so-and-so has become second nature to us, supposing that really it is something added to the basic us who remain unchanged somewhere beneath it: people often classify language, the ordinary first language we begin to speak, as second nature in this sense. But if our language is our second nature where is the first? Must it be confined to our physical constitution (even if that can be imagined somehow unmodified in life)? People think so. For instance '[Chomsky] has claimed that the principles underlying the structure of language are so specific and so highly articulated

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that they must be regarded as being biologically determined; that is to say, as constituting part of what we call "human nature" and as being genetically transmitted from parents to their children.⁴ That restricts human nature to the genetic foundation of life. Similarly Mr Gore Vidal on the roles of the sexes: 'By the age of four or five boys are acting in a very different manner from girls. Since there is no hormonal explanation for this, the answer is plainly one of indoctrination.'⁵ Nature would make boys and girls exactly alike at five, he thinks, and if they aren't, then there is something unnatural.

But higher systems organize lower. Faces are, in some cases, physical, but the physical does not explain what it is about a face that allows us to call it so. The face's expression explains the physicality of the face; or rather the physicality is expressed, made meaningful, in the face, by being seen as a face. It is the nature of a face to be a face, and that is what organizes the physical constituency of the face, not *vice versa*.⁶ It is *our* nature to think and to talk, and if we didn't we wouldn't be somehow pristinely natural, we'd be sub-human. 'Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.'⁷

Speaking a language is then part of the natural individuality of every human being and we become ourselves in it; but language is also something each individual creates in common with others. Surely this is the sense (however it was originally intended) in the old Greek tag 'man is a social animal'. I don't think it can be argued that we cease to be human if we avoid our fellows: hermits are not social animals in the obvious sense but are as human as the rest of us. But like ours their human individuality is only developed through and in the common possession, language.

⁴ John Lyons, *Chomsky* (1970), p. 11.

⁵ *The New York Review of Books*, 22 July 1971.

⁶ The obvious case of a thing's existing as meaning is, of course, a linguistic utterance. A sentence is obviously itself only in the understanding of what it means. In a totally unknown language written in what look like sentences that appearance of being sentences is the extent of the existence of the sentences of the language. But sentences have their physical realization, too, in sound or writing, and a whole generation of linguists (as they then were) drove themselves to or beyond the limits of sanity by trying to restrict the study of language to this physical level, uncontrolled by the higher level of meaning, which does really control it.

⁷ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 12c.

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The normal child develops his power to talk, and the entry it gives him into the vast freedom of humanity, from what Chomsky calls the 'degenerate data'⁸ furnished by his parents' 'language performance'. The world thus entered is not restricted to the child's family (since the parents' language is their version of the common language) but it is restricted to one language, and his individuality normally becomes one that can express itself in that language. The possibilities into which a child grows therefore vary (in ways it is my task to exemplify) with his language.

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

II

If things are what they mean, languages are shared systems for organizing what things mean, which is the same both as allowing them to exist and knowing them. A language is a form of the possibilities of a common sense, including the possibilities of change in a common sense. But how to discuss the form, the whole language? The ways people have attempted are notoriously difficult and various. (The bearings of my discussion upon the most widely respected contemporary way, the 'science of language', linguistics, are interesting, but I must reserve my attempt to treat them for another occasion.) I put the impossible-looking effort to see a language as a whole beside another: the two may seem more possible, though not much less formidable, if they can be seen as the same thing.

One responsibility of us all is to think about and try to understand the way civilization is going. But how to do that? How is so vague a phrase to become meaningful?

One way of coming at the unity of a civilization is to ask how many cultures there are. One? Two? Sixty-three? The question might be made to make sense if you re-phrase it to ask how many styles of a language there are and how they might bear upon one another to form a whole language. I suggest that the number of styles is infinite, but that they are all seen to be themselves, and defined, by their connections and contrasts with one another which form the whole. I use 'style' here in a wide sense, the sense I intended when I said that specialist academic disciplines are different styles of organizing knowledge. But it also is true enough

⁸ N. Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (1968), p. 68.

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to take 'style' in the ordinary sense of (leaving aside for a moment the difficulties in the phrase) 'the way of saying a thing'.

Linguists of the school of J. R. Firth sometimes write of 'register', by which they mean a style appropriate to a particular situation. (I do not say a 'given' situation, because I think it is often the 'register' that 'gives'.) It makes sense to think of a register's selecting words and rhythms from the total possibility of the language. One modern fallacy I discuss in chapter 2 is that there is a simple, uniform, easily recognizable thing called 'ordinary language' (at which the great writers of our century, progressively abandoning style, are sometimes thought to have aimed). 'Ordinary speech' covers a range of styles only less numerous than those of the whole language. I am likely to speak in different styles to my mother, my doctor and my butcher, and in different styles to each on different occasions, though some styles will be usable to all on yet other occasions.

The *vast* range of styles in a language, quite beyond the reach of the traditional discipline of grammar even as developed by Chomsky, was one of the truths that dawned on Wittgenstein between the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Think of exclamations alone, with their completely different functions.

Water!

Away!

Ow!

Help!

Fine!

No!

Are you still inclined to call these words 'names of objects'?

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 13c

Speakers of the language know when to use which, and in what sense. This knowing what to say makes a unity of the very different parts of language by making sense of their contrasts and connections.

The recognition of the richness of the ordinary heritage of language is J. L. Austin's contribution to language-criticism (I won't say 'to philosophy', since he seems more interested in what English actually does than in philosophical questions about the possibility of language). 'Our common stock of words', he says, 'embodies all the distinctions that men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the