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A brilliant and fascinating exploration of the
basic weapon by which man has advanced
from savagery to civilization.

THE STORY OF Language



MARIO PEI

A MENTOR BOOK

Instrument of Culture

The structure of language; how it is formed
and changed . . .

A review of the modern spoken languages . . .

Language and its relation to religion, politics
and economics, science and literature, superstition
and intolerance . . .

Dialects, place names, family names . . .

Problems of language learning and how they can
be solved . . .

Slang, cant, jargon . . .

Evolution of writing . . .

The controversial problem of an international
language . . .

These are just a few of the subjects Mario Pei discusses in this enlightening and entertaining study of language—that most basic and marvelously complex instrument of culture. Albert Guerard said in *The New York Herald Tribune*: “There are many introductions to linguistic studies. . . . I do not hesitate to rank Mario Pei’s among the most comprehensive and the best balanced.” Horace Reynolds wrote in *The New York Times*: “This is a book good for both reading and reference.” After reading *The Story of Language* George Bernard Shaw observed that Professor Pei’s “prodigious memory and knowledge remind me of Isaac Newton.”

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THE STORY OF LANGUAGE

MARIO PEI

— —
A MENTOR BOOK

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PART THE HISTORY OF ONE LANGUAGE

1 NON-LINGUISTIC SYSTEMS OF COMMUNICATION

There was speech in their dumbness, language in their very gesture.—Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

You are travelling along a motor highway. At the side of the road there appears an octagonal sign-post, with no lettering on it. If you do not know the code, you will go right on past it, into the arms of a traffic policeman or, more tragically, into a crash. If you know the code, you will come to a full stop. In like manner, a round disk with a cross tells you you are approaching a railroad crossing, a diamond-shaped sign tells you to slow down, a square sign indicates that you are entering a school-zone. Most States have now replaced these symbolic sign-posts with lettered signs, because illiteracy is rapidly diminishing. They depended upon a visual symbolism of shape, and served their purpose well when a segment of the driving population was still illiterate or semi-literate.

The red, green and yellow lights and "blinkers" which are now so common are equally effective, save in cases of color-blindness. They depend upon a visual symbolism of color, in which red arbitrarily stands for "stop" or "danger," green for "safety" or "go," yellow for "slow" or a transitional signal, a blinking light for "caution."

You are trying to pass a truck on a narrow highway at night. In response to the tooting of your horn, the truckman flashes his rear outline-lights off and on. If you know the code, you know that you can pass him safely. But if instead of signalling with his lights he waves his arm up and down, you know there is a car coming in the opposite direction, and drop behind till he gives the welcome flash. Here we have a symbolism of light and one of gesture.

In none of the cases outlined above has there been an interchange of language, spoken or written. There has, how-

ever, been an interchange of meaning, a transfer of significant concepts. If we accept only the narrower etymological definition of "language" as that which is produced by the human vocal organs and received by the hearing apparatus, we shall have to deny the name of "language" to these transfers. If we accept the broader definition of language as any transfer of meaning, they are forms of language differing in degree but not in kind from a spoken or written message.

In their anxiety to restrict language to a pattern of sounds, too many linguists have forgotten that the sound-symbols of the spoken tongue are neither more nor less symbolical of human thought and human meaning than the various forms of activity (gestural, pictorial, ideographic, even artistic) by which men have conveyed significant messages to one another since the dawn of history. It is a commonplace among linguists that the spoken language antedates the written language by thousands, perhaps millions of years. Insofar as the written language is a symbolical replica of the spoken tongue, this is undoubtedly true. But there is little or no assurance that organized sound-language, as distinguished from mere animal cries, antedates pictographs painted on the walls of caves or petroglyphs carved on rocks, whose purpose undoubtedly was to convey a significant message or establish a permanent record.

Some scientists claim that certain animal species communicate by non-linguistic devices; that bees, for example, convey significant messages to one another by odor and by dancing in their hives, or that ants use their antennae in a significant way. The evidence for this seems to be about as conclusive (or inconclusive) as that in favor of animals with vocal organs communicating significantly by means of a "language" of barks, yowls and whines.

Meaning may be transferred by devices that have nothing to do either with the spoken language or with its written counterpart, and this basic proposition few will be so hardy as to deny. A logical corollary is that language as we know it did not necessarily have to become the great thought-conveyor that it is. Granted a different historical development, it is conceivable that the human race might have reserved its oral passages for purposes of eating and breathing only, and developed an entirely different machinery for the transfer of meaning. That this might have been so is proved by the truly vast number of auxiliary meaning-conveyors that the human race has actually devised, and employs side by side with the spoken and written language. Our justification for discussing them here lies partly in the fact that they

are auxiliaries to language, partly in our partiality for the broader definition of language as that which serves to convey meaning, partly in the fact that a historical discussion of language would be incomplete without them.

In the written language, as will be seen in a subsequent chapter, there are two possibilities: the written language may follow the spoken language, symbolizing its sounds, or at least its words; or it may avoid any connection whatsoever with the spoken language, and symbolize thoughts, ideas and objects. In the former eventuality, the written language is, of course, a handmaiden to the spoken tongue; in the latter, it is altogether free of spoken-language restrictions. In either case, it resembles the spoken tongue in that it depends upon symbols which require common acceptance. The same is true of any non-linguistic system of communication. There must be common agreement upon a symbol before the latter can become meaningful, serve the purposes of transfer, and be dignified, even figuratively, with the name of "language."

The systems of communication that have been devised by man's fertile brain since the inception of civilization are numerous, not to say innumerable. An interesting question that arises in connection with them is whether and to what extent the mutual acceptance that characterizes them is based on a previous understanding depending upon spoken language. The story of the fall of Troy, for instance, tells us that the news of the final victory was relayed from Asia Minor to Greece by a series of signal fires. Signal fires have been in use ever since, and are believed to have led to the use of the heliograph, whereby the sun's rays are reflected from a mirror at significant intervals. But was not the meaning of the signal fires of Troy previously agreed upon through the agency of the spoken tongue?

The same question arises in connection with the tomtom used by African natives as a long-distance telephone. Its significantly spaced beats antedate the Morse code by several centuries and, unlike the latter, are not based upon the spoken languages of their users. We have, however, no assurance that they were not originally arranged at a series of spoken-language conferences. The same may be said of the smoke signals of the American Indians. If it could be proved that all non-linguistic systems of communication were originally systematized through the spoken-language medium, the historical priority of the spoken language would be established. While this proof is readily forthcoming in the case of many systems, it is lacking in others, notably in the field of gestural language.

Certain non-linguistic forms of communication come close to the spoken, others to the written language. The "uh-huh" uttered in three distinct tones, and without accompanying gestures or nods, to signify "yes," "no" and "maybe" in some sections of the South is so close to spoken language that one is left in doubt whether it should be mentioned in this chapter. Very close to the spoken language is also the whistling language used by the natives of Gomera, in the Canary Islands, who communicate by means of it over very long distances (some say six miles); it seems established, however, that this whistling language is based on Spanish rhythms and pitch. Greater doubt attaches to the American wolf whistle and its Italian equivalent, a clucking sound made with the tongue. Symbols of this sort, however, serve to express only one basic emotion, and are therefore to some extent disqualified for the status of language, which must express a variety of things. On the other hand, they share one important characteristic of language; they are based on mutual agreement, and become quite meaningless if the requisite general acceptance is not there. American Wacs were quite bewildered by Italian clucks, and Italian girls by American wolf whistles, until the meaning was explained. In like manner, the American hiss in token of disapproval and loud whistling in sign of enthusiastic applause are quite misunderstood in many European countries, where violent disapproval is expressed by whistling and the hiss is never heard. In Japan a variant of the hiss, a loud sucking-in of the breath, betokens polite recognition. International difficulties arising out of a language of non-linguistic symbols are apparently almost as great as those originating from spoken tongues.

Other varieties of non-linguistic forms of communication come close to the written language, and are supposed by some to have given rise to it. Under this heading fall firstly the pictographic drawings of primitive groups concerning whose ability to speak there is some doubt; secondly the knotted ropes and notched sticks of the ancient Chinese, the South American Indians and the West African and Australian natives. For the first, the question of priority in time appears insoluble. Did the Cro-Magnons and other still more primitive men who developed a very effective rudimentary form of pictorial art, whereby they left significant messages and records, possess speech? Or are their efforts indicative of an abortive tendency to communicate by means of pictures before connected language began? For the second, the problem that poses itself is to what extent the mutual understanding of the symbols in question rested upon a previous linguistic understanding. All we can say with definite assur-

ance is that the meanings conveyed by the ropes and sticks are independent of the spoken languages of their users, and of such a nature as to afford the possibility of international use among speakers of different languages. The *quipu*, or "knots," used by the Peruvian Incas, for instance, included red ropes to symbolize soldiers, yellow ropes for gold, white ropes for silver, green ropes for grain, with a single knot signifying 10, two knots 20, a double knot 100, and so forth. The messages conveyed by means of the *quipu* were so complicated that special officials called *quipucamayocuna*, or "keepers of the knots," were ordained to interpret them.

A third great division of non-linguistic communication is gestures, which have no connection, save in a few specific instances, with either the spoken or the written language. Here the problem is more complicated. Granted that many conventional modern gestural signals, like those of a baseball umpire, football coach, boxing referee or traffic policeman, are based upon previous linguistic understanding, the fact nevertheless remains that gestural language is commonly conceded to have preceded oral speech, some say by at least one million years. It is further estimated that some seven hundred thousand distinct elementary gestures can be produced by facial expressions, postures, movements of the arms, wrists, fingers, etc., and their combinations. This imposing array of gestural symbols would be quite sufficient to provide the equivalent of a full-blown modern language. It is quite conceivable: first, that a gestural system of communication could have arisen prior to and independently of spoken language; second, that such a system, had historical conditions been favorable, might have altogether supplanted the spoken tongue; third, that it could today supply the world's needs for an international common system.

The third part of this proposition requires no proof. Many North American Indian tribes are known to have developed a system of sign-language whereby members of different groups, speaking dissimilar languages, could carry on lengthy conversations about any topic (the northern tribes generally used two hands, the southern tribes one). The International Boy Scout movement, with a courage based on ideological conviction, resolutely adopted the Indian sign-language and proceeded to develop a science of pasimology, or gestures, which serves the Jamborees in perfect fashion. Representatives of as many as thirty-seven different nations have met at various times and carried on both general business and private conversations in pasimology.

The gesture-language idea was carried on by teachers interested in the training of deaf-mutes. Here, however, we

have a secondary ramification. Some deaf-mute language systems express gesturally and by means of facial expressions only ideas and states of mind, in which case they can be internationally used. Others spell out words, which means that a particular language is called into play, whereupon the gestural system becomes a mere auxiliary of the spoken tongue. Still other systems combine both approaches. A fourth approach is that of lip-reading and the consequent reproduction of audible speech by the "deaf oralists," but this, of course, is merely a phase of the spoken language.

It is interesting that the American Indians should have contributed to the world's civilization their own particular form of pasimology, used for the avowed purpose of avoiding international language difficulties. Their systematic reduction of meaning to gestures, however, has less developed counterparts in other portions of the world. It has been noted by students of pasimology that many gestural forms are universal. For example, the gestures describing a beard, a headdress and a cupped hand raised to the mouth denote respectively a man, a woman and water in Armenia, Russia, among the Australian Bushmen, and among the deaf, while American Indian signs for "child," "man," "no," "tear" and "night" have been traced in Egyptian, Chinese and Mayan symbols on monuments, representing the same ideas. Both ancient Egyptian and ancient Chinese monuments represent "no" by a pair of outstretched arms or hands.

Gesticulation used as an aid to the spoken language is universal, but to different degrees and with different symbolisms. Southern Europeans use many more gestures than the inhabitants of northern Europe. When French fliers were being trained in this country, gesticulation was systematically used and found extremely helpful in teaching them English.

Differences in gestural symbolism are often striking. To the ancient Greeks, a downward nod of the head meant "yes," an upward nod "no." The modern Neapolitans express "no" by an upward jerk of the head, coupled with the sticking out of the lower lip. Americans usually wave good-bye with the palm of the hand down, but many Europeans give the same wave with the palm of the hand up and the fingers moving back and forth, which gives their signal a "come hither" look. An Italian downward motion of the forearm, with the extended fingers sweeping down past the chin, which they barely touch, means, "Nothing doing!," while a wave of the forearm, with the fingers and thumb cupped close together and coming to a point, means, "what is it all about?"

Among ancient gestures that have given rise to language

clichés is the *pollice verso* ("thumbs down," in our parlance, but the thumb was actually turned up) of the ancient Romans, which meant death to the gladiator who had been overcome. The Romans' expression for "to applaud" was *pollicem premere* ("to press the thumb"), but actually they displayed their approval by clapping, snapping their fingers, and waving the flaps of their togas.

A few special gestures have interesting historical origins. Our military salute goes back to medieval times, when knights raised the visors of their helmets on meeting so they could recognize one another. The Fascist salute, with extended arm and outstretched hand, goes back to the days of ancient Rome; its significance was in origin a peaceful one, indicating that there was no concealed weapon, and the American Indians used a very similar greeting. The clenched fist of the Communists arose in opposition to the Fascist salute.

Gesticulation used for a specific, even professional purpose, is an ancient phenomenon. In the traditional dancing language of Japan, China, Korea, Indo-China and Indonesia there is a series of conventionalized gestures which serve to convey both the narrative and the emotional states that are to be symbolized. Among the latter, there are said to be some two hundred symbols to express various phases of love. The flirt-language of the fan, widely used by lovers in past centuries, conveyed very complicated messages. Somewhat similar was the sign-language used for a time by modern bobby-soxers, in which bobby sox straight up meant "open for date," one fold meant "going steady," rolled down had the meaning of "taken," beads knotted on the neck meant "dated," unfurled, "open for date."

Recently gestural language has been commercialized in interesting fashion. The ushers in New York theaters use a series of conventionalized gestures whereby they signal to one another. A raised fist indicates that no more patrons are to be admitted; right fist on hip and two fingers of the left hand touching the elbow indicate two doubles half way down; right arm held out from the waist with left hand pointing to shoulder, elbow or wrist indicate single seat in rear, center or front; crossed arms indicate all seats filled in an aisle. Over forty such signals are in use.

The casino croupiers of Monte Carlo also have developed a complete system of sign-language. Finger-tips touching the table mean, "There's a chiseler here"; a finger behind the ear is a distress call for the head man; the finger of one hand touching the thumb of the other means, "O. K.; let him play"; crossed index and third finger is "please take over";

palm and fingers extended downward means, "They are cleaned out."

In all these modern phases of gesturing, however, previous understanding achieved by linguistic means is implicit. The same may be said of scientific and semi-scientific systems of communication such as semaphores, flags, cable codes and the universal weather-reporting code, intelligible in all parts of the world, recently devised by the Meteorological Division of International Civilian Aviation, and based upon the use of groups of five figures.

To the question why did gestural language not become generalized in the place of spoken language, a fairly satisfactory, though somewhat mechanistic answer was given by Darwin. Gestural language requires use of the hands, while the spoken language leaves the hands free for other tasks; gestural language requires light and unobstructed view, while the spoken language can operate in the dark and around obstacles. On the other hand, the international advantages of gestural language are more apparent than real, since spoken language could, if desired, be made equally international, while gestural language, as has been seen, is not necessarily international in scope. Even the greater expressiveness and emotional release of gestural language is largely hypothetical, in view of what can be and is achieved along these lines by the spoken tongues.

In sum, systems of communication not based on speech, while extremely useful on specific occasions, are generally inferior to the spoken tongue as meaning-conveyors. The one great exception to this general statement is writing, which by sublimating and multiplying symbolical values has succeeded in implanting itself by the side of the spoken tongue, of which it is a substitute and an auxiliary, to the point where some prefer it and consider it an instrument of transfer superior to its oral counterpart.

2 THEORIES OF LANGUAGE BEGINNING

God, that all-powerful Creator of nature and architect of the world, has impressed man with no character so proper to distinguish him from other animals, as by the faculty of speech.—Quintilian

Language,—human language,—after all, is but little better than the croak and cackle of fowls, and other utterances of brute nature,—sometimes not so adequate.—Hawthorne

If there is one thing on which all linguists are fully agreed, it is that the problem of the origin of human speech is still unsolved.

Theories have not been wanting. Some are traditional and

mystical, like the legends current among many primitive groups that language was a gift from the gods. Even as late as the seventeenth century, a Swedish philologist seriously maintained that in the Garden of Eden God spoke Swedish, Adam Danish, and the serpent French, while at a Turkish linguistic congress held in 1934 it was as seriously argued that Turkish is at the root of all languages, all words being derived from *güneş*, the Turkish word for "sun," the first object to strike the human fancy and demand a name.

Other theories may be described as quasi-scientific. One hypothesis, originally sponsored by Darwin, is to the effect that speech was in origin nothing but mouth-pantomime, in which the vocal organs unconsciously attempted to mimic gestures by the hands.

Several theories are current among linguists today, but with the distinct understanding that they are as yet unproved and, in the nature of things, probably unprovable. They have been given picturesque names, which proves that linguists, too, can be imaginative on occasion.

The "bow-wow" theory holds that language arose in imitation of the sounds occurring in nature. A dog barks; his bark sounds like "bow-wow" to a human hearer. Therefore he designates the dog as "bow-wow." The trouble with this theory is that the same natural noise is, apparently, differently heard by different people. What is "cock-a-doodle-doo" to an Englishman is *cocorico* to a Frenchman and *chicchirichì* to an Italian.

The "ding-dong" theory sustains that there is a mystic correlation between sound and meaning. Like everything mystical, it is best discarded in a serious scientific discussion.

The "pooh-pooh" theory is to the effect that language at first consisted of ejaculations of surprise, fear, pleasure, pain, etc. It is often paired with the "yo-he-ho" theory to the effect that language arose from grunts of physical exertion, and even with the "sing-song" theory, that language arose from primitive inarticulate chants.

The "ta-ta" theory that language comes from imitation of bodily movements is further exemplified in the Darwinian belief described above.

The ancient Greek philosophers, who gave some attention to the problem of the origin of language, allowed themselves to be led afiel by their speculative leanings. Pythagoras, Plato, and the Stoics held that language had come into being out of "inherent necessity" or "nature," which is begging the question; while Democritus, Aristotle and the Epicureans believed it had arisen by "convention" or "agreement." How this agreement had been reached by people who had no

previous means of mutual understanding they did not trouble to explain.

Leibniz, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, first advanced the theory that all languages come not from a historically recorded source, but from a proto-speech. In some respects he was a precursor of the Italian twentieth-century linguist Trombetti, who boldly asserted that the Biblical account of the Tower of Babel is at least figuratively true, and that all languages have a common origin. A contemporary linguist, E. H. Sturtevant, presents a novel theory which, though slightly paradoxical, has its merits. Since all real intentions and emotions, he says, get themselves involuntarily expressed by gesture, look or sound, voluntary communication, such as language, must have been invented for the purpose of lying or deceiving. People forced to listen to diplomatic jargon and political double-talk will be tempted to agree.

On at least three recorded occasions attempts were made to isolate children before they began talking to see whether they would evolve a language of their own. One such attempt was made by the Egyptian king Psammetichos, the second by Frederick II of Sicily about 1200, the third by King James IV of Scotland around 1500. These attempts, lacking scientific controls, proved inconclusive. More recent cases of children who had allegedly grown up among wolves, dogs, monkeys or gazelles have added little to our knowledge, save that the human child, though ignorant of human language when found, takes to it readily and with seeming pleasure, something that his animal playmates are incapable of doing.

Animal cries, whether we choose to describe them as "language" or not, are characterized by invariability and monotony. Dogs have been barking, cats meowing, lions roaring, and donkeys braying in the same fashion since time immemorial. The ancient Greek comic poets indicated a sheep's cry by Greek letters having the value of "beh"; in modern Greek, those letters have changed their value to "vee." The sheep's cry has not changed in two thousand years, but the Greek language has.

Human language, in contrast with animal cries, displays infinite variability, both in time and in space. Activity and change may be described as the essence of all living language. Even so-called dead languages partake of this changeability, as evidenced by the ingenious combination devised by the Vatican to express the ultra-modern concept of "motorcycle" in Latin—*birota ignifero latice incita* ("two-wheeled vehicle driven by fire-bearing juice").

In one sense, the reason for the changeability of language is as mysterious as the origin of language itself. In another