THE GIFT OF TONGUES

by Margaret Schlauch

THE
Gift of Tongues

MARGARET SCHLAUCH

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

London
GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD

FIRST PUBLISHED IN GREAT BRITAIN IN 1943

THIRD IMPRESSION 1949

THE PAPER AND BINDING OF THIS BOOK CONFORM TO THE AUTHORIZED ECONOMY STANDARD

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

CLEMENTS NEWLING AND CO., LTD.
WEMBLEY, MIDDLESEX

Preface

Almost everyone who talks must have wondered at one time or another why he used certain words for certain things. Children, whose ignorance is often so wise, have frequently baffled their parents by the metaphysical question: "Mother, why do we say 'table'?" And mother is necessarily forced to evade this question, along with innumerable others. Bilingual persons usually speculate at least tentatively on the relations between the two languages they know. With three or more languages, they begin to wonder about more complicated questions in making comparisons.

An American or an Englishman who knows German is aware that there is some likeness between the words "deep" and *tief,* and he asks himself what it may be. A person with a classical training who learns Russian wonders whether the adjective *vernyi* or верный, meaning "true," is connected with the Latin *verus,* meaning the same thing. A missionary priest learning Cakchiquel in order to work in Guatemala might be struck by the fact that Hebrew *ishshah* or "woman," corresponds fairly closely to the native *ishok,* expressing the same idea. He might be tempted to regard this as evidence that his prospective Indian converts are descended from the lost tribes of Israel, but upon further study he will probably conclude that the correspondence is purely accidental.

A mother teaching her child to talk notices that he has trouble with some sounds while others come quite readily. While she patiently drills him in the "right" pronunciation (that is, the accepted one), she may say to herself: "What makes John drop the *s* in 'story' and say ' 'tory'?" A foreigner learning English shows some psychological difficulties in handling our idiom; we ask him to explain why it is so hard for him to omit the article in using such words as "truth" and "beauty," and he finds that he can't explain except by saying that in his own language one says "the truth" and "the beauty."

These are all linguistic speculations—that is, they deal with technical problems of language. They are sometimes very entertaining to the speculator. But the mere thought of reading or studying on the subject usually fills him with horror. What! Learn anything about linguistics! Why, that is surely the dullest of all subjects! Its disciples are supposed to be grim and chilly individuals with never an atom of humanity in their dispositions. Entertainment must be entirely absent from this recondite field. Romance may be expected to lurk in physics, chemistry, biology or mathematics; but in linguistics—never!

Still, with so much curiosity about the subject evident among people in general, the romance must after all be lurking somewhere. The speculation implies at least a possibility of intellectual adventure. Perhaps a book like this can give the answers to some of the questions popularly current about language, without at the same time marshaling a host of unnecessary facts in a forbidding formal array. There are ambitious textbooks and reference books in abundance which could be consulted by inquiring amateurs, but it is doubtful whether the inquirer's ardor could escape dampening in the process. To a trained eye these same volumes may appear to be repositories of the most exciting information, but a non-linguist sees in them nothing but a mass of irrelevant and uninspiring facts. He groans and turns away—to look for romance rather in the latest text expounding the sublimities of mathematics.

The educated reader with an unprofessional, merely casual interest in language has not yet, I believe, received the kind of book he deserves. He is entitled to the information he wants, expressed in language he can understand. The overdiluted and superficial accounts which often pass as popularizations give him too little and leave him justly dissatisfied. The heavily incomprehensible volumes which specialists sometimes produce under the illusion that they are being popular leave him, on the other hand, completely mystified. But surely there must be a middle ground for this much abused general reader!

This book represents an attempt to reach the general reader and to find the middle ground. There is no wish to repeat

(less well) the extremely competent general introductions to linguistics designed for more advanced students, such as the recent volumes by Graff, Prokosch, Bloomfield, and Gray, to which grateful recognition will be made in the notes. But the author does hope to answer some of the simpler questions clearly, and at the same time to show some of the fascination of a much maligned subject of study. Afterwards the reader can consult more detailed works with pleasure and profit.

There is a pure joy to be derived from the perception of clear relationships where none was observed before. This exciting experience is for many persons a reward in itself. Linguistic studies yield it abundantly. But there is an even more practical reward to be gained too. If you learn that a certain type of relationship is apt to appear in a language of one given family, then you are quite justified in looking for something like it elsewhere; and you will probably find it. As a result the effort in learning the second will be much easier than the first. What is known as a "gift for languages" is largely an ability to see these likenesses quickly. To see them is to remember more readily the words that exemplify them. Memorizing new words is only difficult when you can't see any sense to them—any relationship to something already known. Some relationships become plain when we observe the difference between our own pronunciation when we are being careful or bookish, and at other times when we are careless. For example: notice consciously what happens to your pronunciation of "Give me" when you are tired. It tends to become "Gimme." The [v]-sound has been changed until it becomes identical with the next one, [m].[1] The resulting [m] may be spoken a bit prolonged, as an indication that it is now taking the place of two different sounds. This "doubled" sound (if you will) is the result of a process known as assimilation, or the changing of two unlike things until they become more alike.

[1] It is customary in employing characters of the phonetic alphabet to use enclosing brackets. See chapter 2, note 1. Ordinary letters are often ambiguous in our spelling.

But if assimilation happens today, in our own rapid speech, it must have happened many times before, in the speech of other peoples. And it did. You observe, for example, that Italian words with a "double letter," as it is popularly called, show clear signs of assimilation from an earlier stage when there were two different letters representing two quite different sounds. It is easy to guess what sounds were there originally, before the change took place. If you encounter the word *otto,* meaning "eight," a little experimenting will lead you to surmise that it was once *octo,* and is connected somehow with our word "octave." Likewise *notte* shows connections with Latin *nocte* and English "nocturnal," *massimo* with "maximum," and so on. Once this sort of thing has been pointed out it seems ridiculously clear and obvious, and it facilitates the learning of a whole series of similar words. Yet the relationship has to be pointed out in the first place.

There is a practical use for all linguistic principles. They clarify what was once obscure and they also make learning new languages very much simpler. The practical aids which linguistic study gives should not be scorned by the exponent of science for its own sake. In this book there will be constant reference to the everyday helps to be used in learning languages. There will be exercises and suggestions for further experiment, designed for those who wish to apply the principles concretely. The notes will tell of additional books to be read in each field. From these initial studies the roads lead out endlessly into other terrains of research: psychology, sociology, anthropology, music, physics. . . . It is a presumptuous thing, no doubt, to attempt so brief and undetailed a survey as this of a vast field where so many great scholars have labored. A wish for brevity and simplicity may have led to inaccuracies or false impressions in the survey. Yet it is to be hoped that the two chief purposes may be served in some measure, no matter what the faults may be. These purposes are: a revelation of some of the poetry and romance in language studies, and an exposition of some of the more practical benefits which may be derived by teachers and learners from these same studies.

CONTENTS

1. Language as Communication

Expression in Talking

Suppose you are about to step across a crowded street without looking about you with due caution. An automobile is careening towards you in conspicuous contempt of traffic regulations. If you continue in your blind carelessness, you are sure to be knocked over, possibly killed. But a quick-eyed stranger, let us say a monolingual Hungarian, sees what is about to happen to you. Shrill with horror, he shouts something at you in the Magyar tongue. You get something of his message without understanding a single word, draw back suddenly, and are saved. Somewhat breathless and also more than a little sheepish at your recent oblivion of surroundings, you stammer your thanks. If in your sudden retreat you have stepped on your savior's foot, you add some words of apology. He on his side smiles, disclaims any reason for your gratitude, and graciously accepts your apology in the appropriate Hungarian formula. Neither of you has understood a word of the other's speech, and yet the interchange has so far been quite clear and eminently agreeable to both participants. It was facilitated, of course, by the simplicity of the situation and the urgency of the first cry. Ideas have been exchanged; there has been communication in the sense that these ideas have been successfully made *common* knowledge to the two people concerned.

Again, suppose you are walking through the park of a seaport town frequented by sailors of many nations. On one of the benches a visiting naval lad is declaring to one of the town's nymphs, in facile, well-practiced phrases, that she is the most

beautiful feminine creature that he has ever had the privilege of discoursing with on a park bench. He utters his protestations with the deepest conviction, no matter how many times he has used the time-honored vows before. He may be speaking Swedish, however, whereas the temporary object of his eternal vows may be limited to self-expression in an obscure local Indian dialect of the Pacific coast of Central America. Only a few words of most elementary significance are common to the two of them. Nevertheless, she unerringly comprehends the general import of his remarks, and with appropriate giggles and slaps—repulses not seriously intended—she may assure him that she knows how many times he has used these protestations before. He, for his part, is sure to increase the ardor and conviction of his wooing, employing oaths of sincerity at which (so they say) Jove has been laughing these thousands of years as he has heard their polyglot expression from all parts of the globe. The entire dialogue may be brought to a conclusion entirely satisfying to both parties without having one complete sentence in it actually intelligible to the party listening. And an eavesdropper ignorant of both tongues might also be aware of its import and its happy conclusion.

In both of these situations the pitch, intensity, and tone of voice, the qualities which we generally call "expression" in talking, have conveyed the entire message. "Look out! Danger ahead!" can be understood in any language if the speaker dramatizes the warning sufficiently. It is also rather easy to convey the hyperbolic proposition, "You are the most beautiful girl I have ever met," across any conceivable barriers of speech. A tone of flattering raillery and caress is reported to be unmistakable from the Arctic to the Antarctic.

Gesture

But variations in quality and volume of voice are not the only methods of carrying messages across a linguistic divide. Gesture is another aid very closely associated with tonal expression. You ask a stranger in a strange city how to find a

certain public building. If his reply is to be, "Sorry; I don't know," you will be aware of it before he has so much as opened his mouth, if he merely raises his shoulders and eyebrows, draws down the corners of his mouth, throws his hands out with the palms facing you, and frowns slightly. The extended palms appear to mean: "I put my entire knowledge at your disposal, concealing nothing, but unfortunately the information you require is not there"; the frown says: "I am concentrating on your inquiry—in vain, alas!"; the elevated shoulders and deflected mouth add: "I feel quite disconcerted and physically ill at ease to think that I should fail you in your need, O stranger."

We use these non-linguistic means of conveying ideas, all of us, as an accompaniment to speech. A cry, a tonal inflection, a gesture, are means of communication far more universal than language as we understand it. They are in fact universal enough to be conveyed to animals as well as other human beings. When a man snaps his finger at a trained dog and points to the ground beside him, he is using gestures to substitute for an entire sentence: "Come here, Brownie, and sit beside me." Animals can also understand quite complicated commands by means of tone and voice inflection alone, without the aid of gesture.

We have, then, various ways of communicating with one another and with the lower animals, quite apart from a mutual understanding of the separate speech symbols which we call words. Communication of messages is far more general than an understanding of the languages used by human beings throughout the world. To understand a language, you must always attach the same meaning to a highly conventionalized group of sounds. An enormous number of these groups of sounds—words—in any language have an abstract meaning which could not possibly be conveyed by any gesture, even the most eloquent. There is a great gap between the cry "Look out! Danger!" and the statement "I regret what I did last year. Had I known this fact, then I should have done other-

wise." Certainly no conceivable gestures could convey the import of the following terrifying sentence from Immanuel Kant:

> But, although extension, impenetrability, cohesion, and motion—in short, everything which outer senses can give us—neither are nor contain thoughts, feeling, desire or resolution, these never being objects of outer intuition, nevertheless the something which underlies the outer appearances and which so affects our sense that it obtains the representations of space, matter, shape, etc., may yet, when viewed as noumenon (or better, as transcendental object), be at the same time the subject of our thoughts (*Critique of Pure Reason*).

Spoken language, as contrasted with gesture, is a highly symbolical method of expression adapted to abstract concepts. But because of the cries, gestures, grunts and similar elemental expressions which form a considerable part of its accompaniment, we are justified in asking ourselves whether it is not closely connected with the means of expression and communication employed by some of the lower animals.

Speech of Animals

It was formerly assumed (with typical human conceit) that man, as a special and separately created being, had received the gift of language ready-made from his Creator. Just as woman was supposed to have appeared suddenly, by a swift if uncomfortable exit from Adam's side, so speech was supposed to have begun abruptly on the day when Adam named the animals and other creatures under God's tutelage. Many religions contain a myth about the origin of speech at a given moment under divine instruction. It seemed sacrilegious to suppose, in these days of early speculation, that the infinitely flexible instrument of human expression, which more than anything else makes us men, could have any kinship with the grunts and cries of the lower animals. Some writers, particularly those of a theological bent, deny the kinship today. But when Darwin and his followers pointed out the biological kin-

hip of man with those same lower animals, students of language re-examined their attitude. It became the intellectual shion, indeed, to look for "evolution" in all matters concerning living things. The sounds made by animals were regarded with a new and salutary respect, since they seemed to offer the proximate simple explanation of the origin of human speech. Presumably grunts and cries merely became standardized and increased in number—and behold! the result was human speech: the result of a clear and steady development or "evolution."

Today we are inclined to think that the relationship of man's speech to animal cries is far more complicated than that. Mere numerical increase in the number of cries will not account for the appearance of abstract, highly conventionalized meanings. Moreover, the shift from the one level (haphazard expression) to the higher one (standardized meaning) may not have been the result exclusively of an infinite series of gradual adjustments, the kind of slow process implied in the term "evolution." It is not impossible to imagine sudden spurts of progress such as occur in other cultural arts.

We shall never know just how or where language first developed, because no records of speech survive from that very distant epoch. A number of scholars have devoted themselves hopefully to the observation and recording of the sounds made by chimpanzees. About the turn of the century, R. L. Garner went so far as to claim that these sounds should be dignified by the name of language. He also claimed that he had learned the meaningful sound-symbols used by his primate subjects, and had communicated with them in what might be called elementary conversations. Others denied this claim entirely, or restricted it to a few general correlations between sound and meaning. Two German students reported that the expression of fear was connected with a high sound like English *ee,* lament by a deep one resembling English *oo,* and joy by a series of repeated *ah's.* Another scholar recorded sounds with musical notations—since pitch might be an essen-

tial element here—and obtained what appeared to be meaningful sound-symbols such as *gak, nghak, gah, gha, kah, ko-ko,* and so on. There seemed also to be a general association of some of these sounds with certain emotional situations.

But the curious thing is that despite the well-known ability of apes at imitation, and the evidence that they can reason their way through fairly complicated situations, all of these responses of theirs are too fluid and vague to constitute language. The sounds which some have called ape-words or the speech of the chimpanzee do not form symbols which can be repeated and recognized, always with the same meaning attached to them. In other words, although an ape can ape (imitate gestures), he can not reproduce sound stimuli consistently enough to establish the beginnings of language. Robert M. Yerkes suggests in his *The Great Apes* that these animals might, however, be trained to a gesture language such as deaf-mutes employ.

Origin of Human Speech

The great question is: what was there in man's physical equipment and his mode of living in the earliest times which permitted him to make use of vocal stimuli and auditory impressions for speaking? It is one of the most fascinating mysteries of early human development. We shall never know the details of that progress forward towards humanity from the lower animals. But we can be quite sure that the physiological equipment and the beginnings of sociological organization were very intimately associated in making possible the great stride. Each element must have been both cause and effect; and whatever tended to advance the one no doubt advanced the other also. We no longer assume that the relation between speaking man and the unspeaking primates is a simple one—a matter of straight "evolution"—but neither do we any longer invoke miracles to explain the great differentiation. We can even go so far as to surmise some of the non-miraculous factors which caused it. If language means communication,

probably communal activity played an important part in shaping it.

Signals for Words

Returning to the human level, as we know it, we find some very elemental signals persisting and helping us in the task of reaching other human beings quickly despite linguistic barriers. In fact, we are very little aware how many signals we receive and comprehend in our daily living apart from spoken words. Emotional sounds and gestures are of surprisingly wide range. We express not only fear, desire, and approval but many other states too when we click the tongue against the roof of the mouth (mild disapproval or reproach), hiss (strong disapproval), cut short a yawn (boredom or sleepiness corrected by regard for other people's feelings), expel the breath with a whistling sound (surprise), inhale with a somewhat osculatory effect. (This last is self-explanatory.) The list could be greatly extended.

Civilized humans who live in cities are constantly receiving complicated signals and interpreting them correctly without the use of words. A red light, a green light, or the gestures of a traffic policeman—all these are the equivalents of imperative or permissive sentences. A bell which rings a certain number of times will announce to students a change of classes, to workers a shift in jobs, to persons on a party wire of a telephone the summons to a conversation with a friend. The bells on shipboard are highly conventionalized signals marking the passage of a day of maritime work. A trumpet call in the Tuileries garden of Paris warns visitors that they must depart. The dirge of a funeral and the chimes of a wedding tell a whole story without words. A green line painted on the ceiling of the New York subway station at Forty-second Street conveys the message: "Follow me, all you who would shuttle over to the West Side trains." The red line, pointing contrariwise, guides the tense and hurrying throngs eastward. Here the symbolism of signs and warnings is almost as elabo-

rate as that in Dante's Hell (to which the place is said to have further similarities), but we who are accustomed to it follow the stylized guides without conscious reflection. A red flag seen in one context means: "Danger! Keep away!" In another connection it may convey a whole political platform, to which the spectator responds with either heated distaste or heated approval, according to his own complicated theories and beliefs. The heat he evinces when he sees the symbol indicates that it has at least been successful in making him conscious of a whole series of theses without the agency of words.

People who live in cities, then, make use of a large number of conventional signals, gestures and acts. Their response to these is quite like that of "primitive" Indians—to whom they may otherwise feel themselves entirely superior—when using an elaborate language of gestures. A dog responding to the snap of fingers, deaf-mutes conversing with their hands, Indians using signs, and New Yorkers intently pursuing a green line, are all behaving in precisely the same way, and to the seeing eye they are also showing their close kinship within the animal realm.

Imitative Words

Some spoken words can easily be recognized as concrete signals, hardly more abstract than the flashing of a red light to indicate danger (because that very destructive element, fire, is also red?). Words that imitate the sound or act they are to designate are called onomatopoetic (from the Greek *onoma,* a name, and *poiein,* to make; that is, "name-making"). Such words exist in every language. Many people assume, without further thought, that the languages of peoples remote from the doubtful blessings of European culture are necessarily made up almost exclusively of such imitative words. Conversely, it is commonly thought that the languages of so-called civilized peoples contain a very small number of these words in proportion to the general vocabulary. Actually, the relative number is very small in all languages, whether "back-

ward" or "advanced." In English we have words like "whip-poorwill," "peewee," "bumblebee," "humming bird," "murmur," "ding-dong," "bow-wow." Many of them, it will be observed, refer to birds, animals, and insects which are designated by an attempt to reproduce the sound they make. Latin gives us an excellent example of onomatopoeia in the sibilant *susurrus,* meaning "whisper."

We must beware, however, of supposing that a word which we imagine to be imitative is necessarily "primitive" or that it was created by an act of imitation. Sometimes it has reached the form which we imagine to be onomatopoetic by a long development, beginning from entirely different sounds which would appear to us to be far less descriptive. Thus the German word for "anger," spelled *Zorn* and pronounced [tsɔrn], seems to suggest a disagreeable emotion by the hissing explosion of the initial sound; but when we examine its history we discover that it has developed from a milder pronunciation like the one preserved in the English "torn." (The words are actually related; in German, a sister language of English, anger is conceived to be the thing that *tears* at one's vitals.) Still farther back the word is discovered to have existed in a form beginning with a *d,* with a root something like *der-n.* In its more primitive state, therefore, nothing appears of the violent *ts*-sound which presumably gives the German *Zorn* its descriptive emotional effect.

Again, the English words "twitch," "witch," and "itch" end in a sound *tsh,* which may be imagined to be descriptive in one way or another; and yet in all of these words the sound was developed from a very different one, namely, *k,* which is made at the back of the throat instead of being hissed between the tongue and the palate. The Russian language is full of sounds which appeal to many listeners as exceedingly tender and caressing. There are those who find this quality in the word *zhenshchina* for "woman" (the *zh* being pronounced like the French *j* in *jardin*); and no doubt when properly spoken, in appropriate circumstances, it conveys the desired