ROBBINS BURLING

man's many voices

LANGUAGE in its cultural context

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Language in Its Cultural Context

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PREFACE

This book has grown out of a good many years of wandering back and forth across the border between anthropology and linguistics and fiddling with one or another of that miscellaneous grab bag of topics embraced by the rubric "language and culture." Among other things I have struggled with a course by that title, a course that all nonlinguistic anthropologists seem to feel must be included within the curriculum of a progressive anthropology department. After some nearly disastrous experiments, I concluded that to touch upon all the topics which everyone expected in a language and culture course could result only in chaos. I then began to slough off many of the traditional topics and gradually concentrate upon the few that seemed to offer some hope of unity. The contents of this book reflect the narrowing of my concern, and I want to emphasize that this book is not intended to be a survey of what I regard as the hopelessly disparate field of language and culture.

My topic is much narrower. I like to think of it as an investigation into the nonlinguistic factors that affect our use of language. As I try to explain in the first chapter, I think it fair to say that linguists have largely dealt with linguistic variables that depend upon other linguistic phenomena. Their rules are internal to language. But man's use of language is also dependent upon the context in which he speaks and upon his varied personalities. It is these extralinguistic variables and the way in which they affect the patterns of our language that concern me.

Unlike many anthropologists who have written on language and culture, I am not concerned with the way in which the rest of culture is dependent upon or similar to language, but I am concerned instead with the way language is affected by the rest of culture. On the other hand, unlike most linguists, I am not primarily concerned with the internal structure of language, but only with the way that structure is affected by and dependent upon things other than language. I am convinced that not even the structure of language can be decently understood without some understanding of the animal that uses language and of the setting within which he speaks.

Writing on the border between disciplines, I have difficulty avoiding examples and terminology that will seem unfamiliar to one side or the other. Linguists may be appalled by the heavy dose of kinship terminology, but since kinship terminology has been studied so much more thoroughly than the terminology of any other semantic domain, reliance upon it is almost inevitable for one who wants to deal with semantics from the viewpoint that interests me. I find it equally impossible to write about language without using a good deal of the special terminology of linguistics. I presume that most of those who turn to this book will have had at least some background in linguistics, and even a limited knowledge should make the viewpoint and terminology clear enough. Since my topics may be of interest to non-linguists, I have tried to define as many terms as possible, but it would be annoying to stop and define every phonetic term and every phonetic symbol. The glossary beginning on page 201 may help with a few terms, but for the most part I have written with the assumption that readers will already have some background in linguistics.

My examples come from many sources, but one particular parochial bias will be seen in my heavy reliance upon examples from south and southeast Asia. Equally valid and interesting examples could surely be gathered from any other part of the world, but my own anthropological and linguistic research has been confined to southern Asia, and even when I am not reporting my own work, I am most familiar with the literature of these areas. I can only hope that my geographical bias will be compensated for by the greater confidence with which I can present the examples. My own trips to south and southeast Asia were made possible by generous fellowships. The Ford Foundation supported more than two years of field work between 1954 and 1956 in the Garo Hills of Assam, India, and the Fulbright Foundation sent me to Burma in 1959–1960. As always, it is a pleasure to thank these institutions for their help.

Most of the examples and ideas reported, however, have come from the work of others. In the bibliographic notes, assembled at the end of the volume, I have tried to indicate my debt to these scholars and suggest my dependence upon their work. My debt to them is enormous. If there is any originality in the organization which I have given to these topics, it is in large part the outgrowth of my several attempts to teach the course called Language and Culture. The course has not always been successful, but I have learned much from my students. They deserve my thanks for bearing with me as I tried out various unsuccessful ideas upon them and groped my way toward the viewpoint presented here.

My attitude toward these topics has also been shaped by close association with many outstanding scholars. I have drawn upon their work for some of my examples, but more important has been the subtle help derived from my many long conversations with them. In particular I want to ac-

knowledge my debt to A. L. Becker, John L. Fischer, Paul Friedrich, Ward H. Goodenough, John J. Gumperz, and Floyd G. Lounsbury. I hardly dare to guess whether these men would recognize their own points of view coming through in my formulation. I hope they will. I know that I could not have written this book without the benefit of my association with them.

Ann Arbor, Michigan   R. B.
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1 Language and Its Setting

Language and Culture

Language has always held a central place in the affairs of man—in his education, his art, and his science. Language is among the very first forms of behavior that we learn as children. When we later learn other skills and acquire other knowledge, much of our learning can reach us only through the medium of language. Other animals learn. Only men can receive explanations. Whether in oratory, in singing, or in written form, language has been an important medium of artistic expression for all peoples. Science too is conducted in language. Whether we are casual observers of the world around us or taxonomic biologists, we feel compelled to give names to the objects we examine. Even when science is expressed in mathematical form, language is not really absent, for the language of mathematics is, to a large degree, an abstract and idealized version of the natural language that all men use. Quite possibly our ability to reason, to argue logically, and even in some sense our very ability to think rest upon qualities first evolved as part of our use of language. Certainly it is language as much or more than any other human trait that sets us off as unique within the animal kingdom.

Since language is so important in our lives, it is hardly surprising that when men have turned to examine their own behavior, language has always figured among their most lively interests. To travelers, historians, and anthropologists, language has always seemed a convenient way to classify nations and tribes. Philosophers of many persuasions have been concerned with language, and it has been central to the work of many psychologists. Students of literature have carefully examined the medium through which literature is expressed. All these disciplines, however, have examined language within a larger context—as language serves to classify tribes, as it bears upon questions of truth, existence, or knowledge, as it is related to memory

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and learning, or as it is used artistically. Their interest in language has, to some degree, been instrumental, for through the instrument of language they have sought to gain an understanding of other phenomena—of history, logic, art, or the mind.

The scholar who calls himself a linguist differs from his colleagues in other disciplines in examining language for its own sake rather than as an instrument by which to seek an understanding of other matters. The results of linguistic investigation may be of interest to its sister disciplines, but solving their problems has not been the linguist's major goal. In fact, it is reasonable to suggest that real progress in learning about the structure and organization of language only came when a few men began to narrow their interest down to language itself and to set aside any concern for the uses to which language is put. They could then see language as a system with its own internal logic and its own internal rules, for it turned out that many striking features of language could be described with little or no reference to the natural or human context within which language is used. By temporarily ignoring the place of language within the broad range of human behavior, linguists have been able to concentrate upon the internal organization of language, the patterning of its sounds and its syntax, and the ways in which the various aspects of a linguistic system are interdependent. By minimizing their concern for the relationship of these purely linguistic phenomena to other aspects of our behavior, linguists have vastly simplified their task. I believe it has been this narrowing of focus that has allowed a rather rapid development of the specialized field of linguistics.

The major subdivisions of linguistics illustrate the tendency toward autonomy. In syntax, for instance, an attempt is made to formulate rules which can account for the arrangements of words and their major parts such as prefixes, bases, suffixes (the units that linguists refer to as morphemes) and to distinguish the permissible sequences of words and morphemes from the many conceivable sequences that cannot be used. One might suppose that linguists would search for an explanation for their rules, perhaps in the organization of the human mind or in the influence of human history, but they have rarely done so. Instead, they have usually been content when they could successfully show what speakers accept as normal and what they reject as aberrant.

Phonology, the study of the sound patterns of language, is, to be sure, tied to something outside of language—anatomy. Sounds are most conveniently described in terms of the mechanics of the vocal organs, the lips, tongue, teeth, and larynx. Nevertheless, as developed by linguists, much of phonology has been abstracted far away from the mechanics of sound production. Even in phonology abstract rules that show the mutual influence of sounds upon one another and the way in which sounds join together into

syllables or larger units have sometimes taken precedence over the anatomical aspects of their production. To some linguists it has seemed plausible to suggest that just as phonology is grounded in anatomy, and in a sense anchored at that point to the nonlinguistic world, so syntax or at least lexicography, the study of words, is anchored to the world through meaning. Many difficult problems have beset the linguistic study of meaning, however, and it is by no means as well developed as phonology. Syntax has actually developed a far greater autonomy from meaning than phonology from anatomy.

Phonology, syntax, and lexicon can all be studied historically as well as descriptively (or synchronically), and, here again, many linguists have been content to describe changes without searching for the forces that have encouraged or caused them. It is true that in studying the history of a lexicon cultural factors are inescapable. One can hardly examine the coming and going of words without at the same time considering the pressures of cultural changes. But the heart of historical linguistics has been in phonology, and here, as in the study of historical grammar, linguists have been extremely wary of attributing any sort of cultural explanation to the changes they have observed. They have worked out remarkably subtle descriptions of linguistic change, but the factors that have fostered the changes have been poorly understood and sometimes have even been dismissed as irrelevant or unknowable.

In making these observations, I do not mean to imply that linguists should be blamed for neglecting the context within which language is used. On the contrary, they can hardly have been expected to do everything at once. It has probably been excellent strategy to limit attention to the internal organization of language and to set aside for a time any serious concern for its context. Nevertheless, anyone who has a broad interest in the role of language must sooner or later be drawn to see language in a much wider perspective and to try to understand how language and its setting interact.

In a rough way, three factors can be seen to influence our use of language. One is meaning, for we certainly choose our words and our sentences so as to communicate meaning of some sort. A second is social organization, for sociological variables, such as the class and status of the speaker or the formality of the situation in which he speaks, deeply influence the use of language. A third is individual variability among speakers. An understanding of the variability within a language, whether that variability is patterned by social class or is an expression of individual skill, helps to give us an understanding of the factors encouraging linguistic change. Beginning with meaning, the chapters of this book consider these topics. They try to suggest how meaning, social structure, and individual variability affect the use of language, and how these bear upon linguistic change.

Grammar and Meaning

Nothing in the long history of man's examination of language has evoked more controversy than the relation between grammar and meaning. Linguists have hardly been able to deny what the layman has always taken for granted, that something called meaning plays an important part in language, but linguists have never been able to agree upon exactly what they *mean* when they use words like meaning or semantics. Linguists have been far clearer when dealing with grammar, but I wish to deal with topics for which, in a broad sense, I feel the label "meaning" to be appropriate, and I want to consider these topics within the context of all our use of language. I must therefore, indicate, as clearly as I can, how I feel terms such as meaning and semantics can be usefully understood and how I would like to keep those distinct terms from grammar.

When linguists present grammatical analyses they almost always attempt to account for some features of a language by reference to other features of the language. They may state how a word or a morpheme varies from one linguistically definable situation to another. They may write a transformation that can show the relationship among sentences, but they rarely ask what is it that induces a speaker to choose a sentence requiring a transformation. Their rules practically never include terms that stand for variables outside of language. But linguistic events also depend, in some way, upon nonlinguistic phenomena, and terms like semantics or meaning can be reasonably applied to studies that seek to relate linguistic forms to something outside of language. More specifically, to give the meaning of some linguistic event can be understood as stating rules for its use in terms of nonlinguistic events.

To formulate semantic rules of this sort requires some way of measuring or pointing out the events to which the linguistic form is related. When studying color terms, for instance, we may specify colors by a chart or by wave length. Or perhaps we can manage less formally, by pointing at objects or by recalling things in the world whose color we have all experienced: the sky, a lump of coal, a buttercup. Similarly, when anthropologists study kinship terms, they need a way of specifying the objects in the world (the particular referents of the expression) to which the terms refer. For this purpose they have worked out elaborate ways of distinguishing all imaginable kinsmen from one another. When we say *kitty* over and over again to a small child in the presence of a cat, we are teaching him to relate a linguistic event to a different sort of event, which he can see and feel. When we introduce a man as *Mr. Brown,* we are doing the same thing more efficiently for the benefit of an adult who has learned the trick of relating linguistic labels to such extralinguistic phenomena as Mr. Brown. When we notice that a certain tone of voice indicates anger, we are relating one aspect of language, its

phonology, to an emotion that is not itself a part of language. When we realize that on formal occasions many speakers of English say *going* but on informal occasions are likely to say *goin'*, we are relating a linguistic variable, (*-ing* versus *-in*) to a nonlinguistic variable, the degree of formality of the situation. To the extent that we must refer to nonlinguistic events when we describe these linguistics events, our descriptions can be reasonably labeled semantic.

In understanding the way in which nonlinguistic variables affect our language, it may be helpful to look upon speech as being subject to different levels of constraint. First, and least avoidably, a speaker is constrained in his choice of morphemes, words, and constructions by the surrounding morphemes, words, and constructions. These are the constraints that we can call grammatical. But any speaker can produce a limitless number of grammatically acceptable sentences, and out of this number he is forced to make a further choice. He must select only those sentences that make sense—those which correspond to the events he wishes to discuss and those which are suitable to the situation in which he speaks. These choices go beyond the linguist's usual concern, but they are just as essential to clear conversation as those that can be described entirely by means of internal linguistic variables.

If we imagine that a speaker's first requirement is to produce sentences which fit the code of his language—which are well formed or grammatical—then we might also say that the linguist's first task is to look for patterns and specify grammatical rules that characterize well-formed sentences. However, any set of grammatical rules has to contain options—points of freedom where a more open choice is possible. Indeed, a set of rules that provided no options would be capable of generating only a single sentence. A linguist who wants only to formulate grammatical rules can afford to dismiss these varied features of the language as optional and then forget them. Nothing in the linguistic context dictates which alternative is to be chosen. But any full attempt to characterize a language ought to look beyond the purely grammatical constraints and examine the determinants of meaningful choices as well.

When we think of meaningful options, we think most often of the syntactical and particularly, the lexical, components of language. A linguist may show an adverb to be optional (perhaps by enclosing it in parentheses), when he describes the permitted sentence patterns; its optionality implies that decision about whether or not to include an adverb in the sentence is dependent not upon the internal grammatical constraints of the language, but rather upon the meaning that is to be expressed. The choice between active and passive constructions has sometimes been said to be optional, and this would make it a choice that potentially could carry meaning. Similarly, the choice among particular lexical items (*left*, or *right*, *gradually* or *slowly*, *dog* or *cat*) is a choice of meaning rather than of grammar. A wide choice among lexical items is usually allowed at each location in a sentence, and this

choice is left open by grammar and depends largely upon extralinguistic factors. Even some of our choices among certain features of segmental phonology (the choice between a whisper and a shout, for instance) are not contrained by rules that could be called grammatical but instead by the situation of the speaker.

To say certain choices are not amenable to grammatical description does not imply that an explicit and careful description is not possible. We should be able to formalize semantic rules just as we can formalize grammatical rules, but the semantic rules would reflect quite different variables. They would have to reflect the same sort of extralinguistic variables that a speaker uses when he decides what to say.

Reference, Situation, and Personality

I have written as if a speaker faced only two types of choices and con-straints, but the extralinguistic variables that bear upon our language use are not all of the same type. By sorting out the different types of variables the notion of semantic can be somewhat refined. First of all, of course, we have rules of reference, definitions of the referents of terms. Such rules of reference should provide explicit criteria for deciding between such terms as *dog* and *cat*, *left* and *right*, *hot* and *warm*. Rules of reference greatly reduce the degree of optionality left by the grammatical rules, but rules of reference still leave some choices open. Synonyms refer to the same phenomena and partial synonyms overlap in their reference, so reference rules can be said to leave the choice among synonyms as optional. Rules of reference should distin-guish between *mother* and *father*, but (in most conventional analyses of kinship terminology at least) *father*, *daddy*, *papa*, and *pop* are left as syn-onyms—the choice among them is referentially optional.

Clearly *father*, *daddy* and *pop* are not identical even though they all refer to the male parent. The choice among these forms is governed not by the referent to which they all refer, but by such factors as the speaker's person-ality, his father's presence or absence, his feelings toward his father, and the formality of the situation. Perhaps all languages make some distinction between formal and informal styles. In English we often use the passive in relatively formal situations, so if the passive is produced by a grammatically optional transformation, the transformation does not really leave the mean-ing unchanged. Javanese has an elaborate series of speech levels, character-ized primarily by many alternative lexical choices, but the choice among these levels depends not upon literal reference but upon such factors as the formality of the situation, and the relative status of speaker and hearer (see Chapter 7). Some English speakers probably switch between *he doesn't* and *he don't*, depending upon the situation.

We express something about the context of the situation not only by syntactic and lexical choices but even by phonological choices. A number of studies have shown that phonological variables such as the presence or absence of the post vocalic /–r/ (*r* when following a vowel) or the precise articularity position of /θ/ (the sound we spell *th* as in *th*ink) in New York English depend upon both the social class of the speaker and the situation in which he speaks (see Chapter 7). All of us can modify our phonology by whining, shouting, or whispering. Here we have examples where aspects of the extralinguistic environment seem to penetrate language not at the syntactical or lexical level but clear down at the phonological level.

Even beyond the situational factors, some linguistic choices are governed by the idiosyncrasies of our individual personalities. From a strictly individual point of view, of course, these are hardly *choices* except perhaps when we deliberately imitate someone else or try to hide our own personality. But from the broader viewpoint of the linguistic community, people certainly vary in their personal styles, and the variations are no doubt correlated with other aspects of personal behavior. Some people are consistently more formal than others in speech, and this may well reflect other aspects of their personality. Individuals have favorite words. A few lisp so badly that they lose a phonemic contrast, and we all have our individual voice qualities.

So the constraints that bear upon our use of language can be sorted roughly into at least four major types which we can label as grammatical, referential, situational, and personal. By the definitions which I have given, all but the strictly grammatical choices are meaningful, and if we are to understand how these choices are made, we will have to consider features of the world outside of language.

Perhaps the very success that linguists have had in discovering patterns within language and in formulating theories to account for these patterns, has occasionally blinded us to the place that language must occupy in any broader view of human behavior. Sooner or later one would hope that the findings of the linguists could be brought to bear upon these larger problems. When cornered, even linguists know that language is used to communicate ideas. We talk about *things*. In one way or another, language is involved in everything that we do. Yet linguists are surely correct in recognizing that language has some sort of internal organization and many subtle aspects of this internal organization can be expressed with no reference to things or ideas outside of language. Any full view of language must embrace both the linguists' insight into the internal organization of language and the broader view of the part language plays in all of human life.

Beginning with reference, I will consider a number of these extralinguistic factors and give a few examples that suggest what bearing they have upon our linguistic choices. Table 1–1 suggests a way of conceptualizing the kinds of choices given to speakers. The rows represent various levels of linguistic