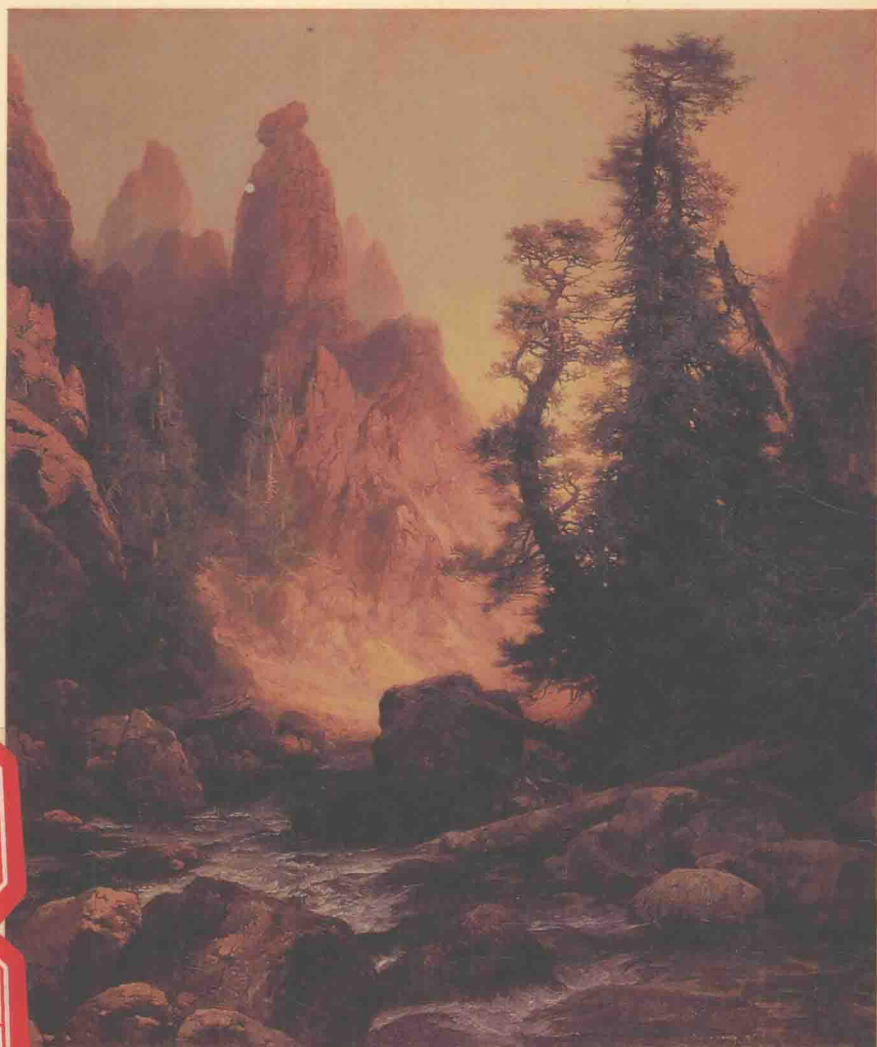


The Living Language

A Reader

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HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH, PUBLISHERS

San Diego New York Chicago Washington, D.C. Atlanta
London Sydney Toronto

COVER: *Below the Towers of Tower Falls, Yellowstone Park* by Thomas Moran (1909). Courtesy San Diego Museum of Art

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ISBN: 0-15-551127-0

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 83-081789

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Preface

In offering a new language reader, we are reaffirming the conviction that an increased awareness of language and the goals of college-level composition courses go hand in hand. Students who become increasingly conscious of the power that language asserts over us—and who learn in turn to exert more control over their own use of language—will ultimately become more confident and competent writers. Our own experience as composition instructors, and the experience of our colleagues, has borne out this conviction.

Our dissatisfaction with most of the language readers currently available, however, has prompted us to be governed by three main principles in editing this reader. First of all, we wanted to include essays that emphasize the changing, dynamic nature of language, and that emphasize the positive potential inherent in our use of language. We have therefore attempted to avoid the tendency to include essays that stress unduly what has gone wrong with language; one need only peruse the table of contents of other readers to discover entire sections of books devoted to language misuse, to euphemisms, to clichés, to the “decline” of language. Without necessarily intending to do so, such readers give students the impression that our language, rather than offering exciting new horizons, represents a veritable mine-field of problems to avoid. We do not mean to suggest that we believe current language usage is without serious problems or that clichéd writing, for example, is desirable; rather, we have chosen to emphasize the more positive vistas that an increased awareness of language can offer our students.

Second, we have included only those essays that are in themselves models of good writing, that succeed as essays, *per se*. Accordingly, we have resisted the temptation to include a piece of writing just because it would illustrate a particular point or fit a particular category. In several instances, in fact, we have included essays that are not concerned with language as a subject matter but are instead excellent examples of writing within the field under consideration—essays, that is, that use language to advantage.

Third, as the table of contents of this reader suggests, we have organized the essays to illustrate how language functions within a variety of occupations, disciplines, or subject areas. One way to interest beginning writers in the topic of language, we believe, is to interest them in the function of language within particular areas that have already captured their attention. Science students, for example, may learn that written language plays a more central role in the sciences in general than they might have supposed. When a practicing surgeon or a recognized scientific scholar takes the time to write about the particular significance of language to the scientist, we trust our students will become more receptive to issues of language in general.

We have integrated reading assignments and discussions with the rhetorical and mechanical concerns commonly associated with composition courses. The discussion questions that follow each essay address issues relevant to the essay's content, its rhetorical strategies, the author's use of language, and suggestions for writing assignments. The headnotes to each essay provide, in addition to pertinent biographical information, a brief introduction to the author's rhetorical strategies; an alternate table of contents organizes the essays according to the chief rhetorical modes they demonstrate. Finally, we have written brief introductory essays for each chapter that, while discussing the particular perspective on language offered within the section, attempt to conform to the principles of good essay writing.

Although many universities use language readers primarily in entrance-level composition courses, we have prepared this reader with the thought that the variety and scope of the essays included will appeal to, and be useful to, students at all levels of accomplishment. We are confident, moreover, that our discussions of rhetorical concerns and our commitment to selecting essays of high quality will make this volume suitable for any college course in composition.

Preface

In preparing this text we were aided by a number of people who offered us helpful suggestions and/or moral support. Our thanks, therefore, go to Jackie Bacon, Ken DeBow, Nori Hirasuna, and Tom Venturino. We also wish to thank Matt Milan and Jack Thomas from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, whose assistance and encouragement have been invaluable. Most especially, however, we wish to thank Evelyn Kasmire, Carol McConnell, and Susan Voss, whose patience and assistance were crucial throughout this entire endeavor.

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Table of Contents

Preface v

The Varieties of English 1

- Peter Farb, "Man the Talker" 4
- Helen Keller, "Everything Has a Name" 12
- Richard Mitchell, "The Worm in the Brain" 17
- William F. Buckley, "The Hysteria About Words" 28
- Norman Cousins, "A Growing Wealth of Words" 32
- Lewis Carroll, "Humpty Dumpty" 36
- Lewis Thomas, "Notes on Punctuation" 46

Language and the Community 52

- Diane Johnson, "Doctor Talk" 55
- Burton Bernstein, "Rybernian" 61
- Joan Didion, "On Going Home" 67
- Maxine Hong Kingston, "A Visit to My Aunt" 72
- Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Sexism in the Language of Marriage" 77
- Daniel Yankelovich, "Lying Well Is the Best Revenge" 88
- Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" 95

Language and the Media 114

- Tony Schwartz, "The Second God" 118
- Joshua Meyrowitz, "Where Have the Children Gone?" 124

- Tom Wolfe, "Porno-violence" 129
Norman Cousins, "An Epitaph for the *Saturday Review*—and Culture, Too" 137
M. F. K. Fisher, "As the Lingo Languishes" 142
Consumers Union, "It's Natural! It's Organic! Or Is It?" 154
Stanley Kauffmann, "Why I'm Not Bored" 162

Language and Politics 170

- George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" 173
Walter Lippmann, "The Indispensable Opposition" 188
Lewis H. Lapham, "Confusion Worse Confounded" 196
Edmund White, "The Political Vocabulary of Homosexuality" 203
Richard Rodriguez, "Aria" 217

Language and Sports 241

- Francine Hardaway, "Foul Play: Sports Metaphors as Public Doublespeak" 243
Joseph Durso, "You Could Look It Up" 252
A.B. Giamatti, "Hyperbole's Child" 267
William Zinsser, "Sports" 276
Roger Angell, "Stories for a Rainy Afternoon" 286
Red Smith, "Unconquerable" 296

Language in Science and Technology 301

- Albert Einstein, "The Common Language of Science" 304
Lewis Thomas, "Social Talk" 308
Francine Patterson and Eugene Linden, "Koko's First Words" 313
Ruth Nelson, "The First Literate Computers?" 324
Susan Sontag, "A Rhetoric of Disease" 333

Language and the Arts 343

- Edward Weston, "Things Seen into Things Known" 345
Ingmar Bergman, "Film-making" 351
Agnes de Mille, "To Make Up a Dance" 361

Aaron Copland, "How We Listen" 365
Simone Signoret, "A Flying Leap into the Unknown" 372

Writers on Writing 380

Virginia Woolf, "A Writer's Diary" 381
Anne Frank, "I Want to Write" 386
Dylan Thomas, "The Colours of Words" 389
William Stafford, "Writing" 393
Joan Didion, "Why I Write" 397
Richard Selzer, "Why a Surgeon Would Write" 405
Robert Day, "What Is a Scientific Paper?" 412

Rhetorical Table of Contents

Fiction

Lewis Carroll, "Humpty Dumpty" 36

Diary

Anne Frank, "I Want to Write" 386

Virginia Woolf, "A Writer's Diary" 381

Narrative

Roger Angell, "Stories for a Rainy Afternoon" 286

Burton Bernstein, "Rybernian" 61

Joan Didion, "On Going Home" 67

Joseph Durso, "You Could Look It Up" 252

Helen Keller, "Everything Has a Name" 12

Maxine Hong Kingston, "A Visit to My Aunt" 72

Francine Patterson and Eugene Linden, "Koko's First Words" 313

Richard Rodriguez, "Aria" 217

Red Smith, "Unconquerable" 296

Dylan Thomas, "The Colours of Words" 389

Description

Burton Bernstein, "Rybernian" 61

- Joseph Durso, "You Could Look It Up" 252
Francine Patterson and Eugene Linden, "Koko's First Words" 313
Simone Signoret, "A Flying Leap into the Unknown" 372

Definition

- Burton Bernstein, "Rybernian" 61
Robert Day, "What Is a Scientific Paper?" 412
Albert Einstein, "The Common Language of Science" 304
Peter Farb, "Man the Talker" 4
M. F. K. Fisher, "As the Lingo Languishes" 142
Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" 95
Ruth Nelson, "The First Literate Computers?" 324
Susan Sontag, "A Rhetoric of Disease" 333
William Stafford, "Writing" 393
Dylan Thomas, "The Colours of Words" 389
Edward Weston, "Things Seen into Things Known" 345
Tom Wolfe, "Porno-violence" 129

Example

- Joseph Durso, "You Could Look It Up" 252
M. F. K. Fisher, "As the Lingo Languishes" 142
Diane Johnson, "Doctor Talk" 55
Walter Lippmann, "The Indispensable Opposition" 188
Ruth Nelson, "The First Literate Computers?" 324
Alleen Pace Nilsen, "Sexism in the Language of Marriage" 77
George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" 173
Richard Rodriguez, "Aria" 217
Tony Schwartz, "The Second God" 118
Lewis Thomas, "Social Talk" 308
William Zinsser, "Sports" 276

Process Analysis

- Ingmar Bergman, "Film-making" 351
Aaron Copland, "How to Listen to Music" 365
Agnes de Mille, "To Make Up a Dance" 361
Joan Didion, "Why I Write" 397

- M. F. K. Fisher, "As the Lingo Languishes" 142
William Stafford, "Writing" 393
Edward Weston, "Things Seen into Things Known" 345
Tom Wolfe, "Porno-violence" 129
Virginia Woolf, "A Writer's Diary" 381

Classification

- Aaron Copland, "How to Listen to Music" 365
Norman Cousins, "A Growing Wealth of Words" 32

Comparison/Contrast

- Ingmar Bergman, "Film-making" 351
Norman Cousins, "Epitaph for the *Saturday Review*—and Culture Too" 137
Peter Farb, "Man the Talker" 4
Stanley Kauffmann, "Why I'm Not Bored" 162
Joshua Meyrowitz, "Where Have the Children Gone?" 124
Susan Sontag, "A Rhetoric of Disease" 333
Lewis Thomas, "Social Talk" 308

Cause/Effect

- Richard Mitchell, "The Worm in the Brain" 17
Susan Sontag, "A Rhetoric of Disease" 333
Daniel Yankelovich, "Lying Well Is the Best Revenge" 88

Analogy

- William F. Buckley, "The Hysteria About Words" 28
A. B. Giamatti, "Hyperbole's Child" 267
Walter Lippmann, "The Indispensable Opposition" 188
Tony Schwartz, "The Second God" 118
Simone Signoret, "A Flying Leap into the Unknown" 372

Analysis

- Joan Didion, "On Going Home" 67
Peter Farb, "Man the Talker" 4

- Diane Johnson, "Doctor Talk" 55
Joshua Meyrowitz, "Where Have the Children Gone?" 124
Ruth Nelson, "The First Literate Computers?" 324
Lewis Thomas, "Notes on Punctuation" 46
Edmund White, "The Political Vocabulary of
Homosexuality" 203
Daniel Yankelovich, "Lying Well Is the Best Revenge" 88

Argument

- William F. Buckley, "The Hysteria About Words" 28
Consumer's Union, "It's Natural! It's Organic! Or Is It?" 154
Norman Cousins, "Epitaph for the *Saturday Review*—and
Culture, Too" 137
Francine Hardaway, "Foul Play: Sports Metaphors as Public
Doublespeak" 243
Stanley Kauffmann, "Why I'm Not Bored" 162
Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" 95
Lewis Lapham, "Confusion Worse Confounded" 196
Walter Lippmann, "The Indispensable Opposition" 188
George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" 173
Richard Rodriguez, "Aria" 217
Richard Selzer, "Why a Surgeon Would Write" 405
Edmund White, "The Political Vocabulary of
Homosexuality" 203
Daniel Yankelovitch, "Lying Well is the Best Revenge" 88

The Varieties of English

1

The English language is the native tongue of more than a quarter billion people; in the United States alone, more than a dozen different dialects of English are spoken. In everyday situations we use words that originated in the age when Anglo-Saxon kings ruled the British Isles, yet in the same sentence we might use a word that did not even exist before we launched our first space ship. Like all modern languages, English is a dynamic entity capable of changes that are at once predictable and nearly limitless in scope. Even if our language were suddenly frozen in time, with no further possibilities for change, we could still use it to express almost every nuance of thought anyone is ever likely to think.

“Linguistic creativity” is the term our first essayist, Peter Farb, uses to describe the almost limitless possibilities inherent in every native speaker’s use of his or her own language. Every time we speak or write a sentence, Farb’s essay shows, we are selecting from among an almost infinite variety of words and grammatical constructions; that ability to choose separates human language from all forms of animal communication. Even animals—such as parrots and mynah birds—that have been taught to imitate human languages are incapable of using their vocabularies to form new phrases or sentences of their own devising. That ability remains solely the province of humans; if we think about the implications of this fact, we will begin to understand how unique a role language plays in human interactions.

The second essay in this chapter, written by the remarkable Helen Keller, records the story of her childhood struggle to break through the double barriers of deafness and blindness, aided by the patient instruction of her teacher, Anne Sullivan. But before she could begin to understand the significance of the letters Miss Sullivan spelled into her hand, Helen Keller had first to discover the simple truth that we all take for granted—that “everything has a name.” Few people could recount with much accuracy the point when they first began to associate individual words with specific objects, but for Helen Keller that moment is recalled in vivid detail and with strong emotions. It made the world for her seem to blossom, “like Aaron’s rod, with flowers.”

In sharp contrast to Helen Keller’s serious narration, Richard Mitchell’s essay, “The Worm in the Brain,” light-heartedly attacks administrative language, with all its passive constructions and misplaced modifiers. Taking his cue from a statement by Carl Sagan, Mitchell proposes that some literal “trouble in the brain” causes once ordinary people to begin to write like administrators. In calling such language the product of a disease, Mitchell suggests that “official” language need not be the way it is; his metaphor of disease even holds out the implicit promise of a cure. But Mitchell doesn’t moralize in his essay, nor does he adopt the stance of a language purist resistant to change. Instead, he is content to maintain a playful tone throughout his essay, nonetheless making the point that language may reveal as much about the speaker as it does about the concepts the speaker articulates.

In “The Hysteria About Words,” the political columnist William F. Buckley defends himself against the frequent charge that he uses “unusual” and unfamiliar words in an affected way. Anyone who has heard Buckley on television or read his articles in magazines will know immediately why such a charge might have been leveled against him: His vocabulary is extraordinary, and he is among the most erudite and articulate television personalities in America. In the essay reprinted here, Buckley does not defend his vocabulary on the grounds that it can in fact be understood by those with whom he seeks to communicate; rather, he argues that we have fallen prey to a “phony democratic bias against the use of unusual words.” This is unfortunate, Buckley insists, because such words are “as necessary to philosophy, economics, esthetics, and political science as they are necessary in the world of higher mathematics. . . .”

Whether or not we ultimately agree with Buckley's conclusion, we are likely to find his defense of unusual words spirited and provocative.

Norman Cousins, in his brief essay, "A Growing Wealth of Words," focuses on the wide array of words that have been added to the English language in the last 80 years—all, he says, the "products of 20th-century civilization." He cites examples from space-age activities, the Psychological Revolution, modern medicine, and public communication. Like Buckley, although from an entirely different point of view, Cousins takes great delight in our ever-expanding vocabulary. Acknowledging that "we have seen the growth of the cult of incoherence," Cousins is nonetheless optimistic about the health of the English language. It "has never been richer than it is today and it will become richer still."

The sixth essay in this chapter is altogether different than the others. Technically speaking, it is not an essay at all, but a chapter from Lewis Carroll's nineteenth-century classic work *Through the Looking Glass*. In it, Alice encounters the moody and unpredictable Humpty Dumpty, first memorialized in the Mother Goose rhyme by the same name. Alice finds Humpty Dumpty a particularly difficult conversationalist not only because he is irascible but because, as he says, he makes words mean whatever he wants them to mean. We include this excerpt here in part because it is a classic piece about language, but primarily because it is a delightful tribute to the inventive possibilities involved in word play.

The final essay in this chapter was written by Lewis Thomas, essayist and physician of national renown. Thomas concerns himself here with a topic that is important to language only in its written form—punctuation. His concern, however, is not the correctness or the incorrectness of a given mark of punctuation; rather, he devotes at least one paragraph to the qualities inherent in each major mark of punctuation, and he does so in a way that playfully attempts to capture the essence of each. Thomas shares with the other writers represented in this section a firm sense of the richness inherent in the human use of language.

Underlying all these essays is the notion that whenever we speak or write we make myriad choices, whether consciously or unconsciously. The essays all imply that rather than be intimidated by these choices, we should welcome them and enjoy them for their limitless potential to enrich human communication.

Man the Talker

Peter Farb

Peter Farb (1929–1980), a free-lance writer and researcher in the science and natural history of North America, was a feature editor for Argosy magazine. He wrote and edited dozens of books, including The Insects (1962), The Atlantic Shore (1966), and Wordplay: What Happens When People Talk (1974). “Man The Talker” celebrates the dazzling complexity and spontaneity of human language, particularly English, which Farb compares and contrasts to other human and non-human languages.

Some twenty-five hundred years ago, Psamtik, an Egyptian pharaoh, desired to discover man's primordial tongue. He entrusted two infants to an isolated shepherd and ordered that they should never hear a word spoken in any language. When the children were returned to the pharaoh several years later, he thought he heard them utter *bekos*, which means “bread” in Phrygian, a language of Asia Minor. And so he honored Phrygian as man's “natural” language. Linguists today know that the story of the pharaoh's experiment must be apocryphal. No child is capable of speech until he has heard other human beings speak, and even two infants reared together cannot develop a language from scratch. Nor does any single “natural” language exist. A child growing up anywhere on earth will speak the tongue he hears in his speech community, regardless of the race, nationality, or language of his parents. 1

Every native speaker is amazingly creative in the various strategies of speech interaction, in word play and verbal dueling, in exploiting a language's total resources to create poetry and literature. Even a monosyllabic yes—spoken in a particular speech situation, with a certain tone of voice, and accompanied by an appropriate gesture—might constitute an original use of English. This sort of linguistic creativity is the birthright of every human being on earth, no matter what language he speaks, the kind of community he lives in, or his degree of intelligence. As Edward Sapir pointed out, when it comes to language “Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting savage of Assam.” 2

And at a strictly grammatical level also, native speakers are unbelievably creative in language. Not every human being can play the violin, do calculus or jump high hurdles, no matter how excel- 3