LANGUAGE IN ITS SOCIAL CONTEXT*

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The Master said: "What is the good of being ready with the tongue? They, who meet men with smartnesses of speech, for the most part procure themselves hatred." (The Analects of Confucius, trans. J. Legge)

1. VARIOUS APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE

INTEREST IN LANGUAGE IS NOT A RECENT DEVELOPMENT, as shown by the oldest grammar we know, the one written by Panini c.a. 300 B.C., in which he analyses the speech sounds of Sanskrit and its grammatical structure. In the course of time the phenomenon of language has puzzled and attracted people's minds in so many different ways that it will be possible to mention only a few here.

Interest in the numerous languages of the world has led to the scientific study of linguistic phenomena, particularly in their morphological aspects. This has given rise to two main types of classification — a structural type, based on the relative degree of synthesis of the words and the way in which various parts of a word are attached to it, and a genetic type of classification.

The genetic classification is based on comparative studies with regard to phonetic and structural changes. Through a careful study of phonetic changes and changes in vocabulary, a theoretical reconstruction may be made of the original language from which the present existing languages have stemmed, or (since the interest in the origin of languages has faded) of the distribution of languages and dialects. These studies may also prove a valuable aid in studying the patterns of population changes.

Such studies necessitate thorough investigation not only of the phonetic or sound elements but also of the phonemes or functionally significant units which make up a language pattern. Apart from this scientific use, the study of speech sounds has its practical application in the field of language teaching.

The psychologists have studied language from a different angle. Their contribution lies in the psychology of communication. Generally this field ranges from the mechanical aspects (phonetics, perception of speech) to the socio-psychological patterns of communication and barriers to communication, learning habits, and distortion of testimony or of rumor.

For many the study of language means the only key to the world of literature. They struggle valiantly to master speech sounds, grammatical rules, idiom and vocabulary, but their ultimate aim is to enjoy the literary efforts of others or to express themselves in that way.

The various aspects of language are all interrelated. Therefore the special approaches should not be seen as separate fields of study, but rather as a specific emphasis. The sociological emphasis is on language as part of a social system. The quotation from Confucius at the head of this article aptly illustrates the point that language may be regarded not only as a tool but as social action calling forth counter-action.

In the subsequent paragraphs we shall discuss this approach more in detail.

2. COMMUNICATION

The communicative aspect of language has impressed various authors and indeed for many people the social aspects of language are predominantly contained in those of communication between individuals or groups. Such a statement however, has to be qualified, for obviously communication is possible without the use of language while language may be used for other reasons than direct communication. There is in fact at present at tendency to over-estimate the communicative aspect at the cost of a more inclusive approach to language.

At the same time the concept of communication has been narrowed down to its practical component of transfer and exchange of information and ideas. Thus language, and more particularly speech, is often popularly thought of as a kind of magic, hard to achieve but worth striving for in a perfectionistic manner, for the more refined the tool the better the communication. This however is only part of the picture. Preceding the concept of communication is the approach to language as an abstraction from the social situation, in other words as a system of significant symbols, referring to a social context.

The manipulation of these symbols makes out the main body of social activities. Language then is in the first place social action. It is as a form of behavior, viz. symbolic behavior that (it) arouses the interest of social scientists. This approach is a natural concomitant of the development of the social sciences, in the same way that in earlier times the main interest in language was centered around the origin of languages or the question of whether language was divine or rational in character. The modern social scientist, studying language as social action, may distinguish more than one type of communication:

(1) the direct external type of communication in which a message is communicated from one individual to one or more others;

(2)   a more indirect or diffuse external type in which communication takes place regardless of the message communicated;

(3)   the internal type viz. the communication taking place between an individual and himself.

External Communication

In Mead's terms, gestures (including language or vocal gesture) "become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in an individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse or are supposed to arouse in other individuals." (Mead, p. 47)[1] In this threefold relationship between (1) social situation, which serves as a referent, (2) symbols used by the speaker, and (3) response of the hearer, there are various levels of abstraction.

Thus a man pointing to a steaming dish of food may remark to someone else that it is hot. The hearer observing the same visual signs and hearing the remark will agree. The interpretation is based on the recurrence of a similar social situation or a whole series of similar situations in the past. Since both speaker and hearer have experienced similar social situations in the past, the sight of the steaming dish will be interpreted by them in the same way. They both have internalized in their experience the social situation and the symbol used as an abstraction of that situation. Because of their shared experiences the symbol "hot" may be used also if the visual signs are absent. A speaker may tell about hot dishes in a situation where no such dishes are present. Yet his symbol will not fail to arouse the desired response in his listeners. At a more advanced level of abstraction, he will speak of a "hot" contest or a "heated" argument and his listeners will understand the meaning of his words since the symbol arouses in them the picture of all previous referents.

Reversely, if speaker and listener do not share the same internalized experiences, in other words, if they do not have the same frame of reference, the symbols used will fail to arouse the same response. Thus many fathers found that their pre-school age children could not interpret the symbol "office" since there was no adequate referent for it in the social situation the children could envisage. It is of course possible to refer the symbol to the office-building, but not to the whole complex of interpersonal relations the symbol stands for.

Such difficulties in interpretation of symbols caused by a lack of common internalized experiences are even more marked in the field of foreign languages. Words which seem the equivalents of words in a foreign language often turn out to refer to entirely different referents. This is

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[1] All references in the text are to items in the Master Bibliography.

e.g. illustrated by the word "family." When American or British speakers use this word, the symbol stands for a rather similar social unit in the U.S. and in Britain. In related Indo-Germanic languages the words for "family" seem both in appearance and in sound so similar that they are usually regarded as interchangeable with the English word. However, the social unit to which these words refer may be a different one.

To cite just one example: if an American would say that he was travelling with his "family," the Dutch translation would not be *familie* but *gezin* the latter word indicating the nuclear or simple family, whereas the word *familie* is used to indicate wider kin relations and would therefore have to be translated by "relatives." If between neighboring countries with a common socio-cultural background numerous differences of this kind are to be found, we can easily understand how extensive the gap must be between languages with widely diverging socio-cultural frames of reference.

Differences in socio-cultural background are not eliminated by the fact that both parties employ the same language as a medium of communication. For example, communication between Dutch social welfare officers and Ambonese refugees in the Netherlands takes place either in Malay, a language of which most social welfare workers in this field have a good working knowledge, or in Dutch, which a good many Ambonese understand and often speak quite well. Between the parties no communication difficulties would be expected. Yet communication has failed several times because both parties employed the foreign tongue with reference to their own differing socio-cultural background. The simple fact, for instance, that the Dutch welfare workers think and speak in terms of the needs of the individual, thus isolating the individual from one of the many traditional groups of which he is an integral part, has often led to considerable confusion.

Modern methods of mass-communication entail their own specific problems. The use of mass-media permits an enormous increase in the total volume of external communication. The enlargement of scale however also sets its own limitations. Mass communication is directed to an anonymous mass and responses are correspondingly vague and often difficult to measure.

When discussing language as a means of communication, it is generally assumed that the emphasis falls on the transfer of a message. Models have been evolved explaining what factors are considered important in the process of communication while the message itself has been analysed as being of an informative or expressive character.

There is however a second, more indirect type of external communication, the type that has been termed "phatic communion," i.e. the function of speech in mere sociabilities. It is a fundamental tendency of humans

to congregate, to be together. Speech binds them together, accentuates their sense of belonging. As Malinowski remarks: "another man's silence is not a reassuring factor, but on the contrary, something alarming and dangerous." (p. 314) Here, the mere fact that some conversation is going on, is the essential feature, not the information that is imparted. The communication is there but it is an indirect communication in the sense that it is not dependent on the meaning of the words. The sound of the words and the context in which they are spoken are sufficient to bring about the communication.

In this connection it has been remarked that the bonds between speaker and hearer created by linguistic communication are not necessarily symmetrical. The speaker giving the information or uttering his ideas, derives a far greater satisfaction from this act than the hearer. However, there is always an opportunity to reverse the roles so that the flow of words goes in the other direction, which will also change the pattern of satisfaction. (Malinowski). In this context it is also worth noting the importance of the play element in language. As Huizing has pointed out, the play element is a function of culture, a given magnitude, "existing before culture itself existed, accompanying it and pervading it from the earliest beginning right up to the phase of civilization we are now living in." (p. 4)

In language this play element is very prominent. Not only is language pre-eminently suitable to convey humour and lightheartedness, but in many languages a playful element can be detected in some morphological aspects. Thus in Indonesian languages reiteration of words with or without vowel and/or consonant changes, often seem to reflect this play element. Thus the Malay/Indonesian word for scratch or line is: *tjoret*, but also *tjoreng*, *tjorek, tjorat-tjaret*. Often words of rather similar meaning are combined, apparently because the spoken words in combination have a pleasing sound, e.g.: *lemah lembut, gelap gulita, sopan santum bengkang bengkung, sajur majur*. Here evidently both rhythm and sound of the spoken words bring about the play element and the satisfaction derived from pronouncing or hearing the words comes very close to that derived from music. It shows that the borderlines between such cultural elements as music, dance and speech are often very artificial. Here again we find communication through vocal gestures but independent of the meaning content.

Internal Communication

Thus far we have discussed some aspects of communication between persons or groups of persons. There is also the communication between an individual and himself, or between man and the supernatural in prayer or exhortation. Such communication between an individual and himself is based on the existence of a system of linguistic symbols. "Only in

terms of gestures which are significant symbols can thinking — which is simply an internalized or implicit conversation of the individual with himself by means of gestures — take place." (Mead, p. 48).

This seems applicable also to the processes involved in memory. To remember something we need the guidance of signs. By means of language the individual can reach back into the past and generally he cannot reach further back than the period at which signs became available to him. Habits, feelings, sensations, experiences generally become associated with language symbols. By reorganizing these symbols past experiences can be called back and future experiences imagined. In other words it is the named things, which play an important role in memory and imagination. Remembering and especially recalling is an act of reconstruction — of reorganizing symbols. By means of language an ordering is possible of the chaos of impressions. Objects or things become familiar even if we know little else about them but their names.

By naming or at least by attempts to describe them, we seem to get a hold on things. Things, which cannot be named, cannot be compared to other known things, cannot be described in any intelligible way, and, in fact, are things "out of this world." They do not develop beyond the stage of vague sensations, emotions, fears or forebodings. We are aware of "something," but we do not know what, and generally we fear the unknown, nameless things. As soon as the thing has been named our uncertainty disappears. We now "know" it. The process is one of labeling, which is fundamental to all social life. "... And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof..."

All societies have their own way of labeling things, or ordering the raw material of experience according to a certain system. People become so accustomed to using these labels and to apply their way of ordering, that they become unconscious of the fact that the labels are not the things themselves, but only indicators, and that their way of ordering experience is for the most part arbitrary and inevitably distorts reality. Childhood experiences viewed in this light and especially the pre-language experiences, deal for the most part with "raw" experience materials, not yet labeled and not or insufficiently systematized. This has been related to the phenomenon of childhood-amnesia, the fact that most individuals remember practically nothing of the period before their fifth year (Schachtel).

Philosophers and ethnolinguists have likewise recognized the compelling force of linquistic categories in the processes of ordering experience. Dewey states: "The chief intellectual classifications that constitute the working capital of thought, have been built up for us by our mother tongue." (Dewey, p. 235). Whorf goes even further and asserts that "the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of

patterns of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematization of his own language." (Whorf, p. 252). Language not only embodies meaning, it also prescribes to a great extent the nature of the meaning we attach to our experiences.

3. LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The juxtaposition of these two terms is deceptive. It seems to imply that language and social structure are two separate entities or that language can be disentangled from its social context to be compared to what remains — the patterns of interpersonal relationship. Actually language is an integral part of social structure, and any attempt to study either of the two in isolation entails a certain amount of distortion.

As a social phenomenon language consists of acts, temporal and transitory. Its function is to coordinate social behavior according to the demands of the situation. Language as an integral part of social process gives meaning to and at the same time derives its meaning from social behavior. The relationship between language, systems of thought, and other patterns of behavior can be traced back to the metaphysics underlying each culture. As Whorf has shown in his exposition of the Hopi world view, each society has its own model of the universe and all observable phenomena of the universe can be accounted for and accurately described in the language of its people. Thus, whereas the metaphysics underlying western thinking and language imposes upon the universe the two separate concepts of space and time, the Hopi universe is described as comprising two different cosmic forms — the manifested and objective on the one hand and the manifesting (or unmanifest) and subjective on the other. The former comprises everything accessible to the senses without distinguishing between present and past, but excluding everything which in our thinking would be future. The latter concept deals with everything that is subjective, mental, and sacred. Hence it also includes notions of expectancy, desire, purposive thought into future action, a state or emerging into manifestation (which has been described as the "expective form" in Whorf's terminology of Hopi grammar). (Whorf 59/60)

There is then obviously an intimate and complex interrelationship between language and social structure, which is of particular interest to the sociologist. As an illustration of how these phenomena may be observed in reality, let us assume that in a certain social situation, a number of individuals are engaged in discussion. The sociologist, observing this situation is not in the first place concerned with the speech sounds or the vocabulary of the speakers, unless these linguistic phenomena are sociologically relevant. What he wants to know is, for example, what is the topic of the discussion? What are the social roles of the different speakers

and what is the nature of their interrelationship? What groups or categories do they represent? Is their group membership or status reflected in their speech or in a specific terminology used in addressing them? Why does this particular person speak more often than others? Who listens attentively when he speaks? Who does not?

The observer may note that some societies have what has been termed a "talking culture," while in other social systems the "strong, silent man" is valued. (LaPiere and Farnsworth) He may also find that specific types of linguistics behavior are consistently accompanied by specific other forms of symbolic behavior (gestures, facial expression, dress, ritual). The sociologist, it will be noted, interprets linguistic acts in terms of a network of interpersonal relationships, i.e. in terms of social structure.

Here two significant aspects may be distinguished. Studies of sociocultural systems have shown that all socially significant categories and processes have their linguistic counterpart. Thus we find that the well-known criteria of age, sex, occupation, etc. have found expression in terms for different age groups and of seniority (e.g. terms for older brother, younger brother) and special terms for male and female roles and, in some societies, separate types of address for male and female speakers. There are also terms for specific occupations and affiliations and terms expressive of kinship and affinity.

This notion of the power of the word is a general one, and not without reason. The very first contact a child makes with his social world is through vocal action. His cry for food or for comfort immediately brings response. Later on, his first words again entail prompt action from the adult world. "Words are to a child active forces, they give him an essential hold on reality.... The word acts on the thing and the thing releases the word in the human mind." (Malinowski, p. 321)

The conviction that words are powerful forces in the essence of verbal magic. It may take the form of the application of magical words to bring about health, growth, or fertility. It may also consist of avoidance of such value-laden, dangerous words. Thus among many fishing and hunting communities, special "occupational" or "secret" languages have developed. The obvious reason for this specialization is the desire to avoid taboo-words, which may frighten away the animals, or else to propitiate the deities of water, wind, rain and other unpredictable elements. The same magical function may be attributed to the jargon of criminal groups.

Although major emphasis has been placed on the conserving and perpetuating element of language, the same characteristics of language make it an excellent instrument to bring about or emphasize social change. The speech habits of the Religious Society of Friends, based on Biblical simplicity in speech, was part of a whole complex of social gestures ex-

pressive of the social reforms of George Fox, the founder of the Society.
Many battles were fought before the offensive "Thee" and "Thou" of the
Friends were tolerated in their own social environment of non-Friends.
The "beatnik"-slang, like their dress and other habits, similarly has a
double function. Internally it serves to affirm and preserve group mem-
bership, externally it accentuates a breaking away from the social standards,
a rebellion against the socially approved habits.

The fascination of the new often takes a linguistic form, such as a
smattering of foreign languages, newly coined words, or new expressions.
The many forms and means of linguistic advertising illustrate the role
of language as a means of pushing new ideas and forming new habits and
needs.

Language is often manipulated as a means of exciting and stimulating
non-symbolic action in processes of rapid social change. We hear and
see slogans as a moral accompaniment of revolutionary movements such
as *"Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite"* in France, "Merdeka" (freedom) in In-
donesia, "Mena Muria" (ready for action) in Ambon, and "Africa for
the Africans." These slogans may be employed as an appeal to unite
people speaking the same language ("Ein Volk, ein Fuhrer, eine Sprache!")
or it may take the form of an attempt to unite people speaking different
tribal or regional languages such as Bahasa Indonesia, the national lan-
guage of Indonesia in a country where over two hundred languages are
spoken.

Here we might elaborate a little on the concept of a national language.
For the linguist, all languages and dialects are of equal value and interest
and the efforts to codify and build up one language as a national language
with a standard spelling, grammar and an artificially enlarged vocabulary
of its own, does not mean much to him. For the sociologist however,
the motivations underlying the struggle to build up a national language
and a national literature are highly significant. Such aims may accompany
social movements and the language becomes a symbol of nationalistic or
tribal aims. Thus in India the proclamation of Hindi as the national lan-
guage brought vehement protests from the Tamil-speaking people in South
India. Hindi and Tamil belong to two different linguistic stocks. In
Pakistan a similar struggle ensued although the two languages, Urdu and
Bengali, are related.

New concepts or ideas, after being launched by individuals or interest
groups, may become the focal point of new specific vocabularies facilitating
the introduction of changes. This process may run as follows. The
observation of certain social phenomena stimulates attempts to describe,
interpret and evaluate what has been observed in the light of a specific
focus of interest. This linguistic process allows a characterization of those
phenomena in unfavorable terms. Often the complex of phenomena is

captured under a label, a new name suggesting the undesirability of their existence, or, as often happens, desired changes are as it were crystallized in the new concept and it is upheld in striking contrast to the existing situation. After the idea has been launched it appears that many others have been concerned with related problems. These problems are then discussed and interpreted in a novel way. Many odd things fall into place. Thought and discussion are experienced as promoting insight. People derive great satisfaction from being among the first to introduce the new concept. Gradually it becomes the fashion to discuss related problems in these terms. It is at this stage that the idea seems to have acquired a power and a momentum of its own and thus a purely linguistic phenomenon has been transformed into a social force. The moment for its translation into direct non-symbolic action has arrived. The history of such ideas, depicting a general social process which runs its course from the concrete social situation via linguistic behavior back to direct non-symbolic action is illustrated by the career of emotionally charged terms as: democracy, communism, colonialism, un-Americanism, segregation and desegregation, and so forth.

Linguistic changes may accompany, precede, or follow social changes. Seen from the viewpoint of the individual, change may result from the selection of a specific language or sub-language and the avoidance of others. In this process of selection and avoidance, it is worth studying the motivation behind these decisions. In discussing the Javanese sub-languages in which the hierarchical order is reflected, we noted, that these linguistic forms tended to reaffirm and perpetuate the status categories. Consequently it is not surprising to learn that many Javanese, in order to escape "humiliating" use of "high" speech, will prefer to use Malay, a language in which such status distinctions are not expressed.

A person formulates his purposes and imputes motives to his acts especially in situations where his intentions are questioned by others or when his conduct is not in accordance with the expectations of others or when he thinks this is so. Questions are raised especially in situations where acts are unexpected or purposes considered unusual or when alternative behavior exists. This shows the essentially social character of motivation. Therefore the words used, the way one formulates an explanation, depends on the vocabulary of motives which is acceptable in certain situations and by the social circles concerned. In most societies motivation in terms of moral goodness is the most serviceable. Morally serviceable words like: industriousness, ability, generosity, cheerfulness, kindness, filial piety etc. are frequently used by the individual because they earn him the goodwill of his group. (Burke) Depending, however, on the social group and the situation, the emphasis may be more

on generosity and hospitality than on industriousness and thrift or more on law and order than on generosity and refinement.

We have first dealt briefly with various approaches in order to specify our own. Then the communicative aspect of language has been discussed, not only because this aspect is the most obvious but also to make a distinction between this and the following section dealing with the function of language in social statics and social dynamics. Our brief exposition is of course far from exhaustive. Language inevitably involves all aspects of social life, and the delineation of a sociology of language as a separate field of study, as proposed by Hertzler, seems justified. In this paper however we have been concerned mainly with an elaboration of the concept of language as social action, a less obvious but highly significant concept. Its further development as a field of study in a sociological frame of reference will open interesting perspectives.

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