

LINGUISTS AND THE SENSE OF MISSION

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A COMPLETE SURVEY of what makes linguists tick would be a very complex undertaking. Some linguists are motivated by what I wish to call here a "sense of mission." When a linguist sees that his studies could be used for the betterment of the society in which he lives, what could be more natural than that he should try to make his presence felt? Scientists in other fields have become "movers and shakers" of their culture—why should not the linguists do so too?

Our society, however, has built up a set of defenses against those who would bring about change. The "reformer" is usually caricatured as a figure to be made fun of, and there are sinister implications in "agitator," "do-gooder," "true believer," etc. Worse still is the "starry-eyed utopian," the "cultist," or the person with a "Messianic complex." But quite apart from this battle of epithets, there is a very sound basis in principle why the linguist should be cautious about espousing a program of reformism. A respect for his material as he finds it is a necessary basis for any practicing linguist. This can be summed up in the doctrine, "whatever is, is right," and it should serve as a strong brake on any "sense of mission." The linguist cannot afford to tamper with his basic material; he must accept it as a "given." The collecting of impartial, unbiased observations is the first step in linguistics,

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and it must be based on the fundamental assumption that "whatever is, is right."

This doctrine has been traced in the history of English grammars back to the year 1847, in a work by the English grammarian Robert G. Latham.¹ I have found it even earlier, in 1830, used as a motto by Schuyler Clark, but the author merely quoted Pope's couplet without discussion:

And spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, *Whatever is, is right.*²

The dispute in the early nineteenth century was often couched in the terms of "anomaly" *versus* "analogy," though they now have an old-fashioned ring.³ The believers in anomaly emphasized concrete details, however unsystematic they might be; while the believers in analogy sought to organize all material into neat patterns.

The avenues or channels by which the "sense of mission" has manifested itself are many and diverse. One type of activity is the improvement of the structure of the language itself. Such plans turn up every few years, and a sample can be given from the year 1785, by the Scottish antiquary John Pinkerton. He believed that English plurals should be formed in *-a*; thus, *a bad pen*, plural, *bada pena*. Also the substantives ending in harsh consonants should have *-o* added. Thus a passage of *The Spectator* was made to read:

I cast mina eyea towardo the summito of a roco, tha
waz noto faro fro me, whéré I discovered oné in the

¹ Mildred E. Hergenthan, *The Doctrine of Correctness in English Usage in the Nineteenth Century* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1938), p. 72, citing Latham's *An Elementary English Grammar*, 2nd ed. (London, 1847).

² Schuyler Clark, *The American Linguist* (Providence, R.I., 1830), p. 91.

³ See, for example, Joseph W. Wright, *A Philosophical Grammar of the English Language* (London, 1838), p. 128: "Those reasonings which refine and improve the language, tend only to unsettle it; because this proper authority (which obliges anomalies to answer for analogies) speaks out and decides the point!"

habito of a shepherdo with a litel musical instrumento in hiz hando. Az I looked upo him, he applied ito to hiza lipa, and began to play upo ito. . . . My hearto melted away in secreta rapturea.⁴

Only a few years ago an American projector set forth a new system that he had devised, called "Simplify-ed English." He wished to regularize the verbs, and gave as one of his paradigms: "I'm, you am, he am, we am, yous am, they am."⁵

As I look about at my colleagues, however, I see little evidence that they wish to make actual alterations in the language. It may be a temptation now and then, when one is obliged to explain some English irregularity to a student, but the feeling of "whatever is, is right" usually carries the day. The only exception I know of, among reputable workers, is that of Ogden and Richards, whose "Basic English" involved the reduction of English verbs to eighteen operators. They claimed that this was not an alteration of the language, for Mr. Richards has such literary skill that he could make his use of "Basic English" sound natural; but most people have agreed that the limitation is a most unnatural one.

THE SENSE of mission has been illustrated also by centuries of attempted spelling reform, and lifetimes of energy have been poured into it. A few years ago, while I was managing editor of *American Speech*, I attended a meeting of the Modern Language Association when a spelling reformer was there buttonholing people to gain support for her system. She was so persistent in importuning me to print her work in *American Speech* that I had to go into hiding for part of the sessions.

The attempt to regulate, purify, and "fix" a language has engaged the attention of many students, a linguistic academy often being suggested. For several centuries, both

⁴ Under the pen-name of Robert Heron, *Letters of Literature* (London, 1785), p. 255.

⁵ This was reported in an English newspaper (it would be!), by Lord Peterborough, in the London *Daily Telegraph*, as reprinted in the *English Digest*, October 1955, p. 68.

in England and America, there have been elaborate projects every few years. About a century ago, however, a new generation of linguists, led by William Dwight Whitney, Thomas R. Lounsbury, Brander Matthews, Jespersen, etc., changed the climate of scholarly opinion, so that "corruption" and "decay" were no longer feared. The puristic outlook has survived among the untrained, and one will still see outbursts like the following, from a letter to a popular magazine:

Outlawing the word "mutt" is much approved. I am a ninety-one-year-old gent. Been a "crank" most of my life on slang and other improper features of our language, which I hope will become world-wide and be kept pure. I'm especially anti to the words "got, going and oh, yeah," as in "I have got," "we are going to ask you," etc. "I'd, you'd, aren't I" and others are also on my list. I hope a million educators see my letter.⁶

The "old gent" certainly had a sense of mission, but linguists would call it misguided.

The sense of mission is also involved in the teaching of a language, and especially in the spreading of it to other countries. The spread of English began under the exuberance of the Elizabethan era. The spirit was well stated in 1599 by Samuel Daniel in his poem *Musophilus*:

And who, in time, knowes whither we may vent
 The treasure of our tongue, to what strange shores
 This gaine of our best glory shall be sent,
 T'inrich vnknowing Nations with our stores?
 What worlds in th' yet vnformed Occident
 May come refin'd with th' accents that are ours?⁷

But even the practice of teaching English abroad has been attacked. I still recall the shock that I had when I first encountered the phrase "linguistic imperialism." It was used in the early 1930's against Basic English when it first began

⁶ E. W. Farnsworth, of Sheldon, Iowa, in *Collier's*, December 6, 1947, p. 76.

⁷ "Musophilus," in *The Whole Workes of Samuel Daniel* (London, 1623), p. 100.

making headway. Are the dedicated American teaching teams who nowadays go abroad guilty of "linguistic imperialism"? This is hard for me to believe. However, we may recall that imperialism has devious ways, and even Christian missionaries have been accused of softening up a foreign country as a prelude to imperialistic incursions. Some of the oratory about the glorious future of English could be said to have sinister overtones. An example is the speech of James Buchanan, American minister in London, on April 6, 1854, two years before he became president. In response to a toast by the Earl of Ellesmere at a formal banquet, Buchanan spoke as follows:

Though not blessed with a poetic imagination, I look forward with confident hope to the day when the English language, which is the language of Christian, civil, and political freedom, will be the language of the larger portion of the habitable globe. No people speaking this language can ever become the willing instruments of despotic power. These great results, in the destiny of the future, are to be peacefully accomplished by the energy, enterprise, and indomitable perseverance of the British and American races.⁸

Perhaps this can be set aside as nothing but oratorical pomposity, but it does contain the seeds of imperialism.

THE PROBLEM of the expansion of the English language is complicated by the fact that two strong political entities, Britain and America, make use of it. For many generations American English occupied such a modest colonial position that it offered no real competition. The earliest indication that I have been able to find of an Englishman recognizing the threat of American English is from the year 1834. In that year an English traveler, Charles A. Murray, while at Burlington, Vermont, visited the University of Vermont, then a small place of one hundred students. He reported:

⁸ *The Works of James Buchanan, Comprising his Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence*, ed. J. B. Moore (Philadelphia, 1909-10), IX, 175.

I had little opportunity of talking with any of the students, but was informed that among them were three Germans come thither from Gottingen to study the English language! Is there nothing in this to rouse the attention of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Edinburgh, &c. that three young men, desirous of learning English, should find it expedient (from reasons of economy or other facilities) to travel between four and five thousand miles to a remote town in the interior of North America?⁹

About fifty years later, the teaching of American English met with great difficulty in Paris. In 1882 a minister's wife from Providence, Rhode Island, on a tour around the world, wrote home from Paris, as follows:

American-English is quite at a discount in Paris. I am told that it is an exceedingly difficult matter for an educated American girl to obtain a good situation to teach English in the Parisian capital. We are not so much to blame as the jealousy of our cousins, and their persistent effort to impress upon Continental people that Americans speak a corrupt dialect of the pure English. Parents, here, do not wish their children to learn either outlandish Zulu, or outlandish American.¹⁰

I think that the charge of linguistic imperialism cannot be substantiated with regard to teachers of English, no matter how strong their "sense of mission." They are fulfilling a demand that comes to them, and I have seen no evidence of a desire to dominate or to impose on others.

The urge to build international languages has engaged the sense of mission of many linguists, and the bibliography alone of the field is staggering. I have respect for the mountains of effort that have gone into this enterprise, but the artificiality of the results, compared with natural languages, is distasteful to me. I am chiefly impressed by the bitter rival-

⁹ Charles A. Murray, *Travels in North America* (New York, 1839), I, 72-73.

¹⁰ Lucy S. Bainbridge, *Round the World Letters* (Boston, 1882), p. 505.

ries and the waspish bickerings between the proponents of the different schemes. Little can be expected in this field, because the rivals can be counted on to kill each other off.

The enterprise of increasing literacy in all parts of the world seems beyond criticism. When faced with the fact that three-fifths of the human race is illiterate, we find the doctrine of "whatever is, is right" fading away completely. The career of Dr. Frank D. Laubach is a monument to what the sense of mission can accomplish.

I HAVE LEFT to the last the area in which my own sense of mission has its greatest intensity. I refer to the spreading of the insights that are commonly known by the name of the "Whorfian hypotheses." It seems to me that the most important benefit that linguistics has to offer is the awareness of the role of language in determining our perception of the event level of existence. In this outlook, language is not a garment or vehicle of ideas, but it is the very medium, the mechanism itself, by which human actions are produced.

The best way of showing this is to analyze typical social situations and to point out the linguistic factors at work. The example that I wish to present first is a newspaper dispatch from Chicago to the *New York Times*, when Chicago's subway was being installed.

The plight of elderly persons who are puzzled by the escalators in stations of Chicago's new subway was demonstrated last night by a woman about 65. She tried repeatedly to walk up a descending escalator at the Madison and Monroe station. Finally she managed to get up about six steps and, holding to the guard rails, kept pace with the escalator in treadmill fashion. A guard shouted to her to turn around. As the woman reached the bottom again, she collapsed. Revived after first-aid treatment, she said: "The old-fashioned stairways will suit me hereafter."¹¹

Here is a case, it seems to me, where a misevaluation was the result of the words whirling about in her head. She did not examine the event in front of her but followed the words

¹¹ *New York Times*, October 30, 1943, p. 30.

given to her by her culture. On seeing an escalator for the first time, she classified it as "stairs." She saw only what her language allowed her to see. She had known stairs all her life, and stairs are meant to be walked up. If she could have looked at the situation without the mediation of language, she could have seen that a channel of material coming downwards in her direction was not the proper means for going upwards. However, her language categorizing supervened over observation of the facts.

Although the "Whorfian hypotheses" have their most provocative statement in the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf in about 1940 and 1941,¹² forerunners can be pointed out from Wilhelm von Humboldt on, especially Edward Sapir in the 1920's and Alfred Korzybski in the early 1930's.¹³ A. F. Bentley found language to be the mainspring of human behavior, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, before his death in 1951, moved in the direction of linguistic analysis as the sole field of philosophy.

IT WOULD SEEM on the face of it that linguists ought to leap with enthusiasm to the acceptance of the Whorfian outlook, but as a matter of fact they have moved in a gingerly and cautious manner. Why should this be? I think that I can isolate three reasons.

In the first place it could too easily lead to the conclusion that one language is better than another, and of all notions regarding language that is most of all to be anathematized. Whorf seems to be saying that if Hopi has a segmentative category in its verb system, it is superior to other languages as a medium for observing nature. In his own words of 1936, "The Hopi actually have a language better equipped to deal with such vibratile phenomena than is our latest scientific

¹² Now available in his selected writings, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, ed. John B. Carroll (New York, 1956).

¹³ Korzybski's *Science and Sanity* of 1933 is supplemented by the important paper that he was working on when he died in 1950, "The Role of Language in the Perceptual Processes," in *Perception: An Approach to Personality*, ed. R. R. Blake and G. V. Ramsey (New York, 1951), pp. 170-205.

terminology.”¹⁴ But linguists are keenly aware that languages have remarkable compensatory mechanisms, and alleged deficiencies or alleged superiorities even themselves out in the long run. If the early Germanic dialects lacked a future tense, their speakers could talk about the future readily enough by the use of adverbs of time. Although a language can become enriched by the cultural experiences of its speakers, the basic categories of known languages are so much on a par that it is foolish to evaluate any language as intrinsically better than another. Linguists would take exception to the statement of one of America's leading sociologists, Alvin Johnson, concerning his native tongue: “The Danish is a simple, non-provocative language. It is a language in which you can speak the truth without offence, and can't speak a lie without detection.”¹⁵ How fortunate the Danes are!

In the second place, the Whorfian hypotheses are open to the danger of over-simplified application. It is all too easy to attribute cultural effects to some particular linguistic feature. For instance, when an English traveler, Major John Thornton, came to this country in 1850, he was distressed by the colloquial American use of the verb *to guess*, and he set down the following comments in his diary:

A parting word to brother Jonathan on the indiscriminate and unmeaning use of the word “*guess*.” To speak with ambiguity, when you can speak with certainty, is prejudicial to truth, and the best interests of mankind, and is a habit brother Jonathan would correct did he see its bearings with the eye of experience. The vague and ill defined use of the word “*guess*” embodies in it a dangerous principle inasmuch as people may go on to guess at every thing, and be certain of nothing. The expression “*I guess*” should never be used but in its true and proper sense, or otherwise it serves too well to aid the fraudulent, the false, and the malicious, by raising doubts and suspicions whenever a cheat wishes to mystify and confuse; by invariably using correct language

¹⁴ Whorf, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁵ *New School Bulletin*, V (February 16, 1948), 1.

we cut up "Humbug" by the roots, and promote the cause of truth and honesty.¹⁶

It is doubtful if the off-hand American "I guess so" will bear this much moralistic interpretation. Another sample of the too easy explanation is by a Japanese writer, Satoshi Ichiya. He has written:

When an Englishman finds himself in a predicament he says he is "in a hole," whereas the American in a similar situation will tell you he is "up a tree." The former seems to indicate English pessimism or fatalism rather, and the latter, American optimism, inasmuch as the man "up a tree" can at least cherish a hope that he will eventually escape from his dilemma into the clouds above.¹⁷

The strained nature of such interpretations has been well satirized by Joseph Greenberg in the sentence: "Because the sergeant barks at his men it does not follow that we feed him dog biscuits."¹⁸

IN THE THIRD PLACE, the Whorfian hypotheses can probably never be "proved" in any sense that is acceptable to logicians or indeed to ordinary users of the word. Linguistic features never appear in isolation; they are always part of a complex social situation, and the attempt to isolate any one feature is likely to fail. One can never be sure that any particular feature is the operative one.

In fact, the words "cause" and "effect" are too crude to describe what is going on. A field of characteristics transforms into another field of characteristics, and under such multi-causation, the change cannot be attributed to any one feature. A word altogether different from *cause* must be used, and I suggest that the verb *to coach* offers the best description of

¹⁶ Major John Thornton, *Diary of a Tour through the Northern States of the Union and Canada* (London, 1850), p. 119.

¹⁷ Satoshi Ichiya, "King's English" or "President's English"? (Kobe, Japan, 1933), p. 86.

¹⁸ *Language in Culture*, ed. Harry Hoiyer (Chicago, 1954), p. 13.

the relationship. That is, words, categories, patterns "coach" the behavioral responses in a culture. Sometimes the coachings are not strong enough to be effective; but such ever-present gentle pressures have a significant influence in the long run. Our behavior is nudged ahead, in one direction or another, by linguistic forms. A word or category will nudge us to do something rather than cause us to do something. People with the so-called "logical mind" may not approve of this type of approach, but if it represents the nature of the relationships they must work with, they will have to put up with it. A figure of speech used by Wittgenstein may be helpful here: "And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres."¹⁹

Another restatement of the Whorfian outlook would be this: all human evaluation as well as misevaluation takes place in the medium of language. That is, when people act, the segmentation of their universe and the relationships that they perceive in it are determined by the language they habitually use.

Let us look at a situation that arose during the last war. The following report appeared in an American paper:

This week an officer suggested to General MacArthur that the U.S. flag on Army headquarters was a fine marker for raiding airmen, suggested it be brought down. Said Douglas MacArthur: "Take every other normal precaution for protection of the headquarters, but let's keep the flag flying."²⁰

Linguistic analysis will make the issues plain in such a situation. A piece of cloth is transformed into a flag by language and by language alone, and a considerable emotional dimension has been built up in the use of it. But could not General MacArthur have equally as well said, in a ringing, impressive voice: "Fly the flag when it is safe to do so, but let's

¹⁹ *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), p. 32.

²⁰ *Time*, December 22, 1941, p. 18.

keep headquarters functioning!" Now does linguistics offer a basis for a choice between the two decisions? The answer is a clear no, for linguistics can offer only clarification of issues and not ultimate goals. These goals must be supplied from some other source.

In order to find them, it is possible to take a larger base, beyond linguistics, and to ask "What is the nature of man?" The asking of this question has resulted, in one attempt, in the larger discipline called "general semantics," as formulated by Alfred Korzybski, and the basic answer he found is the assumption that it is the nature of man to try to survive. Thus "survival value" is the fundamental criterion by which behavior can be judged. On this base he elaborated a system that made use of the full range of science to achieve the optimum development of human potentialities.

Some people may prefer to accept their goals from the maxims handed down in their culture or from the assumptions of the religion they have espoused. While linguistics itself does not offer criteria for ethical judgment, its clarifications are so freeing, the enlightenment it yields is so stimulating, that one's sense of mission has ample scope for the dedication of a lifetime.

Throughout this article I have posed a contradiction between the sense of mission and the doctrine "whatever is, is right." Must we leave this as an unresolved paradox? I think we need not do so. When we examine the words "whatever is" we see that they seem to refer to a static quality, whereas the world we live in is constantly changing, is ever in flux. The phrase "whatever is" must be accepted then at a higher lever of abstraction, to include the ever-changing process-world. Would it not, in the long run, even include the sense of mission? Furthermore, it may be that the sense of mission, at its best, is co-terminous with living itself, and the linguist who has it is merely a warm human being, responding to the problems that attract him.