

THE GRAMMARIAN AND HIS LANGUAGE

BY EDWARD SAPIR

THE normal man of intelligence has something of a contempt for linguistic studies, convinced as he is that nothing can well be more useless. Such minor usefulness as he concedes to them is of a purely instrumental nature. French is worth studying because there are French books that are worth reading. Greek is worth studying—if it is—because a few plays and a few passages of verse, written in that curious and extinct vernacular, have still the power to disturb our hearts—if indeed they have. For the rest, there are excellent translations.

Now, it is a notorious fact that the linguist is not necessarily very deeply interested in the abiding things that language has done for us. He handles languages very much as the zoölogist handles dogs. The zoölogist examines the dog carefully, then he dissects him in order to examine him still more carefully, and finally, noting resemblances between him and his cousins, the wolf and the fox, and differences between him and his more distant relations, the cat and the bear, he assigns him his place in the evolutionary scheme of animated nature, and has done. Only as a polite visitor, not as a zoölogist, is he even mildly interested in Towzer's sweet parlor tricks, however fully he may recognize the fact that these tricks could never have evolved unless the dog had evolved first. To return to the philologist and the layman by whom he is judged, it is a precisely parallel indifference to the beauty wrought by the instrument which nettles the judge. And yet the cases are not altogether parallel. When Towzer has performed his tricks and when Ponto has saved the drowning

man's life, they relapse, it is true, into the status of mere dog—but even the zoölogist's dog is of interest to all of us. But when Achilles has bewailed the death of his beloved Patroclus and Clytæmnestra has done her worst, what are we to do with the Greek aorists that are left on our hands? There is a traditional mode of procedure which arranges them into patterns. It is called grammar. The man who is in charge of grammar and is called a grammarian is regarded by all plain men as a frigid and dehumanized pedant.

It is not difficult to understand the very pallid status of linguistics in America. The purely instrumental usefulness of language study is recognized, of course, but there is not and cannot be in this country that daily concern with foreign modes of expression that is so natural on the continent of Europe, where a number of languages jostle each other in every-day life. In the absence of a strong practical motive for linguistic pursuits the remoter, more theoretical, motives are hardly given the opportunity to flower. But it would be a profound mistake to ascribe our current indifference to philological matters entirely to the fact that English alone serves us well enough for all practical purposes. There is something about language itself, or rather about linguistic differences, that offends the American spirit. That spirit is rationalistic to the very marrow of its bone. Consciously, if not unconsciously, we are inclined to impatience with any object or idea or system of things which cannot give a four-square reckoning of itself in terms of reason and purpose. We see this spirit pervading our whole scientific out-

look. If psychology and sociology are popular sciences in America today, that is mainly due to the prevailing feeling that they are convertible into the cash values of effective education, effective advertising, and social betterment. Even here, there is, to the American, something immoral about a psychological truth which will not do pedagogical duty, something wasteful about a sociological item which can be neither applied nor condemned. If we apply this rationalistic test to language, it is found singularly wanting. After all, language is merely a lever to get thoughts "across." Our business instinct tells us that the multiplication of levers, all busy on the same job, is poor economy. Thus, one way of "spitting it out" becomes as good as another. If other nationalities find themselves using other levers, that is their affair. The fact of language, in other words, is an unavoidable irrelevance, not a problem to intrigue the inquiring mind.

II

There are two ways, it seems, to give linguistics its requisite dignity as a science. It may be treated as history or it may be studied descriptively and comparatively as form. Neither point of view augurs well for the arousing of American interest. History has always to be something else before it is taken seriously. Otherwise it is "mere" history. If we could show that certain general linguistic changes are correlated with stages of cultural evolution, we would come appreciably nearer securing linguistics a hearing, but the slow modifications that eat into the substance and the form of speech, and that gradually remold it entirely do not seem to run parallel to any scheme of cultural evolution yet proposed. Since "biological" or evolutionary history is the only kind of history for which we have a genuine respect, the history of language is left out in the cold as another one of those unnecessary sequences of events which German erudition is in the habit of worrying about.

But before pinning our faith to linguistics as an exploration into form, we might cast an appealing glance at the psychologist, for he is likely to prove a useful ally. He has himself looked into the subject of language, which he finds to be a kind of "behavior," a rather specialized type of functional adaptation, yet not so specialized but that it may be declared to be a series of laryngeal habits. We may go even further, if we select the right kind of psychologist to help us, and have thought itself put in its place as a merely "subvocal laryngeating." If these psychological contributions to the study of the nature of speech do not altogether explain the Greek aorists bequeathed to us by classical poets, they are at any rate very flattering to philology. Unfortunately the philologist cannot linger long with the psychologist's rough and ready mechanisms. They may make shift for an introduction to his science, but his real problems are such as few psychologists have clearly envisaged, though it is not unlikely that psychology may have much to say about them when it has gained strength and delicacy. The psychological problem which most interests the linguist is that of the inner structure of language, in terms of unconscious psychic processes, not that of the individual's adaptation to this traditionally conserved structure. It goes without saying, however, that the two problems are not independent of each other.

To say in so many words that the noblest task of linguistics is to understand language as form rather than as function or as historical process is not to say that it can be understood as form alone. The formal configuration of speech at any particular time and place is the result of a long and complex historical development, which, in turn, is unintelligible without constant reference to functional factors. Form is even more liable to be stigmatized as "mere" than the historical process which shapes it. For our characteristically pragmatic American attitude, forms in themselves seem to have little or no reality, and it is for this

reason that we so often fail to divine them or to realize into what new patterns ideas and institutions are balancing themselves or tending to do so. Now, it is very probable that the poise which goes with culture is largely due to the habitual appreciation of the formal outlines and formal intricacies of experience. Where life is tentative and experimental, where ideas and sentiments are constantly protruding gaunt elbows out of an inherited stock of meagre, inflexible patterns, instead of graciously bending them to their own uses, form is necessarily felt as a burden and a tyranny instead of the gentle embrace it should be. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the lack of culture in America is in some way responsible for the unpopularity of linguistic studies, for these demand at one and the same time an intense appreciation of a given form of expression and a readiness to accept a great variety of possible forms.

The outstanding fact about any language is its formal completeness. This is as true of a primitive language, like Eskimo or Hottentot, as it is of the carefully recorded and standardized languages of our great cultures. By "formal completeness" I mean a profoundly significant peculiarity which is easily overlooked. Each language has a well defined and exclusive phonetic system with which it carries on its work and, more than that, all of its expressions, from the most habitual to the merely potential, are fitted into a deft tracery of prepared forms from which there is no escape. These forms establish a definite relational feeling or attitude towards all possible contents of expression and, through them, towards all possible contents of experience, in so far, of course, as experience is capable of expression in linguistic terms. To put this matter of the formal completeness of speech in somewhat different words, we may say that a language is so constructed that no matter what any speaker of it may desire to communicate, no matter how original or bizarre his idea or his fancy, the language is prepared to do his work. He will never need to create new forms or to force

upon his language a new formal orientation—unless, poor man, he is haunted by the form-feeling of another language and is subtly driven to the unconscious distortion of the one speech-system on the analogy of the other.

The world of linguistic forms, held within the framework of a given language, is a complete system of reference, very much as a number system is a complete system of quantitative reference or as a set of geometrical axes of coördinates is a complete system of reference to all points of a given space. The mathematical analogy is by no means as fanciful as it appears to be. To pass from one language to another is psychologically parallel to passing from one geometrical system of reference to another. The environing world which is referred to is the same for either language; the world of points is the same in either frame of reference. But the formal method of approach to the expressed item of experience, as to the given point of space, is so different that the resulting feeling of orientation can be the same neither in the two languages nor in the two frames of reference. Entirely distinct, or at least measurably distinct, formal adjustments have to be made and these differences have their psychological correlates.

Formal completeness has nothing to do with the richness or the poverty of the vocabulary. It is sometimes convenient or, for practical reasons, necessary for the speakers of a language to borrow words from foreign sources as the range of their experience widens. They may extend the meanings of words which they already possess, create new words out of native resources on the analogy of existing terms, or take over from another people terms to apply to the new conceptions which they are introducing. None of these processes affects the form of the language, any more than the enriching of a certain portion of space by the introduction of new objects affects the geometrical form of that region as defined by an accepted mode of reference. It would be absurd to say that Kant's

"Critique of Pure Reason" could be rendered forthwith into the unfamiliar accents of Eskimo or Hottentot, and yet it would be absurd in but a secondary degree. What is really meant is that the culture of these primitive folk has not advanced to the point where it is of interest to them to form abstract conceptions of a philosophical order. But it is not absurd to say that there is nothing in the formal peculiarities of Hottentot or of Eskimo which would obscure the clarity or hide the depth of Kant's thought—indeed, it may be suspected that the highly synthetic and periodic structure of Eskimo would more easily bear the weight of Kant's terminology than his native German. Further, to move to a more positive vantage point, it is not absurd to say that both Hottentot and Eskimo possess all the formal apparatus that is required to serve as matrix for the expression of Kant's thought. If these languages have not the requisite Kantian vocabulary, it is not the languages that are to be blamed but the Eskimos and Hottentots themselves. The languages as such are quite hospitable to the addition of a philosophic load to their lexical stock-in-trade.

The unsophisticated natives, having no occasion to speculate on the nature of causation, have probably no word that adequately translates our philosophic term *causation*, but this shortcoming is purely and simply a matter of vocabulary and of no interest whatever from the standpoint of linguistic form. From this standpoint the term *causation* is merely one out of an indefinite number of examples illustrating a certain pattern of expression. Linguistically—in other words, as regards form-feeling—*causation* is merely a particular way of expressing the notion of "act of causing," the idea of a certain type of action conceived of as a thing, an entity. Now the form-feeling of such a word as *causation* is perfectly familiar to Eskimo and to hundreds of other primitive languages. They have no difficulty in expressing the idea of a certain activity, say "laugh" or "speak" or "run," in terms of

an entity, say *laughter* or *speech* or *running*. If the particular language under consideration cannot readily adapt itself to this type of expression, what it can do is to resolve all contexts in which such forms are used in other languages into other formal patterns that eventually do the same work. Hence, "laughter is pleasurable," "it is pleasant to laugh," "one laughs with pleasure," and so on *ad infinitum*, are functionally equivalent expressions, but they canalize into entirely distinct form-feelings. All languages are set to do all the symbolic and expressive work that language is good for, either actually or potentially. The formal technique of this work is the secret of each language.

It is very important to get some notion of the nature of this form-feeling, which is implicit in all language, however bewilderingly at variance its actual manifestations may be in different types of speech. There are many knotty problems here—and curiously elusive ones—that it will require the combined resources of the linguist, the logician, the psychologist, and the critical philosopher to clear up for us. There is one important matter that we must now dispose of. If the Eskimo and the Hottentot have no adequate notion of what we mean by causation, does it follow that their languages are incapable of expressing the causative relation? Certainly not. In English, in German, and in Greek we have certain formal linguistic devices for passing from the primary act or state to its causative correspondent, e.g. English *to fall*, *to fell*, "to cause to fall"; *wide*, *to widen*; German *hangen*, "to hang, be suspended"; *hängen*, "to hang, cause to be suspended"; Greek *phero*, "to carry"; *phoreo*, "to cause to carry." Now this ability to feel and express the causative relation is by no manner of means dependent on the ability to conceive of causality as such. The latter ability is conscious and intellectual in character; it is laborious, like most conscious processes, and it is late in developing. The former ability is unconscious and non-intellectual in character, exercises itself

with great rapidity and with the utmost ease, and develops early in the life of the race and of the individual. We have therefore no theoretical difficulty in finding that conceptions and relations which primitive folk are quite unable to master on the conscious plane are being unconsciously expressed in their languages—and, frequently, with the utmost nicety. As a matter of fact, the causative relation, which is expressed only fragmentarily in our modern European languages, is in many primitive languages rendered with an absolutely philosophic relentlessness. In Nootka, an Indian language of Vancouver Island, there is no verb or verb form which has not its precise causative counterpart.

Needless to say, I have chosen the concept of causality solely for the sake of illustration, not because I attach an especial linguistic importance to it. Every language, we may conclude, possesses a complete and psychologically satisfying formal orientation, but this orientation is only felt in the unconscious of its speakers—is not actually, that is, consciously, known by them.

III

Our current psychology does not seem altogether adequate to explain the formation and transmission of such submerged formal systems as are disclosed to us in the languages of the world. It is usual to say that isolated linguistic responses are learned early in life and that, as these harden into fixed habits, formally analogous responses are made, when the need arises, in a purely mechanical manner, specific precedents pointing the way to new responses. We are sometimes told that these analogous responses are largely the result of reflection on the utility of the earlier ones, directly learned from the social environment. Such methods of approach see nothing in the problem of linguistic form beyond what is involved in the more and more accurate control of a certain set of muscles towards a desired end, say the hammering of a nail. I can only believe that explanations of

this type are seriously incomplete and that they fail to do justice to a certain innate striving for formal elaboration and expression and to an unconscious patterning of sets of related elements of experience.

The kind of mental processes that I am now referring to are, of course, of that compelling and little understood sort for which the name "intuition" has been suggested. Here is a field which psychology has barely touched but which it cannot ignore indefinitely. It is precisely because psychologists have not greatly ventured into these difficult reaches that they have so little of interest to offer in explanation of all those types of mental activity which lead to the problem of form, such as language, music, and mathematics. We have every reason to surmise that languages are the cultural deposits, as it were, of a vast and self-completing network of psychic processes which still remain to be clearly defined for us. Probably most linguists are convinced that the language-learning process, particularly the acquisition of a feeling for the formal set of the language, is very largely unconscious and involves mechanisms that are quite distinct in character from either sensation or reflection. There is doubtless something deeper about our feeling for form than even the majority of art theorists have divined, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that, as psychological analysis becomes more refined, one of the greatest values of linguistic study will be in the unexpected light it may throw on the psychology of intuition, this "intuition" being perhaps nothing more nor less than the "feeling" for relations.

There is no doubt that the critical study of language may also be of the most curious and unexpected helpfulness to philosophy. Few philosophers have deigned to look into the morphologies of primitive languages nor have they given the structural peculiarities of their own speech more than a passing and perfunctory attention. When one has the riddle of the universe on one's hands, such pursuits seem trivial enough, yet when it begins to be

suspected that at least *some* solutions of the great riddle are elaborately round-about applications of the rules of Latin or German or English grammar, the triviality of linguistic analysis becomes less certain. To a far greater extent than the philosopher has realized, he is likely to become the dupe of his speech-forms, which is equivalent to saying that the mould of his thought, which is typically a linguistic mould, is apt to be projected into his conception of the world. Thus innocent linguistic categories may take on the formidable appearance of cosmic absolutes. If only, therefore, to save himself from philosophic verbalism, it would be well for the philosopher to look critically to the linguistic foundations and limitations of his thought. He would then be spared the humiliating discovery that many new ideas, many apparently brilliant philosophic conceptions, are little more than rearrangements of familiar words in formally satisfying patterns. In their recently published work on "The Meaning of Meaning" Messrs. Ogden and Richards have done philosophy a signal service in indicating how readily the most hard-headed thinkers have allowed themselves to be cajoled by the formal slant of their habitual mode of expression. Perhaps the best way to get behind our thought processes and to eliminate from them all the accidents or irrelevances due to their linguistic garb is to plunge into the study of exotic modes of expression. At any rate, I know of no better way to kill spurious "entities."

This brings us to the nature of language as a symbolic system, a method of referring to all possible types of experience. The natural or, at any rate, the naïve thing is to assume that when we wish to communicate a certain idea or impression, we make something like a rough and rapid inventory of the objective elements and relations involved in it, that such an inventory or analysis is quite inevitable, and that our linguistic task consists merely of the finding of the particular words and groupings of words that correspond to the terms of

the objective analysis. Thus, when we observe an object of the type that we call a "stone" moving through space towards the earth, we involuntarily analyze the phenomenon into two concrete notions, that of a stone and that of an act of falling, and, relating these two notions to each other by certain formal methods proper to English, we declare that "the stone falls." We assume, naïvely enough, that this is about the only analysis that can properly be made. And yet, if we look into the way that other languages take to express this very simple kind of impression, we soon realize how much may be added to, subtracted from, or rearranged in our own form of expression without materially altering our report of the physical fact.

In German and in French we are compelled to assign "stone" to a gender category—perhaps the Freudians can tell us why this object is masculine in the one language, feminine in the other—; in Chippewa we cannot express ourselves without bringing in the apparently irrelevant fact that a stone is an inanimate object. If we find gender beside the point, the Russians may wonder why we consider it necessary to specify in every case whether a stone, or any other object, for that matter, is conceived in a definite or an indefinite manner, why the difference between "the stone" and "a stone" matters. "Stone falls" is good enough for Lenin, as it was good enough for Cicero. And if we find barbarous the neglect of the distinction as to definiteness, the Kwakiutl Indian of British Columbia may sympathize with us but wonder why we do not go a step further and indicate in some way whether the stone is visible or invisible to the speaker at the moment of speaking and whether it is nearest to the speaker, the person addressed, or some third party. "That would no doubt sound fine in Kwakiutl, but we are too busy!" And yet we insist on expressing the singularity of the falling object, where the Kwakiutl Indian, differing from the Chippewa, can generalize and make a statement which would apply

equally well to one or several stones. Moreover, he need not specify the time of the fall. The Chinese get on with a minimum of explicit formal statement and content themselves with a frugal "stone fall."

These differences of analysis, one may object, are merely formal; they do not invalidate the necessity of the fundamental concrete analysis of the situation into "stone" and what the stone does, which in this case is "fall." But this necessity, which we feel so strongly, is an illusion. In the Nootka language the combined impression of a stone falling is quite differently analyzed. The stone need not be specifically referred to, but a single word, a verb form, may be used which is in practice not essentially more ambiguous than our English sentence. This verb form consists of two main elements, the first indicating general movement or position of a stone or stone-like object, while the second refers to downward direction. We can get some hint of the feeling of the Nootka word if we assume the existence of an intransitive verb "to stone," referring to the position or movement of a stone-like object. Then our sentence, "the stone falls," may be reassembled into something like "it stones down." In this type of expression the thing-quality of the stone is implied in the generalized verbal element "to stone," while the specific kind of motion which is given us in experience when a stone falls is conceived as separable into a generalized notion of the movement of a class of objects and a more specific one of direction. In other words, while Nootka has no difficulty whatever in describing the fall of a stone, it has no verb that truly corresponds to our *fall*.

It would be possible to go on indefinitely with such examples of incommensurable analyses of experience in different languages. The upshot of it all would be to make very real to us a kind of relativity that is generally hidden from us by our naïve acceptance of fixed habits of speech as guides to an objective understanding of the nature of experience. This is the relativity of concepts or, as it might be called, the relativity of the form of thought. It is not so difficult to grasp as the physical relativity of Einstein nor is it as disturbing to our sense of security as the psychological relativity of Jung, which is barely beginning to be understood, but it is perhaps more readily evaded than these. For its understanding the comparative data of linguistics are a *sine qua non*. It is the appreciation of the relativity of the form of thought which results from linguistic study that is perhaps the most liberalizing thing about it. What fetters the mind and benumbs the spirit is ever the dogged acceptance of absolutes.

To a certain type of mind linguistics has also that profoundly serene and satisfying quality which inheres in mathematics and in music and which may be described as the creation out of simple elements of a self-contained universe of forms. Linguistics has neither the sweep nor the instrumental power of mathematics, nor has it the universal æsthetic appeal of music. But under its crabbed, technical, appearance there lies hidden the same classical spirit, the same freedom in restraint, which animates mathematics and music at their purest. This spirit is antagonistic to the romanticism which is rampant in America today and which debauches so much of our science with its frenetic desire.