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ON LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

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A language, Aesop is said to have observed, is the best and worst of things. The attitude must be contagious; for it is also characteristic of linguists. In founding modern linguistics (or at least its European variety) Saussure at the same time sealed its fate, by confusing a language with grammar. In other words, he confused the institution with something which, in the present writer's view, is entirely different; namely, signification. Worse still, he explained each in terms of the other. For he adduced its arbitrary variability as a demonstration of the formal impropriety of structure and, at the same time, made the cohesive systematicity of structure into the defining principle of synchrony . In short, Saussure is the composer of that 'hesitation waltz' to which — with all due neutrality, but intending nonetheless eventually to resolve the problem — the title of this journal alludes: between language and communication.

In this title, I might add, although it may sound paradoxical, the element to note is the conjunction. For although there are many linguists and sociologists who are interested in both language and communication, and perhaps even more who simply equate the two, there are in the final analysis very few who pose clearly the fundamental question of the connexion between language and communication.

The current situation may be summarized as follows. Some theorists - the majority at the present time - try to reduce everything, including the unconscious, to language. One can hardly be surprised that in their terminology the word signification bas become more or less devoid of meaning. For others, on the contrary, language tends to be seen as nothing but the superstructure of a system of exchange with an essentially economic basis. For them, language will never ('idealism' apart) be explained by any other laws than those of history, conceived of as the source of all rationality, The mistake they all make is to oversimplify for the sake of preserving uniformity, which may be philosophically satisfying but leads to scientific fantasy. For humanity, like the Devil, is legion. The logic which supports thought is not to be confused with the technique which transforms our exertions into work, nor with the ethnicity which makes us persons, nor with the ethics which restricts our desires and makes us free agents. These are all different ways of being human, and they are pathologically separable ways. No single one of them has priority over any other. The value of each lies only in its relations to the rest.

For this reason, I personally no more believe in Language or in Communication than chemists nowadays believe in Air, Water, Earth or Fire; but only in the interaction of the various processes which formally constitute them, and for which, failing any other method of verification, clinical research provides an authentic experimental field. Otherwise, any debate about language would be likely to remain purely academic for a long time to come. On the other hand, one thing which clinical research has 1ready undermined is the right so lightly assumed today to treat language as a matter of communication, or at least to view almost exclusively from that point of view man's capacity to produce and receive what is

called 'information'. It has become commonplace to speak of codes and vectors, of encoding and decoding, as if linguistics could be reduced to the theory of information. and sociolinguistics to the theory of communication. On the assumption that the main thing is improving transmission, a maximum of scientificity is thought to be achieved by focussing much upon the mechanisms of reception or production as upon the processes of normalization of the code or the permeability of circuits.

To this apparent assimilation, three objections may be made. (1) Even if the model proposed may, strictly, be applied to language insofar as language falls within the province of semiotics (that branch of sociology which treats verbal exchanges on the same basis as any other exchange of information), it cannot nevertheless define language because it is not specific to language. (2) The ability to communicate is retained by aphasics even in the absence of one or other of the grammatical capacities, Thus the fluency characteristic of Wernicke's aphasia or the agrammatism of Broca's aphasia may be regarded less as symptoms of the affliction than as means found by the patient to try to transmit the maximum of information by the linguistically reduced channel still available. (3) It is quite circular to attempt to explain man by resource under the guise of cybernetics, to a logic of which man himself is the author, While it is understandable that the engineer should look at language as performance in order to devise an algebra which machines can cope with, it is much more important for the doctor or the therapist to be able to identify the modalities of capacity whose deficiencies he is trying to remedy. As for the linguist, it is the capacity itself which constitutes his proper domain of inquiry.

It has long been held that the essential characteristic of language resided in the simultaneous conveyance of two kinds of information: perceptual information in the shape of sound, evoking by conventional and symbolic means intellectual information or meaning. And, granted belief in universals, one sees how natural it seemed to abandon meaning to the wiles of philosophers, in order to concentrate attention scientifically upon sound. Hence it came about in linguistics that phonetics long took precedence over semantics. For the same reason, after the Saussurean revolution, Trubetzkoy's phonology becomes the paragon of semiology which like Venus Anadyomene, never quite emerges.

Yet sound, for one thing, is not fundamentally linked to language. There is every reason to suppose that the deaf, who have no problem with grammaticality, would have invented some other way of communicating if left to their own devices, One wonders whether they may Dot be the victims rather than the beneficiaries of the concerted efforts of families and educationalists to integrate them into a world from which they remain irremediably excluded. Swimming breast-stroke is not a mode of locomotion intended for people with no arms. Un the other hand, it is clear that connecting sound and meaning is not beyond the reach of animals, and survives even the worst disintegration of language in the case of aphasics. The conversational abilities of the dolphin continue to provide subject-matter for discussion. Even the most dim-witted of dogs, when told to 'shake a paw', rarely shakes his tail by mistake; and the parrot has sometimes been known to put in an opposite word or two. Nonetheless, these animals do not have access to language, any more than the patient who can identify an object but cannot name it: or the woman who, at a loss to produce her husband's name, asked him: 'Charles, what's your name?'

So, far from being merely a carrier of information, language is in fact a capacity for creating it; or better still, of handling it. This is done by means of models we have within us, constituting what may be called a grammar. That is something no animal has ever possessed,

and it is what, in some measure or other, the aphasic lacks. Like the mathematician each and speaker engages authentically in formalization through the very fact that he divides the continuity of substances, both of meaning and of sound, into the forms of phonemes and words, That is not to say that the phoneme is not sound, nor that the lexical content is not meaning; but the form cannot be reduced to its overt manifestations. Form belongs to a qualitatively distinct mode of existence, which is aptly termed 'differential', since in the realm of structure it is difference alone which constitutes form. To produce a message is not to reproduce anything, but to construct something. To grasp a message, on the other hand, is not merely to apprehend but to comprehend, in virtue of a dual capacity, which merges in the case of Wernicke's or Broca's aphasia, but which allows the normal person to classify and distribute the sound, as well as to deduce and produce the meaning. These are questions of *taxonomic capacity* and *generative capacity* respectively.

That does not mean, of course, that language and structure coincide. To suppose they did would be not only to fall theoretically into the trap of a formalism we reject in practice, but also to fail to acknowledge the conjunction inherent dialectically in every product of human analysis. Grammar, in other words, which spontaneously handles information for us, does Dot dispense us — far from it — from having to make the participant's necessary contribution to both the elaboration and the interpretation of messages. What a language says for us is not the same as what we say rhetorically, through the language. The language is the instrument we have available for working in sound and meaning. Our debt to performance is readily appreciated by comparing the mass of information derivable from an adequate phonetic capacity with the curious robot-like speech of the deaf, which presents what one might call phonology without speech. The same is true where words are concerned. Few would dispute that one can speak English and yet not know what *to be sent to Coventry* means. But it comes as a surprise to have it pointed out that in interpreting an everyday message like 'Can you ring her back?' , nothing apart from usage and past experience rules out 'Can you encircle her rear surface?' . Or that 'He made the bed' leaves it open whether one is talking about a domestically well trained husband or a furniture maker. Or that the word *operation* does not in itself tell us whether it is a question of tactics, arithmetic, banking or surgery. Quite apart from the fact that on a particular occasion there need be no conflict between the meanings, it requires a context to decide between them; failing which, as Boris Vian has so neatly demonstrated, signification and punning are indistinguishable. So the language-user is only aware of the struggle waged on behalf of sound against the polysemy of the signifier and on behalf of meaning against the polysemy of what is signified. Unfortunately, this is also the attitude of certain contemporary linguists, who take the language-user's side and believe they can solve his problems with the assistance of information theory. The flourishing growth of tree structures, the cleverness of rewriting rules, and the undeniable ingenuity of transformations differ only in degree from the procedures employed by the most ordinary of language-users. What used to be reported once upon a time by saying that the swallows were flying low tells us roughly the same as what is more likely to be expressed nowadays in terms of cyclones and anticyclones. The deceptive impression conveyed in the formulations preferred by today's linguists has to do with the fact that they tell us much less about ourselves than about the capacities of our machines. If it is important for our machines that the struggle mentioned above should be pursued to a successful conclusion, for us on the contrary it must be waged unsuccessfully or al least prolonged. Unless anyone would prefer a Chomsky to deliver us not only from the problems of ambiguity, but from the necessity of thinking altogether.

If it is not true that language is merely a matter of calling a spade a spade it must be admitted that language is not merely a matter of communicating either. Perhaps melons are made for family meals after all. But this can hardly be the case for language, which appears in the guise of a great diversity of languages, presenting as much an obstacle to communication as a channel for it.

One would not wish to deny that this is attributable for most part to historical accidents of the kind which historians formerly attempted to explain. There is no question of refusing to admit the success and ingenuity of the research which, step by step, layer by layer, gradually and patiently pieced together, from the last century onwards, the scattered fragments of a vast historical linguistic jigsaw. The fact that this puzzle has a shape which fits our own frontiers is no mere chance, but a feature characteristic of civilization. The issue here must be seen as one of the principles, insofar as it was the lack of any concept of the ethnic mediation of the human being or of society which led to a search for behaviourist and mechanistic model of human development, and thus to a denial of its uniqueness.

A too mechanistic conception of languages meant that their evolution was seen as a deterioration which some saw as parochialism, and others as loss of energy. Not a great deal had changed between the ancient myth of Babel and the modern myth of entropy. Although intermediate states might not be entirely rules out by champions of the force of *intercourse* or of *wave theory*, these were regarded as fortuitous and fragmentary, however numerous they turned out to be. The notion of substratum, adstratum and superstratum derive their meaning from geology. Too often one is left with the impression that what counted was the survival of the material, rather than the use made of it. The identity is the identity of one and the same piece of cloth, irrespective of whether what used to be the eldest childs's jacket has now been made into a piece of trousers for the youngest. Since the linear continuity of transmission and diffusion seemed self-perpetuating, it was inevitable that any interruptions should appear to be catastrophes of some kind, and that qui quite botanical classification of languages should take priority over the classification of communication processes. It is rather as if communication were immediately given, and not the result of an effort made by men to go beyond the limits which men themselves have established. By the same token, form is not to be conceived of as inherent in the linguistic object described, but as the result of an effort of description. The only guarantee of any descriptive 'formalism' lies in the universals which are set up by the descriptive analyst for his particular purposes. Thus every comparativist believes he has the more or less unchallengeable right to distinguish and enumerate whatever dialects his comparison requires. Comparative grammar in this respect reminds one of the sacrament of marriage. Just as priests give their blessings to x-what they cannot prevent, so historical linguists cannot but recognize breaks in the thread of history, which they deplore, in their very endeavours to reconstitute that unbroken continuity they long for. Unfortunately, generativists and genealogists alike are only too prone to fail to distinguish their own stemmata, diachronic or logical, from properties of the universe, which they take to be thereby explained. But no explanation at all can be derived from referring man back to his own forefathers, or to his own works. That form of 'reference back' is merely self-reference; for man is himself the source of his sources and the model for his models.

In short, if circularity is to be avoided, a change of methods is required. It seems that the time has come to try to carry through the kind of epistemological revolution for the study of languages that Saussure launched in respect of glossology, and thereby demonstrate that

structuralism properly understood is not a rejection of history, but the foundation of history, What makes the English language English is not to be confused with what makes it language. Clinica1 studies serve as a constant reminder of the necessity for first separating out, if one wishes to juxtapose the two scientifically, the logical impropriety of the sign from the linguistic reflexion of ethnic arbitrariness of the person: or, rather, the grammatical analysis of representation from the sociolinguistic analysis of the specific uniformity of its vocalization. Just as it took the mathematical naivety of a Chomsky to attempt to resolve the ambiguities which make us think, so there is no reason to hope, pace Jakobson, that any reduction of our misunderstandings could ever eliminate from our ex changes the 'interference' which we ourselves create. We can only go on endlessly trying to overcome the contradictions involved, without ever ultimately reaching mutual understanding. The difference between the schizophrenic and the normal person is simply that the schizophrenic develops a form of autism which the normal person would find it impossible to reconcile himself to.

For we characterize ourselves by our language as well as communicating through it. Hence the definition of a language (which is always provisional in any case, and essentially a political question) lacks positive content: it will vary according to the language in question, and is only at any given time or place or state a system of differences. Consequently, there is no point in those quasi-metaphysical strategies which resort to deep or distant structures, since it will always be impossible to recapture from live actuality the process by which our cultural ontology comes to be contingently manifest. That is why communication, which elsewhere is a process of osmosis or contagion, is problematic only for man, given that it is the product (and not merely as regards language) of a social bifurcation historically transcended. And since there is no question of mistaking either a language or what some call an 'idiolect' for a thing, it goes without saying that what holds macroscopically for the one holds also microscopically for the other: that is to say, that a coherent theory of translation must give also an account of the mechanisms underlying all our interactions. To make of 'conversation' a concept, even pragmatically, amounts to reification.

It thus emerges why it is necessary to substitute for the famous Saussurean dichotomy between langue and parole a pair of dichotomies: namely between Grammar and Rhetoric, on the one hand, and between Idiom and Interlocution on the other. These two dialects intersect, it is true. Every language involves grammar, and all grammar bears a name. But nonetheless it remains the case that not everything which is semiologically significable and hence semantically conceivable is socially acceptable, in spite of the efforts of generative theorists to squeeze everything on to a single scale of grammaticality. The traditional grammarians were right to insist on distinguishing regularity from usage, except that they failed to recognize exceptions to rules as due not merely to chance but to the intrusion of a different order of rationality. There is no rule which stops us saying in French *vous disez* rather than *vous dites*, but only usage. That is why such an 'error' remains comprehensible. But one has to learn that there are people who say not *vous dites but you say*: that kind of fact is unpredictable.

Deductibility and acceptability, in short, are governed by two different principles, culturally distinct. One defines language, while the other actualizes language. It is the latter which concerns sociolinguistics, conceived as being neither merely an account of the 'social life' of words, nor a simple inventory of variations in the language of the community. Sociolinguistics is not just an ancillary study, but an entire linguistic discipline, just as glossology is, But its viewpoint is different. It concerns itself with what is socially sanctioned

and with how meaning is accordingly shared. 'The question,' as Humpty Dumpty observed, 'is which is to be the master — that's all!'

An analytic process of decomposition which splits language up into its different aspects, apart from being authenticated by clinical studies, affords the linguist a safeguard against two currently dangerous oversimplifications. One is an idealized treatment of meaning, characteristic of generativism, the other, more typically pragmatic, is a positivistic pulverization of form. Standing mid-way between these two excesses, such a decomposition respects the kind of reality to which it affords access; that is, a reality of which the 'abstraction' owes less, in the human sciences, to the scientist's intervention than to the nature of the object scientifically explored.