Part I

Popular ideas about language

The cultural diversity of language, as reflected in exchanges between medieval merchants, the imposing dome of the French Academy building in Paris, and a customary debate among three men of Irian Jaya

Why does language provide such a fascinating object of study? Perhaps because of its unique role in capturing the breadth of human thought and endeavour. We look around us, and are awed by the variety of several thousand languages and dialects, expressing a multiplicity of world views, literatures, and ways of life. We look back at the thoughts of our predecessors, and find we can see only as far as language lets us see. We look forward in time, and find we can plan only through language. We look outward in space, and send symbols of communication along with our spacecraft, to explain who we are, in case there is anyone there who wants to know.

Alongside this, there is the importance we attach to language, as a means of understanding ourselves and our society, and of resolving some of the problems and tensions that arise from human interaction. No sector of society is unaffected, and all can benefit from the study of the linguistic factors that constitute a barrier, as well as a means of communication. But linguistic problems rarely admit simple solutions, and it is this elementary observation that has led to the present work.

The main aim of this encyclopedia is to provide information about all aspects of language structure and use, so that the complex forces which act upon language, and upon the people who use it, will be more readily understood. The work is founded on the belief that the systematic analysis and discussion of language in an objective way is an essential step forward towards any world in which mutual respect and tolerance is a reality. 'They don't speak like us; therefore they aren't like us; therefore they don't like us.' This is the kind of logic that the information in this book seeks to deny.

But such a world is a long way off. Recent decades have illustrated many signs of linguistic intolerance and tension. They appear most noticeably in the language protests in India or Belgium, and in the disfigured road signs of Wales or northern Spain; but they are present in more subtle ways, in the unmotivated preservation of traditional purist linguistic practices in many schools, and in the regular flow of complaints on the world's radio channels and in the press about other people's usage.

In the opening parts of this book, therefore, we look at the most important ideas that have influenced the nature of popular opinion about language, in both 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' societies. We begin with the idea of correctness, and the historical development of prescriptive attitudes to language. We look at the desire to keep language 'pure', as encountered in the movements in support of language academies, and the general concern over linguistic change. We address the proposition that all languages are equal, in the face of the widespread view that some are more equal than others. This is followed by a discussion of popular beliefs about the magical and mystical power of language, and a general investigation of the wide range of functions that language performs in everyday life. Part I then concludes by considering the intriguing but intricate question of the relationship between language and thought.

1 • The prescriptive tradition

George Orwell (1903–50)
In *Politics and the English Language* (1947), Orwell lists six rules 'that one can rely on when instinct fails'. These rules were not written with literary or scientific language in mind, but with the everyday need to foster language 'as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought'. In this way, Orwell hoped, it would be possible to halt the decline in the language, which he saw as intimately connected with the 'political chaos' of the time.

1 Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2 Never use a long word when a short one will do.
3 If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4 Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5 Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6 Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. (See further, p. 398.)

At the beginning of any book on language, readers have a distinct advantage over the author. More than in most areas of enquiry, they already 'know' the subject, in the sense that they already speak and read a language. Moreover, because in modern societies linguistic skills are highly valued, many readers will have definite views about the nature of language and how it should function. This is not the usual state of mind of someone who opens an encyclopedia on, say, astronomy, Roman mythology, or physics.

We must therefore begin our investigation by looking at the main opinions and beliefs people already hold about language as a result of the normal processes of education and social development. These views will provide a frame of reference familiar to many readers, and they will also act as a point of departure for the detailed, systematic, and objective study of the subject in the following pages.

An emotional subject

It is not easy to be systematic and objective about language study. Popular linguistic debate regularly deteriorates into invective and polemic. Language belongs to everyone; so most people feel they have a right to hold an opinion about it. And when opinions differ, emotions can run high. Arguments can flare as easily over minor points of usage as over major policies of linguistic planning and education (§61).

Language, moreover, is a very public behaviour, so that it is easy for different usages to be noted and criticized. No part of society or social behaviour is exempt: linguistic factors influence our judgments of personality, intelligence, social status, educational standards, job aptitude, and many other areas of identity and social survival. As a result, it is easy to hurt, and to be hurt, when language use is unfeelingly attacked.

The American linguist Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949) discussed this situation in terms of three levels of response people give to language. The 'primary response' is actual usage. 'Secondary responses' are the views we have about language, often expressed in some kind of terminology. 'Tertiary responses' are the feelings which flare up when anyone dares to question these views. Bloomfield tells the story of visiting a doctor who was quite firm in his view that the Amerindian language Chippewa had only a few hundred words (p. 6). When Bloomfield attempted to dispute the point, the doctor turned away and refused to listen. Irrational responses of this kind are unfortunately all too common; but everyone is prone to them – linguist and non-linguist alike.

PRESCRIPTIVISM

In its most general sense, prescriptivism is the view that one variety of language has an inherently higher value than others, and that this ought to be imposed on the whole of the speech community. The view is propounded especially in relation to grammar and vocabulary, and frequently with reference to pronunciation. The variety which is favoured, in this account, is usually a version of the 'standard' written language, especially as encountered in literature, or in the formal spoken language which most closely reflects this style. Adherents to this variety are said to speak or write 'correctly'; deviations from it are said to be 'incorrect'.

All the main European languages have been studied prescriptively, especially in the 18th century approach to the writing of grammars and dictionaries. The aims of these early grammarians were threefold: (a) they wanted to codify the principles of their languages, to show that there was a system beneath the apparent chaos of usage, (b) they wanted a means of settling disputes over usage, (c) they wanted to point out what they felt to be common errors, in order to 'improve' the language. The authoritarian nature of the approach is best characterized by its reliance on 'rules' of grammar. Some usages are 'prescribed', to be learnt and followed accurately; others are 'proscribed', to be avoided. In this early period, there were no half-measures: usage was either right or wrong, and it was the task of the grammarian not simply to record alternatives, but to pronounce judgment upon them.

These attitudes are still with us, and they motivate widespread concern that linguistic standards should be maintained. Nevertheless, there is an alternative point of view that is concerned less with 'standards' than with the *facts* of linguistic usage. This approach is summarized in the statement that it is the task of the grammarian to *describe*, not *prescribe* – to record the facts of linguistic diversity, and not to attempt the impossible tasks of evaluating language variation or halting language change. In the second half of the 18th century, we already find advocates of this view, such as Joseph Priestley, whose *Rudiments of English Grammar* (1761) insists that 'the custom of speaking is the original and only just standard of any language'. Linguistic issues, it is argued, cannot be solved by logic and legislation. And this view has become the tenet of the modern linguistic approach to grammatical analysis.

In our own time, the opposition between 'descriptivists' and 'prescriptivists' has often become

extreme, with both sides painting unreal pictures of the other. Descriptive grammarians have been presented as people who do not care about standards, because of the way they see all forms of usage as equally valid. Prescriptive grammarians have been presented as blind adherents to a historical tradition. The opposition has even been presented in quasi-political terms – of radical liberalism vs elitist conservatism.

If these stereotypes are abandoned, we can see that both approaches are important, and have more in common than is often realized – involving a mutual interest in such matters as acceptability, ambiguity, and intelligibility. The descriptive approach is essential because it is the only way in which the competing claims of different standards can be reconciled: when we know the facts of language use, we are in a better position to avoid the idiosyncrasies of private opinions, and to make realistic recommendations about teaching or style. The prescriptive approach provides a focus for the sense of linguistic values which everyone possesses, and which ultimately forms part of our view of social structure, and of our own place within it.

Today, prescriptivism seems to be waning in some countries (such as the UK), as it no longer motivates English teaching – and prescriptive attitudes derive from the schoolroom. The next generation, accordingly, may well view the debate as being largely of historical interest. Meanwhile, last-ditch battles continue to be fought – and books bought, as shown by the phenomenon of Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (2003).

WHERE TRADITIONAL GRAMMATICAL RULES COME FROM

	Example of a prescriptive rule	*Descriptive comment*
Latin and Greek The unchanging form of these languages, the high prestige they held in European education, and the undisputed brilliance of classical literature led to their adoption as models of linguistic excellence by grammarians of other languages.	You should say or write *It is I* and not *It is me*, because the verb *be* is followed by the nominative case in Latin, not the accusative.	The Latin rule is not universal. In Arabic, for example, *be* is followed by the accusative. In English, *me* is the educated informal norm; *I* is felt to be very formal. In French, only *moi* is possible (*c'est moi*, etc.)
The written language Writing is more careful, prestigious and permanent than speech, especially in the context of literature. People are therefore often told to speak as they would write.	You should say and write *whom* and not *who*, in such sentences as – *did you speak to?*	*Whom* is common in writing, and in formal styles of speech; but *who* is more acceptable in informal speech. The rules which govern acceptable speech and writing are often very different.
Logic Many people feel that grammar should be judged insofar as it follows the principles of logic. Mathematics, from this viewpoint, is the ideal use of language.	You shouldn't say *I haven't done nothing* because two negatives make a positive.	Here, two negatives do not make a positive, but a more emphatic negative – a construction which is found in many languages (e.g. French, Russian). The example is not acceptable in standard English, but this is the result of social factors, not the dictates of logic.

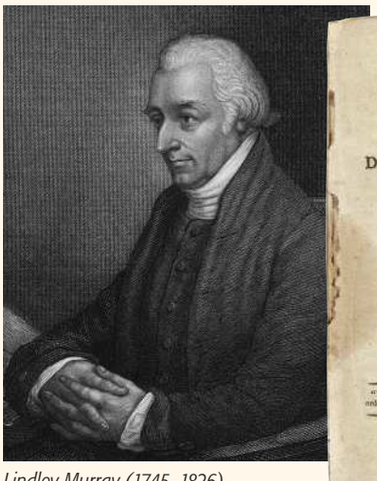
MURRAY'S GRAMMAR

One of the most influential grammars of the 18th century was Robert Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762). This was the inspiration for Lindley Murray's widely used *English Grammar* (1794). Both grammars went through over 20 editions in the decades following publication.

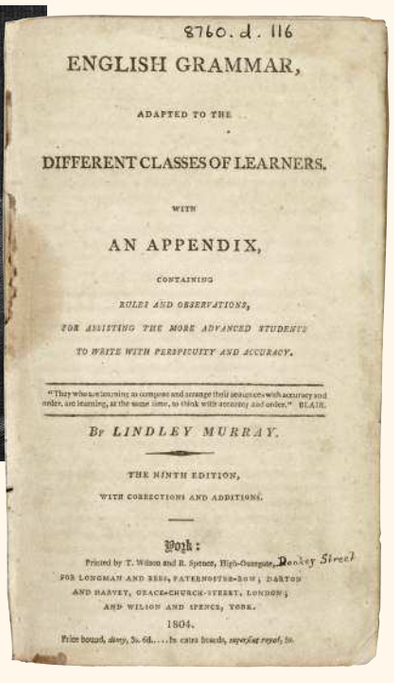
Murray's book had an enormous influence on school practice and popular attitudes, especially in the USA. His alliterative axiom contains several watchwords of prescriptivism: 'Perspicuity requires the qualities of purity, propriety and precision.'

Some of Murray's general linguistic principles were unexceptionable, such as 'Keep clear of double meaning or ambiguity' and 'Avoid unintelligible words or phrases.' But most of his analyses, and the detailed principles of his Appendix, 'Rules and observations for promoting perspicuity in speaking and writing', contain the kind of arbitrary rule and artificial, Latinate analysis which was to fuel two centuries of argument. In Rule 16, for example, we find the negation principle illustrated: 'Two negatives, in English, destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative.'

Murray's rules were widely taught, and formed the basis for much of the linguistic purism still encountered today. However, they were also fiercely attacked. One writer in the *American Journal of Education* (in 1826) compares the grammar to a 'foreign rack on which our simple language has been stretched'. Another (in 1833) insists that grammarians should 'discover' and not 'invent' rules. Long before the advent of modern linguistics, the battle lines of both descriptivism and prescriptivism had been clearly established.



Lindley Murray (1745–1826)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ENGLISH GRAMMAR,

ADAPTED TO THE

DIFFERENT CLASSES OF LEARNERS.

WITH

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CONTAINING

RULES AND OBSERVATIONS,

FOR ASSISTING THE MORE ADVANCED STUDENTS

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"They who are learning to compose and arrange their sentences with accuracy and order, are learning, at the same time, to think with accuracy and order." BLAIR.

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THE NINTH EDITION,

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FOR LONGMAN AND REES, PATERNOSTER-ROW; DARTON AND HARVEY, GRACE-CHURCH-STREET, LONDON; AND WILSON AND SPENCE, YORK.

1804.

Murray's English Grammar

Daniel Defoe (1660?–1731)

Jonathan Swift (1667–1745)

THE ACADEMIES

Some countries have felt that the best way to look after a language is to place it in the care of an academy. In Italy, the *Accademia della Crusca* was founded as early as 1582, with the object of purifying the Italian language. In France, in 1635, Cardinal Richelieu established the *Académie française*, which set the pattern for many subsequent bodies. The statutes of the *Académie* define as its principal function:

> to labour with all possible care and diligence to give definite rules to our language, and to render it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and sciences.

The 40 academicians were drawn from the ranks of the church, nobility, and military – a bias which continues to the present day. The *Académie*'s first dictionary appeared in 1694.

Several other academies were founded in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Spanish Academy was founded in 1713 by Philip V, and within 200 years corresponding bodies had been set up in most South American Spanish countries. The Swedish Academy was founded in 1786; the Hungarian in 1830. There are three Arabic academies, in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. The Hebrew Language Academy was set up more recently, in 1953.

In England, a proposal for an academy was made in the 17th century, with the support of such men as John Dryden and Daniel Defoe. In Defoe's view, the reputation of the members of this academy

> would be enough to make them the allowed judges of style and language; and no author would have the impudence to coin without their authority … There should be no more occasion to search for derivations and constructions, and it would be as criminal then to coin words as money.

In 1712, Jonathan Swift presented his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue*, in which he complains to the Lord Treasurer of England, the Earl of Oxford, that

> our language is extremely imperfect; that its daily improvements are by no means in proportion to its daily corruptions; that the pretenders to polish and refine it have chiefly multiplied abuses and absurdities; and that in many instances it offends against every part of grammar.

His academy would 'fix our language for ever', for,

> I am of the opinion, it is better a language should not be wholly perfect, than it should be perpetually changing.

The idea received a great deal of support at the time, but nothing was done. And in due course, opposition to the notion grew. It became evident that the French and Italian academies had been unsuccessful in stopping the course of language change. Dr Johnson, in the Preface to his *Dictionary*, is under no illusion about the futility of an academy, especially in England, where he finds 'the spirit of English liberty' contrary to the whole idea:

> When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, century after century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption, and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation.

From time to time, the idea of an English Academy continues to be voiced, but the response has never been enthusiastic. A similar proposal in the USA was also rejected. By contrast, since the 18th century, there has been an increasing flow of individual grammars, dictionaries, and manuals of style in all parts of the English-speaking world.

LANGUAGE CHANGE

The phenomenon of language change probably attracts more public notice and criticism than any other linguistic issue. There is a widely held belief that change must mean deterioration and decay. Older people observe the casual speech of the young, and conclude that standards have

KIPPERS *SUR* TOAST?

Menus like this could be found, with the appropriate language change, in almost any European city. They illustrate the way English has permeated public life, despite the efforts of many countries to stop it. The German post office, for example, insisted for many years that *Fernsprecher* should be used on phone booths, though *Telefon* was far more common in speech; but in 1981 they made the change. In 1975, the French went so far as to pass a law banning the use of English loanwords in official contexts, if an equivalent word exists in French (the *loi Bas-Lauriol*): a *corner* (in football) was to be replaced by *jet de coin*, or *collapser* by *s'évanouir*. However, it was a law honoured more in the breach than in the observance; and when a further attempt to impose French in a range of public contexts was made in 1994 (the *loi Toubon*), parts of the proposal were rejected on the grounds that they were contrary to the principle of freedom of speech, and thus against the constitution. Whether one approves or not, the academies could never withstand the unrelenting social pressure for language change, especially in an Internet-dominated world (p. 414).

fallen markedly. They place the blame in various quarters – most often in the schools, where patterns of language education have changed a great deal in recent years (§44), but also in state public broadcasting institutions, where any deviations from traditional norms provide an immediate focus of attack by conservative, linguistically sensitive listeners. The concern can even reach national proportions, as in the widespread reaction in Europe against what is thought of as the 'American' English invasion.

Unfounded pessimism

It is understandable that many people dislike change, but most of the criticism of linguistic change is misconceived. It is widely felt that the contemporary language illustrates the problem at its worst, but this belief is shared by every generation. Moreover, many of the usage issues recur across generations: several of the English controversies which are the focus of current attention can be found in the books and magazines of the 18th and 19th centuries – the debate over *it's me* and *very unique*, for example. In *The Queen's English* (1863), Henry Alford, the Dean of Canterbury, lists a large number of usage issues which worried his contemporaries, and gave them cause to think that the language was rapidly decaying. Most are still with us, with the language not obviously affected. In the mid 19th century, it was predicted that British and American English would be mutually unintelligible within 100 years!

There are indeed cases where linguistic change can lead to problems of unintelligibility, ambiguity, and social division. If change is too rapid, there can be major communication problems, as in contemporary Papua New Guinea – a point which needs to be considered in connection with the field of language planning (§§55, 61). But as a rule, the parts of language which are changing at any given time are tiny, in comparison to the vast, unchanging areas of language. Indeed, it is because change is so infrequent that it is so distinctive and noticeable. Some degree of caution and concern is therefore always desirable, in the interests of maintaining precise and efficient communication; but there are no grounds for the extreme pessimism and conservatism which is so often encountered – and which in English is often summed up in such slogans as 'Let us preserve the tongue that Shakespeare spoke.'

The inevitability of change

For the most part, language changes because society changes (§10). To stop or control the one requires that we stop or control the other – a task which can succeed to only a very limited extent. Language change is inevitable and rarely predictable, and those who try to plan a language's future waste their time if they think otherwise – time which would be better spent in devising fresh ways of enabling society to cope with the new linguistic forms

that accompany each generation. These days, there is in fact a growing recognition of the need to develop a greater linguistic awareness and tolerance of change, especially in a multi-ethnic society. This requires, among other things, that schools have the knowledge and resources to teach a common standard, while recognizing the existence and value of linguistic diversity. Such policies provide a constructive alternative to the emotional attacks which are so commonly made against the development of new words, meanings, pronunciations, and grammatical constructions. But before these policies can be implemented, it is necessary to develop a proper understanding of the inevitability and consequences of linguistic change (§54).

Some people go a stage further, and see change in language as a progression from a simple to a complex state – a view which was common as a consequence of 19th-century evolutionary thinking. But there is no evidence for this view. Languages do not develop, progress, decay, evolve, or act according to any of the metaphors which imply a specific endpoint and level of excellence. They simply change, as society changes. If a language dies out, it does so because its status alters in society, as other cultures and languages take over its role: it does not die because it has 'got too old', or 'become too complicated', as is sometimes maintained. Nor when languages change, do they move in a predetermined direction. Some are losing inflections; some are gaining them. Some are moving to an order where the verb precedes the object; others to an order where the object precedes the verb. Some languages are losing vowels and gaining consonants; others are doing the opposite. If metaphors must be used to talk about language change, one of the best is that of a system holding itself in a state of equilibrium, while changes take place within it; another is that of the tide, which always and inevitably changes, but never progresses, while it ebbs and flows.

William Caxton

One of the earliest English voices to complain about the problems of linguistic change was William Caxton (1422?–91). He was writing at a time when English had undergone its greatest period of change, which had resulted in a major shift in pronunciation, the almost total loss of Anglo-Saxon inflections, and an enormous influx of new vocabulary, mainly from French:

> And certaynly our language now used varyeth ferre from that whiche was used and spoken whan I was borne … And that comyn Englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayne marchauntes were in a shippe in Tamyse [Thames] for to have sayled over the see into Zelande, and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them. And one of theym named Sheffelde, a mercer, cam in to an hows and axed for mete, and specyally he axyd after 'eggys'. And the good wyf answerde that she coude speke no Frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry, for he also coude speke no Frenshe, but wold have hadde egges, and she understode hym not. And thenne at last a nother sayd that he wolde have 'eyren'. Then the good wyf sayd that she understod hym wel. Loo! What sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, 'egges' or 'eyren'? Certaynly, it is harde to playse every man by cause of dyversite & chaunge of langage.
>
> (Preface to *Eneydos*, 1490; modernized punctuation)

Caxton's plaint echoes through the ages, though problems of linguistic change have never been so serious since, with the subsequent standardization of English, and the spread of the written language.

2 · The equality of languages

The Roman goddess Fortuna, holding a cornucopia and a rudder – an appropriate deity to associate with the uncertain destinies of languages

It comes near to stating the obvious that all languages have developed to express the needs of their users, and that in a sense all languages are equal. But this tenet of modern linguistics has often been denied, and still needs to be defended. Part of the problem is that the word 'equal' needs to be used very carefully. We do not know how to quantify language, so as to be able to say whether all languages have the same 'amounts' of grammar, phonology, or semantic structure (§§16, 17, 28). There may indeed be important differences in the structural complexity of language, and this possibility needs to be investigated. But all languages are arguably equal in the sense that there is nothing intrinsically limiting, demeaning, or handicapping about any of them. All languages meet the social and psychological needs of their speakers, are equally deserving of scientific study, and can provide us with valuable information about human nature and society. This view is the foundation on which the whole of the present book is based.

'PRIMITIVE' LANGUAGES

There are, however, several widely held misconceptions about languages which stem from a failure to recognize this view. The most important of these is the idea that there are such things as 'primitive' languages – languages with a simple grammar, a few sounds, and a vocabulary of only a few hundred words, whose speakers have to compensate for their language's deficiencies through gestures. Speakers of 'primitive' languages have often been thought to exist, and there has been a great deal of speculation about where they might live, and what their problems might be. If they relied on gestures, how would they be able to communicate at night? Without abstract terms, how could they possibly develop moral or religious beliefs? In the 19th century, such questions were common, and it was widely thought that it was only a matter of time before explorers would discover a genuinely primitive language.

The fact of the matter is that every culture which has been investigated, no matter how 'primitive' it may be in cultural terms, turns out to have a fully developed language, with a complexity comparable to those of the so-called 'civilized' nations. Anthropologically speaking, the human race can be said to have evolved from primitive to civilized states, but there is no sign of language having

Edward Sapir was one of the first linguists to attack the myth that primitive people spoke primitive languages. In one study, he compared the grammatical equivalents of the sentence *he will give it* (a stone) *to you* in six Amerindian languages. (Hyphens separate the parts of the Indian sentences, and in the literal translations that follow they join words that are equivalent to a single Indian form. For phonetic symbols, see p. 462.)

Wishram
a-č-i-m-l-ud-a
will he him thee to give will

Takelma
ʔòk-t-xpi-nk
will-give to thee he-or-they-in-future

Southern Paiute
maɣa-vaania-aka-aŋa-'mi
give will visible-thing visible-creature thee

Yana
baˑ-ă-ma-si-wa-ʔnuma
round-thing away to does-or-will done-unto thou-in-future

Nootka
oʔ-yiˑ-ʔaˑqχ-ʔat-eʔic
that give will done-unto thou-art

Navajo
n-aˑ-yi-diho-ʔáˑl
thee to transitive-marker will round-thing-in-future

Among many fascinating features of these complex grammatical forms, note the level of abstraction introduced by some languages (expressed by *round thing* and *visible*) – quite contrary to the claim that primitive peoples could only talk about concrete objects. Sapir also gave part of the full Takelma verb paradigm:

ʔokúspi	gives / gave it to you
ʔòspink	will give to you
ʔòspi	can give to you
ʔòspik	evidently gave to you

He points out the similarity to the way the verb varies in Latin – a comparison which many traditional scholars would have considered to verge on blasphemy!

Juanita, a Navajo woman in the 1870s

gone through the same kind of evolution (§48). There are no 'Bronze Age' or 'Stone Age' languages, nor have any language types been discovered which correlate with recognized anthropological groups (pastoral, nomadic, etc.). All languages have a complex grammar: there may be relative simplicity in one respect (e.g. no word endings), but there seems always to be relative complexity in another (e.g. word position). People sometimes think of languages such as English as 'having little grammar', because there are few word endings. But this is once again (§1) the unfortunate influence of Latin, which makes us think of complexity in terms of the inflectional system of that language.

Simplicity and regularity are usually thought to be desirable features of language; but no natural language is simple or wholly regular. All languages have intricate grammatical rules, and all have exceptions to those rules. The nearest we come to real simplicity with natural languages is in the case of pidgin languages (§55); and the desire for regularity is a major motivation for the development of auxiliary languages (§58). But these are the only exceptions. Similarly, there is no evidence to suggest that some languages are in the long term 'easier for children to learn' than others – though in the short term some linguistic features may be learned at different rates by the children of speakers of different languages (Part VIII).

None of this is to deny the possibility of linguistic differences which correlate with cultural or social features (such as the extent of technological development), but these have not been found; and there is no evidence to suggest that primitive peoples are in any sense 'handicapped' by their language when they are using it within their own community.

LANGUAGES OF EXCELLENCE

At the other end of the scale from so-called 'primitive' languages are opinions about the 'natural superiority' of certain languages. Latin and Greek were for centuries viewed as models of excellence in western Europe because of the literature and thought which these languages expressed; and the study of modern languages is still influenced by the practices of generations of classical linguistic scholars (p. 394).

The idea that one's own language is superior to others is widespread, but the reasons given for the superiority vary greatly. A language might be viewed as the oldest, or the most logical, or the language of gods, or simply the easiest to pronounce or the best for singing. Arabic speakers, for example, feel that their classical language is the most beautiful and logical, with an incomparable grammatical symmetry and lexical richness. Classical Arabic is strongly identified with religion (p. 404), as the language of the Qur'an is held to provide miraculous evidence of the truth of Islam. From this viewpoint, it would be self-evident that, as God chose Arabic as the vehicle of his revelation to his Prophet, this must be the language used in heaven, and thus must be superior to all others.

However, a similar argument has been applied to several other languages, such as Sanskrit and Classical Hebrew, especially in relation to claims about which language is the oldest (§49). For example, J. G. Becanus (1518–72) argued that German was superior to all other languages. It was the language Adam spoke in Eden, but it was not affected in the Babel event, because the early Germans (the Cimbrians) did not assist in the construction of the tower. God later caused the Old Testament to be translated from the original German (no longer extant) into Hebrew.

There have been many other spurious linguistic evaluations, reflecting the sociopolitical situation of the time. Charles V of Germany (who ruled from 1519 to 1558) is said to have spoken French to men, Italian to women, Spanish to God, and German to horses! The Swedish writer Andreas Kempe (1622–89) satirized contemporary clerical attitudes in presenting the view that in Paradise Adam spoke Danish, God spoke Swedish, and the serpent spoke French.

A linguistic myth

A belief that some languages are intrinsically superior to others is widespread, but it has no basis in linguistic fact. Some languages are of course more useful or prestigious than others, at a given period of history, but this is due to the preeminence of the speakers at that time, and not to any inherent linguistic characteristics. The view of modern linguistics is that a language should not be valued on the basis of the political or economic influence of its speakers. If it were otherwise, we would have to rate the Spanish and Portuguese spoken in the 16th century as somehow 'better' than they are today, and modern American English would be 'better' than British English. Yet when we make such comparisons, we find only a small range of linguistic differences, and nothing to warrant such sweeping conclusions.

At present, it is not possible to rate the excellence of languages in linguistic terms. And it is no less difficult to arrive at an evaluation in aesthetic, philosophical, literary, religious, or cultural terms. How, ultimately, could we compare the merits of Latin and Greek with the proverbial wisdom of Chinese, the extensive oral literature of the Polynesian islands, or the depth of scientific knowledge which has been expressed in English? Perhaps one day some kind of objective linguistic evaluation measure will be devised; but until then, the thesis that some languages are intrinsically better than others has to be denied.

Nationalism

In the 18th and 19th centuries, language evaluations were often tied to questions of national identity (§9), especially in Germany, in a school of thought which can be traced back to the view of Johann Herder: 'Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers?' Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) praised the German language, and dismissed others, in his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807), even to the extent of claiming that the native German speaker 'can always be superior to the foreigner and understand him fully, even better than the foreigner understands himself'. But comparable claims were made for French and Spanish; and English was similarly lauded by Thomas Macaulay (1800–59): in his *Minute on Education* (1835), referring to the languages of India, he wrote that English 'stands preeminent even among the languages of the West … It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together.'

Johann Herder (1744–1803)

3 · The magic of language

A Jewish man wearing phylacteries (Hebrew tefillin*). These are a pair of small leather boxes containing scriptural passages, traditionally worn by male Jews over 13 years of age, as a reminder of God's Law. They are worn on the left arm facing the heart, and on the forehead during morning weekday prayers. The bands of the phylacteries are knotted so as to form the Hebrew letters daleth, yod and shin, which form the divine name* Shaddai.

The magical influence of language is a theme which reverberates throughout the literatures and legends of the world. Language, especially in its written form, is thought to contain special powers, which only the initiated are allowed to understand or control. The beliefs are often linked to a myth about the divine origins of language (§49), but they extend beyond this, to influence religious activities of all kinds, and to reflect a widespread primitive superstition about objects and events which have a symbolic meaning and use.

The belief that words control objects, people, and spirits can be seen in the use of magical formulae, incantations, litanies of names, and many other rites in black and white magic and in organized religion. The language is thought to be able to cure sickness, keep evil away, bring good to oneself and harm to an enemy. Such language usually has to be used with great exactitude, if an effect is to be obtained: meticulous attention is paid to pronunciation, phraseology, and verbal tradition (a factor which appears, most notably, in the history of Sanskrit and Massoretic Hebrew). There often has to be a great deal of repetition, in order to intensify the power of the words. The language, however, does not have to be intelligible to have its effect: many magical formulae are meaningless to those who use them, but there is still great belief in their efficacy (p. 11).

Cases of linguistic superstition abound. To primitive peoples, the written language must appear to be omniscient, when encountered for the first time. Several stories tell of illiterate people stealing an object from a parcel, and being found out when they delivered the message which accompanied it. The writing, it would seem, had a voice of its own – or perhaps a god lived in the letters. Such ideas are found throughout history. The search for mystical meaning in alphabetic script can be seen in the use of runic charms, or in the systems, still in use, which relate letters to numbers, such as gematria (p. 61).

At another level, the mystique of language is something which we encounter throughout modern society, especially in the field of advertising (pp. 410–11). Conquerors, too, well know the power that exists in words. Napoleon, it is said, preferred newspapers to battalions. And what better way is there to remove a nation's influence than to burn its writings? Cortéz did this to the Aztecs in 1520; and the Nazis and Allies did it to each other in World War II.

VERBAL TABOOS

The word *taboo* has been borrowed from Tongan, where it means 'holy' or 'untouchable'. Taboos exist in all known cultures, referring to certain acts, objects, or relationships which society wishes to avoid – and thus to the language used to talk about them. Verbal taboos are generally related to sex, the supernatural, excretion, and death, but quite often they extend to other aspects of domestic and social life. For example, certain animals may be considered taboo: the Zuñi of New Mexico prohibit the use of the word *takka* ('frogs') during ceremonies; until recently, many southern Americans avoided the word *bull* in polite speech, replacing it by a euphemism, such as *he-cow* or *male beast*; in Sami and Yakut, the original name for *bear* is replaced by such phrases as *our lord* or *good father*, and wolves, weasels, rats, lice, snakes, and many other animals have been given name-taboos by various cultures. Even people can be affected: certain members of the family are considered taboo among Australian Aborigines; either a special language has to be used to them, or they are not directly addressed at all (§10).

The use of a taboo word can lead to a variety of sayings, practices, and responses. The mention of a devil or unclean spirit can evoke a verbal or physical reaction, such as a divine invocation, or the sign of the cross. An obscenity can be the cause of shocked recrimination ('go and wash your mouth out'), physical violence (especially if 'ladies' are present), or legal action (as in the trial over the publication of the unexpurgated D. H. Lawrence novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (p. 63)). The influence of taboo words can even extend across language boundaries. It has been noted that Creek Indians avoid their native words for 'earth' and 'meat' *(fákki* and *apíswa* respectively) because of their phonetic resemblance to English taboo words, which is the dominant language around them. A similar phenomenon has been recorded with Thai learners of English, where English *yet* closely resembles Thai *jēd* (an impolite word for 'to have intercourse'). And Chinese people called *Li* (a common family name) can find their name a source of embarrassment in Yangon (Rangoon), in view of the Burmese word *lî* ('phallus').

The usual way of coping with taboo words and notions is to develop euphemisms and circumlocutions. Hundreds of words and phrases have emerged to express basic biological functions, and talk about death has its own linguistic world, with its morticians, caskets, and innumerable ways of dying. English examples include *to pass on*, *pass over*, *make one's bow*, *kick the bucket*, *snuff the candle*, *go aloft*, and *cut the painter*. French has *fermer son parapluie* ('to close one's umbrella'), the indescribably final *n'avoir plus mal aux dents* ('to have no more toothache'), and many more.

Proper names

The use of words as personal labels is a matter of particular significance – a fact which is early learned by children, who are often anxious to conceal their own names, and who so easily hurt, and are hurt, by name-calling. Many primitive people do not like to hear their name used, especially in unfavourable circumstances, for they believe that the whole of their being resides in it, and they may thereby fall under the influence of others. The danger is even greater in tribes (in Australia and New Zealand, for example), where people are given two names – a 'public' name, for general use, and a 'secret' name, which is known only to God, or to the closest members of their group. To get to know a secret name is to have total power over its owner.

The Todas of southern India dislike uttering their own names, to the extent that, if they are asked for their name, they will ask someone else to give it. The Sakalavas of Madagascar do not communicate their own name, or the name of their village, to strangers, in case mischievous use should be made of it. In folklore, there are many examples of forbidden names which, when discovered, break the evil power of their owners – Tom-tit-tot, Vargaluska, Rumpelstiltskin.

The process of personal naming can even affect the whole of a language. Stories are common of tribal chiefs who change their name when they take office, as a result of which any everyday words which resemble that name have to be replaced, so that the name will not be used in inauspicious circumstances. It is reported, for example, that when Queen Rasoherina of the Anemerina tribe in Madagascar came to the throne, the word *sopherina* ('silk worm') was forbidden, and replaced by *zana dandy* ('silk's child').

Death can lead to major taboo effects on the use of names. Often, the names of the dead are not to be uttered – though this may well be out of fear rather than respect: while a name endures, it is believed, the dead person does also, and those who utter the name bring the evil of death upon themselves. In some cultures (such as the Polynesian), therefore, when a person dies, other people of the same name have to be renamed, or, if the name happens to correspond to a word in the language, that word would have to be changed. By contrast, some cultures (such as the Greenlandic) place great store by the names of dead people, who are thought to be unable to rest in peace, unless a child has been named after them. In yet others, if a child dies, the next by the same mother will be called by some evil name, to show the death spirit that the child is not worth bothering about.

Sophisticated societies have had their superstitions too. In the Roman levies, the authorities took good care to enrol first those men who had auspicious names, such as Victor and Felix. The names of Greek gods were carved on stone and sunk in the sea, to guard against profanation. In Plato's *Cratylus*, debaters worry about using the names of gods as etymological examples (p. 428), and in the Christian era there are long-standing prohibitions over taking the name of the Lord 'in vain' (p. 63). Older Hebrew names usually had meanings, such as Nathaniah ('Yahweh has given') or Azzan ('Strong'). When Adrian VI became pope, he was advised not to retain his own name on the grounds that all popes who had done so had died in the first year of their reign. People in the 21st century may find it easy to dismiss such attitudes, but things have not greatly changed. It is unlikely that popular opinion would ever allow a new ship to be named *Titanic*.

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

The mystique of words can affect place names too, as a country searches to replace forms which have unhappy associations. In 1868, *Edo* was renamed *Tokyo* ('eastern residence'), symbolizing a new period in Japanese history. *St Petersburg* became *Petrograd*, then *Leningrad*, then reverted to *St Petersburg*; *Christiania* became *Oslo*. It is common practice for new nations to change their names, or the names of their major cities, to symbolize their independence and freedom from imperialist influence. Thus in recent times in Africa, for example, we have seen Upper Volta change its name to Burkina Faso (1985); Rhodesia was renamed as Zimbabwe (1980), with its capital city Salisbury renamed Harare (1982); Dahomey has become Benin (1975); French Sudan has become Mali (1960); and Gold Coast has become Ghana (1957).

The old and new Japan: the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, with the high-rise towers of Shinjuku behind

The name of god

The true name of God, or of individual gods, is a closely guarded secret in many cultures, if indeed it is known at all. The real names of many Egyptian deities were never divulged.

Observant Jews do not pronounce the divine name as it occurred in the Hebrew of the Old Testament. It was written with four consonants, YHWH (the tetragrammaton), vowel points not being written in pre-Massoretic Hebrew (p. 212). In reading aloud, the forms *'Adonai* or *'Elohim* are substituted. The form Yahweh is a scholarly attempt at reconstruction, interpreting its meaning as part of the verb 'to be', to give the title 'the One who Is'. The name Jehovah has been traced back only to the 14th century; it is reached by inserting the vowels of *'Adonai* under the tetragrammaton, and arose from a misreading by Christian scholars of the two sources as one word. It is thus not of scriptural origin, and the true pronunciation of YHWH is now quite lost.

4 The functions of language

The question 'Why do we use language?' seems hardly to require an answer. But, as is often the way with linguistic questions, our everyday familiarity with speech and writing can make it difficult to appreciate the complexity of the skills we have learned. This is particularly so when we try to define the range of functions to which language can be put.

'To communicate our ideas' is the usual answer to the question – and, indeed, this must surely be the most widely recognized function of language. Whenever we tell people about ourselves or our circumstances, or ask for information about other selves and circumstances, we are using language in order to exchange facts and opinions. This use of language is often called 'referential', 'propositional', or 'ideational'. It is the kind of language which will be found throughout this encyclopedia – and in any spoken or written interaction where people wish to learn from each other. But it would be wrong to think of it as the *only* way in which we use language. Language scholars have identified several other functions where the communication of ideas is a marginal or irrelevant consideration.

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Mr X carefully leans his walking stick against a wall, but it falls over. He tries again, and it falls a second time. Mr X roundly curses the walking stick. How should we classify this function of language? It cannot be 'communication of ideas', for there is no one else in the room.

Here we have one of the commonest uses of language – a means of getting rid of our nervous energy when we are under stress. It is the clearest case of what is often called an 'emotive' or 'expressive' function of language. Emotive language can be used whether or not we are alone. Swear words and obscenities are probably the commonest signals to be used in this way, especially when we are in an angry or frustrated state (p. 63). But there are also many emotive utterances of a positive kind, such as our involuntary verbal reactions to beautiful art or scenery, our expression of fear and affection, and the emotional outpourings of certain kinds of poetry.

The most common linguistic expressions of emotion consist of conventional words or phrases (such as *Gosh*, *My*, *Darn it*, and *What a sight*) and the semi-linguistic noises often called interjections (such as *Tut-tut*, *Ugh*, *Wow*, *Ow*, and *Ouch*). Also, an important function of the prosody of language (§29) is to provide an outlet for our attitudes while we speak. At a more sophisticated level, there are many literary devices of grammar and vocabulary which convey the writer's feelings (§12). However, in these more complex cases it becomes difficult to distinguish the emotional function of language from the 'ideational' function described above.

SNEEZING IN TONGA

When someone sneezes, the English stock response is *Bless you*. But there is no equivalent to such forms in many languages, and any remarks which might be made can have a totally different meaning and function. In German, one says *Gesundheit* ('health'); in Mende (Sierra Leone), the word to use is *biseh* ('thank you'); in Bembe (Congo), it is *kuma* ('be well'); and in Malagasy, it is *velona* ('alive'). In Tonga, a sneeze is often taken to be a sign that your loved one is missing you. It is quite common for someone to say jokingly, after a sneeze, *Ikai ke nofo noa mua!* – literally, 'Not to be nothing, alas.' The sense intended is that the loved one who has 'caused' the sneeze should be thinking about nothing, instead of about the one who has sneezed. A major difference with English is that the person who has sneezed may utter the phrase – a kind of *Bless me!*

SOCIAL INTERACTION

Mrs P sneezes violently. Mrs Q says 'Bless you!' Mrs P says 'Thank you.' Again, this hardly seems to be a case of language being used to communicate ideas, but rather to maintain a comfortable relationship between people. Its sole function is to provide a means of avoiding a situation which both parties might otherwise find embarrassing. No factual content is involved. Similarly, the use of such phrases as *Good morning* or *Pleased to meet you*, and ritual exchanges about health or the weather, do not 'communicate ideas' in the usual sense.

Sentences of this kind are usually automatically produced, and stereotyped in structure. They often state the obvious (e.g. *Lovely day*) or have no content at all (e.g. *Hello*). They certainly require a special kind of explanation, and this is found in the idea that language is here being used for the purpose of maintaining rapport between people. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) coined the phrase 'phatic communion' to refer to this social function of language, which arises out of the basic human need to signal friendship – or, at least, lack of enmity. For someone to withhold these sentences when they are expected, by staying silent, is a sure sign of distance, alienation, even danger.

These illustrations apply to English and to many European languages, ancient and modern. But cultures vary greatly in the topics which they permit as phatic communion. The weather is not as universal a conversation-filler as the English might like to think! For example, Rundi women (in Burundi, Central Africa), upon taking leave, are quite often heard to say, routinely and politely, 'I must go home now, or my husband will beat me.' Moreover, phatic communion itself is far from universal: some cultures say little, and prefer silence, as in the case of the Paliyans of southern India, or the Aritama of Colombia.