

BREAKING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

AN INTERNATIONAL NECESSITY

Language should free us – not fence us in.

Harry Maynard

The following was a talk given by Harry Maynard at a United Nations conference, November 1981.

Our private and cultural premises hold us captive. Accordingly we have to go beyond accurate translation. This is fundamental to a closely knit world.

Perhaps the toughest roadblock to any form of human communication and real understanding is what the social scientist refers to as ethnocentrism. The most observable differences between cultures are speech, dress, living habits, politics, and religions. Like an iceberg, each culture carries beneath the surface of its observable differences its own premises and biases.

Our everyday language is the most pervasive ethnocentric factor in our cultures. One can liken language to air—colorless, odorless, necessary for survival; but language can be like carbon monoxide—a colorless, odorless gas and very poisonous.

Language and symbols have given us the means to accumulate and the tools to transmit knowledge. Language has given expression to our finest ethical, philosophical, political, artistic, and legal insights. Language acts as the cultural carrier of the good and bad of much of our human predicament. In short, it has defined us as human beings and given us civilization.

Yet too many people (including some linguistic scholars) have examined language primarily as an artifact. In so doing, they remain prisoners of

their ethnocentricity. Listen to scholar and author Evelyn Waugh defend the study of Greek and Latin as a necessity for anyone aspiring to write English:

I believe that the conventional defense of them is valid; that only by them can a boy fully understand that a sentence is a logical construction and that words have basic inalienable meanings, departure from which is either conscious metaphor or inexcusable vulgarity. Those who have not been so taught—most Americans and most women—unless they are guided by some rare genius, betray their deprivation. The old-fashioned test of an English sentence—will it translate?—still stands after we have lost the trick of translation.

Why did Waugh think this way? I think it is because of the rise, during the eighteenth-century in England, of the middle and upper-middle classes. Their desire, like most middle-class types, was to do the right thing. They had deep concern and apprehension about their language and saw in it a criterion of social prestige.

Semantic Emily Posts

The semantic Emily Posts of the day naturally turned to classical Latin in order to frame a grammatical reverence for English. Many books on verbal etiquette appeared at the time. Bishop Lowth's *Short Introduction to English Grammar* was published in 1762. Thirty-three years later

in the United States, Lindley Murray wrote a grammar which sold a million copies between 1795 and 1850.

These were among the writers who Latinized English and attempted to prescribe what was acceptable in speech and writing. As a result, certain false impressions sprang up. One stated that language is a divine institution, originally perfect, but debased by humans. Yet, no serious study of language history supports this idea; as a matter of fact, it demonstrates just the opposite.

Another false impression is that English is a corrupt and degenerate offspring of Greek and Latin. This canard is equally absurd. Yet, a distinguished writer, such as Dryden, did not credit English with having a grammar. He went so far as to translate his words carefully into Latin so that he could make corrections in his English. We supposedly still cannot split infinitives in English or end a sentence with a preposition, because neither can be done in Latin or gracefully translated into elegant Latin. Jonathan Swift felt so strongly about establishing the ground rules for "correct English" that he became one of the leading advocates for the establishment of an academy similar to the Spanish and French academies. He did this because he felt it was the only way English could be protected from further corruption.

Modern linguistic scientists, including Jespersen, Bloomfield, and Sapir, have demolished this antiquated point of view. We see clearly that changes in language are inevitable and normal. Spoken language is our language. Correctness rests on usage and usage is relative. Or, as a scientific wit put it, "there are no absolutes, only relatives, and we have to get along with our relatives." The same holds with language.

Each individual in every culture is immersed in a sea of language; we are part of the world of words and of non-words. This means that we have all the accumulated wisdom and nonsense wrapped up together in our individual



ALDOUS HUXLEY

Beyond verbal etiquette.

psyches and personalities that language has helped put there.

Our only hope of improving our culture and seeing through its accumulated nonsense as well as preserving its wisdom is to see through the verbal game—or we will suffer from not only a tyranny of words but from the tyranny of nonsense assumptions and premises imbedded in the words and symbols of our culture.

Polish American Alfred Korzybski put it well: "We do not realize what tremendous power the structure of a habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of semantic reactions. These structural assumptions and implications are inside our skins. If unraveled, they become conscious; if not, they remain unconscious."

How do we dig our way out of this predicament so that we can begin to communicate across cultural barriers? Aldous Huxley suggests:

A culture cannot be discriminatingly accepted, much less be modified, except by persons who have seen through it—by persons who have cut holes in the confining stockade of verbalized symbols and so are able to look at the world and, by reflection, at themselves in a new and relatively unprejudiced way. Such persons are not merely born; they must also be made. But how?

In the field of formal education, what the would-be hole cutter needs is knowledge: knowledge of the past and present history of cultures in all their fantastic variety and knowledge about the nature and limitations, the uses and abuses of language. A man who knows that there have been many cultures and that each culture claims to be the best and truest of all will find it hard to take too seriously the boastings and dogmatizings of his own tradition. Similarly, a man who knows how symbols are related to experience and who practices the kind of linguistic self-control taught by the exponents of

general semantics is unlikely to take too seriously the absurd or dangerous nonsense that, within every culture, passes for philosophy, practical wisdom, and political argument.

Note that Huxley writes of *general semantics*. How does this discipline differ from semantics? Historically, semantics has usually been associated with the narrow study of word meanings and the history of verbal etiquette.

General Semantics

The general semanticist is interested in the broader spectrum of human beings' response to and use of various symbols, including words. Humans also communicate by pictures, gestures, tone of voice, the clothes we wear, the automobiles we drive, and by many other devices with which we encode information and semaphore each other's nervous systems.

Scholars have classified over twenty different human senses. They are variations on the so-called "five windows of the soul." Thus, research in perceptual psychology shows that from two-thirds to 85 percent of all the information the human nervous system takes in enters through the eye. Once we have taken in this information, we internalize it. We feed it back to ourselves. It becomes our human reality and eventually determines how we think, feel, and behave. This information becomes our assumptive knowledge.

The general semanticist is concerned with this process of subvocal talking and the formation of our assumptions which we continuously apply to newly internalized information.

The general semanticist recognizes that both our personal and national language contain philosophies—that each of our languages contains an implied theory of humans and the universe. Korzybski and others see the parallel with cyber-

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netics. They warn us that, if we feed nonsense into a computer, we will receive nonsense in return. They urge us ever to be alert to the power of our assumptions.

The general semanticist tries to delimit our cultural biases and prejudices by noting specialized languages such as calculus and symbolic logic; yet even these get caught up in the strange grasp of assumptions.

Assumptive knowledge in any language is so subtly acquired and internalized that it takes special education and training to escape it or, as Aldous Huxley says, "cut through it."

Semantic rigidity was introduced into Western culture by Aristotelian logic, in which a thing is either A or not A. This is the law of the excluded middle, which is still with us in the everyday logic of Western movies, with their good guys and bad guys. In symbolic logic, however, a statement can be true, false, or indeterminate—or, as they say in Scottish law: guilty, not guilty, to be proven. In the third case, we must get more information.

The force of Aristotelian logic, of semantic rigidities, of unconscious and erroneous assumptions is so great that even the most creative and painstaking scientists are affected. Einstein said that the biggest roadblock he met in developing the theory of relativity was the notion that the sum of the angles of a triangle had to be 180 degrees. With this notion rigidly in place, he said, "I could not move ahead. I was creatively blocked." Once he got away from this assumption of Euclidean geometry, the way opened.

Let us look at another recent example. Scientists long suffered from the false premise that it was beyond our reach to split the atom. In 1934 at the University of Rome, Enrico Fermi was the first to split the atom, but he did not know what he had done.

Here is how *Newsfront* magazine reported the experiment:

In January 1934, Fermi received news that the famous husband and wife team of physicists, Marie and Pierre Curie, had discovered artificial radioactivity by bombarding aluminum with fast alpha particles. He decided to try the experiment himself, except that he used recently discovered neutrons as projectiles.

Always a systematic man, he planned to test every one of the ninety-two elements starting with hydrogen. By summer, Fermi reached element ninety-two, uranium. He discovered that the uranium became radioactive and at least one of the radioactive products was none of the existing elements close to uranium. Fermi decided he had discovered a new element with the atomic number ninety-three, an element which does not exist on earth because it is too unstable.

For more than five years, scientists repeated Fermi's uranium experiments thousands of times and came up with the same answer, so great was the power of preconceived ideas.

Had Fermi been aware that he had split the atom, possibilities of an atomic bomb would have been obvious back in 1934. This could have given Hitler an arsenal with which to rule the world.

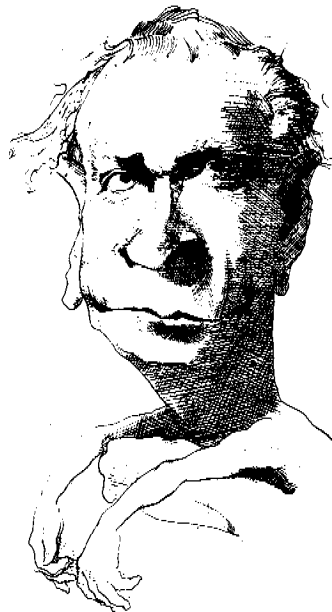
After the war, *New York Times* reporter William L. Lawrence asked Fermi how he had missed.

"It was a thin piece of aluminum foil, three mils thick, that stopped us all from seeing what actually took place," he answered.

In 1936, two Swiss physicists who were repeating Fermi's experiment left out the foil. The incredible reaction which followed caused them to agree—"the damned instrument is sparking," and they hastily replaced the foil.

When even the greatest of our scientists are trapped by their culture, consider the predicament of lesser mortals!

Biologist J. H. Woodger put it well, "Man makes metaphysics just as he breathes: without willing it and above all without doubting it most of the time."



MARSHALL MCLUHAN

The limitations of our assumptions.

Implications for Communications

What are the implications of the tyranny of our assumptions and our ethnocentric predicament for international communications today? Several years ago, Frank Stanton, then president of CBS, pointed out that with modern electronic means of communication we are now in the era of almost instantaneous communication; we are communicating, in some instances, close to the speed of light (186,000 miles per second in a vacuum).

This means that our ethnocentric premises are bumping into each other at speeds unknown in the previous history of humankind. This goes far to explain the turbulent state of the world today, with the tremendous clashes between societies and cultures.

Because several countries have atomic weapons, we are like scorpions in a bottle. Some nations have the potential to sting each other and a good deal of the rest of humankind to death.

What light can the student of semantics, general semantics, and linguistics throw on our human predicament? I believe they can help us, as Wittgenstein said, "fight the bewitchment of our intellect by means of language." Those who know with what they deal are free to deal.

In our international exchanges, we should bring our assumed premises out in the open—up to the surface—where we and the world can examine them. Some of our premises will be personal, some national. Each representative has a perpetual self-inventorying job to do in this area of premise evaluation. Each of us must also try to analyze the assumptions which underlie the words and symbols used by other cultures and individuals.

With the rapid development of communications, humans have released a force and accumulated energy that may be beyond our power to control. We must strive to master the media and

their energy—thought energy—that is more profound and exponential than atomic energy.

Our culture trains us and reinforces us to view the world through semantically colored glasses. One of the notions of general semantics fairly well confirmed by modern psychology is that we each see the world, taste the world, smell the world, touch the world, and hear the world differently. Of necessity we all start with a different point of view. As Einstein put it: "The light that enters your eye is never the light that enters mine."

Perhaps the Far East has been most aware of how much our previous experiences color the information we take in; the Japanese film *Rashomon* made the fundamental point of the great differences in the individual evaluation of "reality."

I am indebted to Walter Piston for the story of a prominent Chinese musician who, returning from his first experience of hearing a symphony concert, was asked which piece had pleased him most. He said he liked the first one best. His friend remarked that he showed excellent taste as it was Beethoven's "Leonore Overture." "No," replied the Chinese gentleman, "I mean the one before that—the piece they played before the conductor came on."

As Wendell Johnson says, the most important part of science is the language of science. Of necessity researchers have begun to pay considerable attention to the specialized languages of science. Each country has unfortunately neglected its everyday language—the language in which we do most of our thinking and perceiving, the language with which we try to solve our moral, political, religious, and psychological problems. We dismiss these as a mere matter of semantics. We handle them as if they were beneath the attention of any deeply concerned person.

We know that to some extent the limits of our language and symbol sys-

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Harry Maynard

tems determine the limits of our personal world. Then let us state the problems as best we can. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but definition is its father. We must recognize that the problems of inhumanity, poverty, nutrition, living space, and disease exist before language. To state a problem properly is not the solution to the problem. But it may be a major step in solving it. And to recognize the assumptive differences built into our everyday languages may be one of the first steps in adjudicating our differences.

The scientifically oriented individual looking at our everyday language is in a unique historical position. We can master these new communications media. We do not have to accept our culture or our language as facts, just as we soon will not have to accept the weather.

We can rise above our own vernaculars; we can transcend languages and, as Marshall McLuhan has pointed out, "the limitations of our own assumptions by a critique of them." He continues:

We can now live, not just amphibiously in divided and distinguished worlds but pluralistically in many worlds and in many media and languages. We are no more committed to one culture—to a single ratio among the human senses—any more than to one book or to one language or to one technology. Our need today is culturally the same as the scientist's, who seeks to become aware of the bias of the instruments of research in order to correct that bias.

If we do adopt this attitude toward both our cultures and our languages, we can then be more understanding of our differences and more creative in lessening stresses and resolving disputes. W

Harry Maynard, president of the General Semantics Foundation, teaches and lectures widely in the field of communication. He formerly worked for Time-Life International, where his positions included editorial director of special publications.