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ABSTRACT

The distinction between learning a first and a second language leads the author to discuss the nature of "high school French" and student expectations. Secondly, the notion of relevance and foreign language instruction is scrutinized in the light of conjectured needs of contemporary American culture. The third major area of discussion examines the concept of whether the humanities may be viewed as a unified field of study and the position of language study within such a categorization. (RL)

LANGUAGE, THE FRONTIER OF MEANING*

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I. "High-school French" has been a byword for generations. Myriads of American tourists have made the pilgrimage to France every year, determined to use the knowledge of French they had acquired in school. When they opened their mouths, however, the sounds they uttered, while bearing some relation to the French language, at the same time betrayed all too clearly their place of origin somewhere near Kalamazoo.

This state of things has been an endless source of mortification for the American foreign language teaching community. It is also one component part of the great American inferiority complex, which can indeed reach impressive heights of destructive self-castigation. One consequence of the "high-school French" syndrome has been the widespread dismissal of foreign language teaching in the schools, on whatever level, as ridiculous and substandard. There were all those kids wasting precious years of their lives studying French, and what did they get? "High-school French"! No wonder that the American national soul was incensed. Americans don't like to be short-changed. It must be either the genuine article, French as spoken in the Quartier Latin, or nothing at all. "High-school French" is just ridiculous.

Now I must say that I disagree with this point of view. I disagree profoundly, absolutely, and wholeheartedly, and this is the main impression I would like to leave with you today.

We cannot say anything meaningful about the learning and teaching of languages unless we develop awareness of the all-important difference between one's "first language", or more generally one's language of constant daily use, on the one hand, and the additional or "second languages" (oral and written) taught within the framework of school curricula.

Knowledge of the first language is acquired early in life in a kind of total immersion in a symbol universe. The psychological process is not yet completely understood. What we notice is only that in millions and millions of individual cases, the learning mechanism, apart from relatively few cases considered "pathological", functions with remarkable reliability. Children acquire the linguistic conventions and norms of their language community, whether urban or rural, standard or sub-standard, with amazing thoroughness and mastery of detail. Differences in mastery of the mother tongue emerge mainly on

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the level of visual communication (reading and writing). As we all know, Johnny can't read and his attempts to express himself in writing in English are rather pitiful. In this field, however, complete mastery, though presumably not attainable by more than a substantial minority, is at least a meaningful goal, and one is indeed justified in speaking about great shortcomings in the educational system, if wide departures from the rules of correct visual communication turn out to be too common. With the "first language", mastery is an appropriate standard.

Second or foreign languages, however, are an entirely different matter. Communication across the boundaries of one's own linguistic community occurs in an existential framework that differs profoundly from that of "first language" communication. The main point is that a few hours a week in school can produce nowhere near the effects of total immersion. In other words, foreign language skills, acquired in school only, are inevitably substandard from the viewpoint of the community whose language is being studied. True bilingualism is not altogether rare, of course, but it is never acquired in school alone. It presupposes immersion in two language systems.

The kind of perfectionism which manifests itself in the disparagement of "High-school French" is based upon a double misunderstanding. For one thing, it disregards total immersion as a necessary condition of true bilingualism. For another, it disparages language teaching in school, for doing only what school education as such can do and nothing more.

But let us look for a moment at what the student can and does get from learning a foreign language in school, it being understood that he will not "master" the language in the way he does his own. He will, to put it briefly, acquire some partial communication ability on some level intermediate between total inability to communicate and total possession of the language. Any such step, however, has momentous existential significance.

When we look at a text written in unfamiliar script, we cannot make out anything; by the same token, we cannot understand a word of what foreigners say if we have never been exposed to their language. The essential difference is between no communication at all and some communication, the transmission of some "meaning" or information.

In other words, "High-school French" or Quartier Latin French is not the point at all. What scholastic foreign language teaching can give the student is some linguistic, communicative ability beyond his own language community, that is an enlargement of the fundamental, most specifically "human" ability, the ability to communicate. Foreign language teaching in school has

great importance from this point of view, because the conditions for achieving true bilingualism are satisfied only in relatively very few cases. (I mean, of course, primarily the bilingualism of speakers whose first language is English. The bilingualism of immigrants or members of linguistic minorities acquiring English as their second language is a different matter.)

It is not necessary to go into all the various aspects of the acquisition of some (though necessarily imperfect) foreign language ability. Everyone can think of many relevant examples. I shall mention only the well-known example of the tourist: no matter how bad his French or Spanish or German or Russian may be, if he has at least some basic elements of the language at his command, he can gradually arrive at an understanding with any member of the host community. Little as this is, it is infinitely more than purely extralinguistic communication.

Generally speaking, language as a communication system contains in itself the instruments needed for improving the level on which it is being used. A small vocabulary, for example, can be enlarged by consulting the dictionary. If one wants to perfect his use of a language, practice and more practice is the best method. The point is, however, that one already places himself in the communication circuit of any one language if his course of study takes him far enough to enable him to improve his communication ability.

This enlargement of communication ability may provide considerable practical advantage for the individual. In addition to this, however--and this is by no means a secondary or non-essential point--, it also can be viewed as a sort of game. Study of foreign language, on any level, is a provocative, intriguing exercise. It puts the learner in contact with a symbol system broadly homologous with his own, but at the same time also characteristically and systematically different. The point about moving between languages is that a simple code defining equivalent transformations--like a simple cipher--does not exist. No "key" reducible to relatively few transformation rules relating symbols with symbols can bridge the distance between live languages. "Keys" are usable only for artificial languages. This difference is fundamental, regardless of what we think about the future possibilities of computerization.

I shall briefly mention one more essentially illusory approach toward bridging the gap between "first" and "second" language: the achievement of "perfect mastery" over the sound system of the language to be learned. It has long been assumed that children can learn the authentic pronunciation of any sound used in their linguistic environment up to a certain age; this has usually been explained in terms of the physiology of speech

organs and their development. At one time, this was used as the master argument for FLES. However, authentic pronunciation, though surely useful in itself, can in no way be equated with linguistic mastery and competence. Pupils in elementary schools can be drilled to the point where they will be able to ask for a pound of potatoes in an Amiens grocery with accents such that they might have been born there, but this is very different from speaking French like a Frenchman. When our FLES graduate moves on to other situations and expresses himself on matters more complicated than buying potatoes, the Frenchman will discover in no time at all that he was not born in Amiens. It is indeed one of the baffling, frustrating, but at the same time endlessly fascinating, aspects of language study that even ideal perfection in a limited category of language use may well co-exist with linguistic incompetence with regard to language use as a whole. The only thing that we can safely say is that no mechanical criterion exists to define "perfect" command of any one language. There is no all-or-nothing distinction between perfection and less-than-perfection. The only all-or-nothing distinction in this field is that between some communication and no communication.

II. I hope that I have made it clear that nothing is further from my intentions than to advance inflated claims for FLES programs--either the one that I am associated with or any other. All of us assembled here have our experiences in the field of foreign language teaching, and we know that we cannot turn out classrooms full of master speakers of foreign languages. If I defend FLES programs and other foreign language teaching activities in the U. S., it is only in the sense that I shall argue the inapplicability of perfectionist criteria of any kind. Meaningful evaluation is possible only on the basis of what schoolroom teaching of foreign languages can produce, depending, for example, on the students' varying linguistic ability.

At this point we must face some problems that I have not yet taken up, although they have received much attention in the profession. I am referring to the problems connected with the "relevance" of foreign language teaching. More than anything else, this is a problem of the individual student; it has to do with strength or weakness of student motivation. We have heard many reports that students denied having gotten anything valuable out of their foreign language studies. Language courses all too often impress the student as a distasteful chore. With such attitudes prevalent, foreign language teaching clearly cannot accomplish much.

But why do such negative attitudes exist? It would be easy, no doubt, to indicate a great number of contributing causes. One reason for the rejection of foreign language study in this country is surely related to the position achieved by English as a kind of lingua franca, a universally used vehicle of communication

across language barriers. In other words, objective conditions simply do not provide enough pressure to generate motivation for the learning of foreign languages. Things are very different for the members of all other language communities. The teaching of English presents no motivational problem in any country, large or small, Western or Eastern, regardless of political and ideological cleavages. One of the problems we, as foreign language teachers in this country, are faced with is how to make the student see the positive aspects of broadening the range of his linguistic capabilities as part of his mental growth. Clearly, however, this cannot be achieved by compulsion and fiat. Either the student's interest is awakened or not. And it is not terribly difficult for him to formulate "good", or at least superficially convincing, arguments against devoting his time to studying languages.

Language learning, for example, can be added to some study of the literary classics of the language in question. Nothing is simpler than to dismiss this part of the program of study with the all-purpose argument that the classics are all dead and hence have nothing to say to members of the atom bomb generation or the Sputnik generation or the Apollo 11 generation.

There would indeed be a lot to this argument if changes occurred simultaneously and at the same speed on every level of the human condition and in every compartment of human culture. It does not, however, require any great mental effort to discover that this is simply not so. The technological leap from the pre-atomic to the atomic age has indeed been tremendous, but it was neither preceded nor accompanied by any appreciable change in the basic genetic pattern of the human organism.

Certain features of human culture, particularly language, though by no means as static as the genetic endowment, change far more slowly than does the technological environment. The argument against studying classics would indeed be cogent if for any momentous breakthrough in technology, a corresponding change in the linguistic symbol system occurred. But no such thing happens; Americans continue to use their language without any appreciable change since the successful atomic test at Alamogordo in 1945. This decisive technological historical event in fact contributed very few elements to the language. We may mention, of course, the new connotations of older terms (atom, nucleus). As new coinages we may mention "fallout" and in the strategic context "deterrents". The age of space travel produced "countdown", "splashdown" and a few others. The Apollo flights also yielded an extremely meager linguistic harvest; at this point I can only think of "module" in a specific moon travel sense.

Thus the changes which occur perennially in linguistic systems are not related to the emergence of major or particularly momentous technological breakthroughs. What they reveal is something more directly related to the communication aspect of the language: the need to express and communicate to others novel experiences, anxieties, aspirations that had never been formulated before because the environment did not impress them upon the individual. Secret or semi-secret generational languages are, of course, by no means a new thing. They had already existed in the Middle Ages. What seems to be new in this communication area today is the changed function of the special generational languages and symbolisms. There is more intense and more pointed hostility involved in the development and use of specific youth symbols today than, say, in the Twenties with their proliferation of age-related slang. And the catastrophic darkening of existential prospects resulting from the advent of the A-bomb has much to do with this. But this mutation of the environment did not produce that effect upon the cultural environment and the communication universe which so many observers attributed to it. It did not drain the meaning out of the existing corpus of classical literatures in any language. This indeed is that fairly mysterious side of language to which I referred earlier: namely, that no symbol use either exhausts the meaning of any human situation or is constrained within the confines of such situations. Communication by language is by its nature something inevitably and irrevocably transcendent. We need have no fear that if we study a literary text created, say, in the Fourteenth or Sixteenth Century, we shall lose our contact with our Twentieth Century reality and be bodily transported back into some dead past. Come to think of it, I am not at all sure that being whisked back to Dante's Florence or Shakespeare's London would be such a bad thing, but bad or not, this is what will not and cannot happen. When a play by Shakespeare is produced today, nobody need fear that a "Globe performance" will be put on, giving the audience something unintelligible. I will admit that reading a classical text in the class is something else again, for it is the individual reader who must try to bring the text to life by understanding it. It would be a great error to minimize the extraordinary difficulties involved in situations that are as tense, explosive and conflicting as ours. Widening one's symbolic abilities, entering into a different linguistic system, responding to great poetry and prose--these can be highly rewarding and treasured experiences. But to have such experiences some peace of mind is needed. It is perhaps the language teacher's first and foremost task to create such a sanctuary. Whatever the tensions of our situation, great art has, in principle, the power to assert itself by virtue of its sheer inner strength and consistency. Once the youngsters get the taste of it, they will not find language study "irrelevant". The impression of "irrelevance" can arise only as long as the student stays outside the magic

circle. Once he has entered, the meanings he will share will demonstrate their own relevance.

Another related point concerns competition with other subjects and fields of study, subjects viewed as more "relevant" to the present situation. The greatest competition of this kind comes from the social sciences or what the high school and college generation, especially its most activist segment, means by social sciences. I don't want to go into detail on this, except to point to something not too widely recognized, namely that what is called "youth revolt" very often serves not to accelerate social change and promote innovation, but to return to the purity of some primordial moral orthodoxy. We find more innovation and experimentation in the "life-style" aspect of the youth revolt: the creation of new group forms, the drug culture, new dress styles and so on. Here indeed the winds of change blow so strongly that one may easily suspect that young people, experimenting with new life-styles, will be radically cut off from all earlier art, literature, and the like. Actual observation, however, shows that this is not the case. Searching youth can and indeed does enter into many symbolic universes regardless of time elapsed.

The widespread view that social sciences have particular heightened relevance to our age rests in part on misunderstanding. The youngsters who insist on "social science", and reject everything else, expect ready-made solutions to the problem which is central to their thinking, namely, radical, social change. My feeling is that if we yield to pressure for more and more social science and less and less humanities, we do not render our students a genuine service. Approaching the social sciences with the misconception that they will put the solution of all existential and social problems within easy reach, the young people are headed toward an inevitable letdown, a shattering, possibly quite dangerous disappointment. There is something poignant about the rate at which present high school and college generations run through their heroes and idols. They are quite knowledgeable about it, too. They can tell you who the great man was four years ago, three years ago, two years ago, and last year; and who today's great man is.

With humanistic studies the difficulty consists in awakening primordial interest in the subject. Once this obstacle is surmounted, later disappointment does not seem to be a major problem. Usually love of great literature and art is for keeps. It is just the "now" thing, today's so-called social science, that seems to be perishable.

I intend, of course, no reflection upon sociology or anthropology or the other social sciences cultivated by specialists. The value of these intellectual pursuits is beyond dispute. What

is questionable is the lasting pedagogical and cultural value of so-called social science as a shortcut to millennium. I am afraid that the "social science" solutions our time is producing are likely to obsolesce rather quickly. Our field, that of language, is remarkable in one respect: it is the one part of the school curriculum in which time and timelessness, change and permanence, are somehow blended. This synthesis, if anything, is what our divided and disintegrating culture needs most.

III. This takes us to another important problem area which is always present in the minds of workers in the foreign language field: the problem of the humanities as a unified field of study. The concept of "humanities" has gone through many strange vicissitudes during the past century or so. Up to the second half of the Nineteenth Century the foundation of higher education, comprising the secondary school as well as the college level, was by definition, and without the possibility of any doubt, humanistic. In some European languages there is still today an abbreviated symbolic tag designating the highest educational stratum: "the Latin-knowers". In Paris, the area where the University is located is called "The Latin Quarter". It took several decades of massive attacks, challenging the humanistic base of higher education on a number of grounds, to give a radically new and different orientation to scholastic instruction on its highest levels.

The pendulum indeed has swung very far in the antihumanistic direction. The turn of the century was the age of the great flowering of pragmatic hopes and quantifying, positive, empirical studies beyond the ken of traditional humanism. The prospect before humanism and humanistic studies was generally thought to be euthanasia, and that as soon as possible. And actual developments indeed went ahead rapidly in that direction. The classical languages all but disappeared from high school and even college curricula, and other humanistic disciplines, such as aesthetics and history of art, survived only in the diminished dilettantish guise of "art appreciation". In any case, humanism was not deemed to be a strenuous and serious field of study. The historical disciplines, which continued to hold a broad place in college, though by no means in high school curricula, gradually sloughed off their humanistic features and strove to be as positive, empirical, and objective as any of the exact sciences. Research increasingly turned to minute documentary details; great works of synthesis came out less and less often.

In a completely unheralded and unexpected way, however, more and more insistent talk began to be heard after the end of the Second World War about the need to reinstate the humanistic idea in the educational system. Curiously enough, the new emphasis on the need for a revised humanistic approach did not originate

with the exponents of the traditional humanistic disciplines. The need for humanism as the complement of positive, exact science, came from the vanguard of the natural scientists. It was the most advanced and most creative representatives of these disciplines, beginning with Einstein, who insisted upon healing the fragmentariness of the pure quantifying outlook by bringing back the 'litterae humaniores', the more especially human-oriented fields of knowledge.

This need is still making itself felt with spontaneous force among scientists cultivating the most advanced specialties of natural science, such as the more abstruse fields, say, of theoretical physics or mathematics. When certain sciences have reached a point in their development where in one field after another only a handful of super-specialists are able to communicate with one another, this is bound to result in rather widespread and oppressive feelings of isolation and loneliness. It is in order to escape the oppressive isolation of the mathematical or natural science specialist that even the greatest of them, an Einstein, a Schrodinger, an Oppenheimer, a von Neumann, turn to the humanities as a significant field of thought.

For the scientifically oriented, humanism emerged as a somewhat mysterious, enormously problematic, but at the same time eminently meaningful and essential field of endeavor. The point is, as it seems to me, that the scientists who turn toward the humanistic disciplines by no means demand the incorporation of the methods and techniques of natural science into the humanistic disciplines in order to render the latter intellectually respectable. Thus there is absolutely no reason to feel self-conscious about working in the fields of art, history, culture, as indispensable adjuncts of language teaching. What we have to do, first of all, in order to be effective in our own field, is to assert our cultural personality, the humanistic personality as strongly and purely as we can.

Treating language teaching merely as a matter of communication technique is hardly a significant or rewarding intellectual strategy. Linguistic forms and facts are embedded as essential components in wider cultural contexts full of humanistic values. I should like to express my wholehearted agreement with the point of view put forward with increasing insistence by many of our colleagues that language teaching is best handled as a branch of the humanities.

This point is related to that of "relevance" of language studies, to which I referred a moment ago. Learning a foreign language purely with an eye to everyday trivial language use indeed has little of the relevance that today's youth is craving. It is the living cultural reality within which this or that

cultural language is being used that fills language study with rich and fascinating significance.

The best thing certainly is to study language and the humanistic values connected with it on the spot. I think there are few young men for whom a sojourn in foreign cultural areas--whether Europe, Latin America, the Far East or Africa--produces no lasting inspiration. Sight-seeing, looking at famous monuments and the beauties of nature, is only a small part of this. More important are human associations and penetration into the humanistic background of language use. It is not just the native of this or that foreign country who enhances his status when he earns the human respect of the foreign visitor. It is an even greater gain for the latter when he discovers new worlds of human value to admire and cherish.

Direct human contacts, however, are beyond the reach of most of us. Our students may indeed make brief visits to selected points of tourist attraction. They can, however, get in touch with most of the humanistic background only through the mediation of pictures, films, lectures, and books. Language teaching can hardly be effective or come up to its potentialities unless it makes the fullest possible use of materials of this sort.

Expanding our specialty in the humanistic direction is certainly bound to increase our workload. I do not believe, however, that any of you is repelled by this added burden. In our profession, constant activity in the medium of beauty and human significance holds greater attraction than labor-saving reduction of the workload to a minimum.

It is in language teaching that the old adage "docendo discimus"--we learn by teaching--is particularly appropriate. In the language field and in the field of humanities in general, the learning process never ends; it fills out one's whole existence. Of course, we find something similar in other fields of specialization as well: scientific expertise must constantly be brought up-to-date by ceaseless study. The natural scientist, however, is mainly interested in keeping up with what others have added to his field. This also is important, of course, in the humanities; we all have to follow the literature. But the main emphasis is upon our own activity, our own creative penetration into the subject of our teaching.

Language and related disciplines should not, and really cannot, be cultivated within a closed circuit. We always come up to new frontiers, areas of transcendence beyond the limitations of our existence. It is not only the most highly qualified specialists who can venture beyond the new frontiers, as is the case in the so-called exact sciences. In the field of

significant communication and symbol use, everybody, students as well as teachers, must constantly venture beyond the frontiers reached. This is how real community ties are forged between teachers and learners. I am not saying that this kind of community has a monopoly on the humanistic studies. It is, however, in the humanities that it reaches its widest development. In the humanities we do not train specialists, but reach for the integral, total view. We want to remedy the loneliness and isolation of overspecialized man.

The much-wanted universality of the Renaissance man is, of course, a thing of the past. We cannot turn out Renaissance men on a mass-production basis. But there is another kind of universality that we as language teachers and humanists can seek to achieve. This is the common, communal possession of the meaning of the great symbolic creations of man, as we can discover and relive it in our own terms, in our particular situation. I am deeply convinced that our culture needs this as one way to counteract the great famine, the great starvation of meaning which is at the root of so many of our present troubles.

Within the realm of the humanities, of course, we have fullness and plenty rather than starvation of meaning. Inexhaustible treasures of beauty and greatness are waiting for us, so that we may discover them and make them our own. The achievement of success, however, is far from automatic. Our task is a deeply personal one; everything depends on how much and how close a personal contact each of us can achieve with young people to awaken their interest, to activate their sense of beauty. The climate of the times may not be favorable to our enterprise, but there is no reason to be defeatist. The enormous spiritual strength that is radiated by the Acropolis and Notre Dame of Paris, the arts of India, China and Japan, and all the tremendous pageant of the arts of mankind as it proceeds through the centuries, can pierce with its light even the accumulated gloom of our present at its most disoriented and anxiety-ridden depth. That is the light we are determined to follow; let it be our beacon toward a better, more human future.