

Language, Aldous Huxley

Language

I want to begin this discussion of language with a certain number of extracts from different authors which cast a lot of light on the subject. The first is from the autobiography of Helen Keller, where she describes how she discovered language as a child. She writes:

[My teacher] brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over my hand she spelled into the other the word 'water', first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house, every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.

Let us now set a number of other quotations against this, beginning with some from Goethe. Goethe was one of the supreme masters of the word, and it is very interesting to find this great manipulator of words speaking constantly against language. He says in one place, 'Gefühl ist alles; Name ist Schall und Rauch' (Feeling is everything, name is merely sound and smoke). Then there is the famous quotation,

Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,

Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.

(Grey is all theory, green life's golden tree.) And, again:

We talk too much. We should talk less and draw more. I personally should like to renounce speech altogether and, like organic nature, communicate everything I have to say in sketches. That fig tree, this little snake, the cocoon on my window sill, quietly awaiting its future, all these are momentous signatures. Indeed, a person able to decipher their meaning properly would soon be able to dispense with spoken and written words altogether. The more I think of it, there is something futile, mediocre, even foppish about speech.

Talleyrand, the great French diplomatist of the early nineteenth century and one of the great masters of practical life, said that 'Speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts'—which was undoubtedly true in his case. Another interesting observation about language was made by the great Christian existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard, who said that the purpose of language is to assist and confirm people in refraining from action. This is, in a sense, a development of the phrase in the Gospel

which says that 'not all of those who say "Lord, Lord" will enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

What is required, then, is not devotion or theological speculation, but right action. On the other hand, we find that language can be most horribly effective in promoting action, especially bad action. As Hitler wrote, 'All effective propoganda has to limit itself only to a very few points and to use them like slogans.'

We find a number of remarks about language in relation to religion in the epistles of St Paul—remarks the more curious when one reflects that it is precisely the language of St Paul's epistles which has dominated the whole Christian scene for nineteen hundred years. Paul says, in one well-known phrase, 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life' (2 Corinthians 3:6). And, 'We should serve in the newness of the spirit and not in the oldness of the letter' (Romans 7:6).

Finally, here is a passage from the works of John Locke on language in relation to philosophy. Although written nearly three hundred years ago it is still very much to the point:

Vague and insignificant forms of speech and abusive language have so long passed for mysteries of science and hard, or misapplied words have by prescription such a right to be mistaken for deep learning and height of speculation, that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak or those who hear them that they are but the covers of ignorance and a hindrance to true knowledge.

These quotations indicate very clearly the curiously ambivalent attitude towards language which we always have had and certainly still have, and which has prevailed throughout the ages. The phrase which opens the Gospel according to St John, 'In the beginning was the Word' (John 1:1), is perfectly true in regard to the beginning of the strictly human world. There is no doubt at all that the strictly human form of life arose when it was possible for man to speak. Language is what makes us human. Unfortunately, it is also what makes us all too human. It is on the one hand the mother of science and philosophy, and on the other hand it begets every kind of superstition and prejudice and madness. It helps us and it destroys us; it makes civilization possible, and it also produces those frightful conflicts which wreck civilization.

Now human behaviour differs from animal behaviour precisely because of the fact that human beings can speak and animals cannot. And we find that even the most intelligent animals, because they cannot speak, cannot do things which to us seem absolutely rudimentary and which very small children, as soon as they learn to talk, would be able to accomplish.

There was a very interesting experiment carried out by the great German Gestalt psychologist, Wolfgang Köhler, who worked for many years with chimpanzees. Köhler found that his chimpanzees could use sticks as tools to pull down bananas which were hanging out of their reach. They were intelligent enough to see that this tool—the stick—could be used for extending their arm and getting the banana. But Köhler found that the animals only used the stick to get a banana when both stick and banana were in view at the same time. If the banana was in front of them and the stick was behind them, they could not use the stick; they could not bear the banana in mind long enough to look around and pick up the stick and then use it.

The reason for this is quite clear. We have words for banana and stick which permit us to think about these objects when they are not actually in sight. Even a small child, knowing the words 'banana' and 'stick', has a conceptual notion of their relationship and is consequently able to think of 'stick' in conjunction with 'banana' even when the stick is behind him and to remember this long enough to pick the stick up and use it on the bananas.

The fact that animals cannot retain their knowledge of things over a long period, and consequently lose interest in them, accounts for their (to us) preposterous behaviour in many situations. They constantly interrupt one line of action to do something else, and they may come back to the first activity or forget it altogether. Human beings, on the other hand, thanks to language, are able to pursue one purpose or to act in relation to a principle or to an ideal over long periods of time. In a certain sense we can say that language is a device for permitting human beings to go on doing in cold blood the good and the evil which it is possible for animals to do only in hot blood, under the influence of passion.

This continuity is illustrated not merely in the life of individual human beings; it is also illustrated very forcibly in the life of entire societies, where language may be described as a device for connecting the present with the past and the future. While it is clear that the Lamarckian conception of the inheritance of acquired characteristics is completely unacceptable, and untrue biologically, it is perfectly true on the social, psychological, and linguistic level: language does provide us means for taking advantage of the fruits of past experience. There is such a thing as social heredity. The acquisitions of our ancestors are handed down to us through written and spoken language, and we do therefore enjoy the possibility of inheriting acquired characteristics, not through the germ plasm but through tradition.

Unfortunately, tradition can hand on bad as well as good items. It can hand on prejudices and superstitions just as effectively as it can hand on science and decent ethical codes. Here again we see the strange ambivalence of this extraordinary gift. It is like the fairy stories in which there is a good fairy and a bad fairy, but in this case the good fairy's gift, which is this amazing gift of language, also turns out to be the bad fairy's gift. It is one of the ironies of our destiny that the wonderful thing which Helen Keller so eloquently describes as a giver of life and creator of thought is also one of the most dangerous and destructive things that we can have.

In the beginning of human life, as a strictly human adventure, was the Word. But what happens when there is no language? What happens in very small children and animals? What is the life of what may be called immediate experience? Here it is worth making a small digression to consider some of the ideas of Indian philosophy. Indian philosophers have always affirmed that the thing which creates our specifically human world is what they call nama-rupa (name-and-form). Name may be defined as subjectivized form and form is the projection of name into the outer world, and the two create for human beings this world of separate objects existing in time. However, the enlightened individual goes beyond grammar. He has what may be called a 'grammar-transcending experience' which permits him to live in the consciousness of the divine continuum of the world and to see the one continually manifest in the many. The enlightened person is, so to speak, after the rise of language; he lives in language and then goes beyond it. But what sort of world is there before language is introduced? What sort of world is the world of immediate non-verbalized experience?

William James spoke of the world of immediate experience, in a very characteristic phrase, as a 'blooming, buzzing confusion', the idea being that the animal and the small child live in a chaos of sensations. But recent investigations in the ethology of animals and the perceptions of small children have revealed that immediate experience really isn't quite as blooming and as buzzing as James supposed. What emerges most strikingly from recent scientific developments is that perception is not a passive reception of material from the outside world; it is an active process of selection and imposing of patterns. The nervous system of animals and of human beings is contrived in such a way that it automatically sifts out from the blooming, buzzing confusion those elements which are biologically useful. So far as animals are concerned, it selects out of the confusion precisely those elements which help them to survive; the animal sees only two classes of objects—the edible and the dangerous.

One of the things which has been revealed in the study of animal universes is how exceptionally limited and extremely odd many of them are. The great German biologist Baron J. J. Von Uexküll wrote a great deal about what he called the *umwelt* of the animals, the different universes in which creatures of different classes and species live. The subject is one of immense fascination. It makes one realize how extremely arbitrary our idea of reality is, though our idea of reality is incomparably greater than that of even the highest of the lower animals. Goodness knows what sort of a world a creature with more effective senses and a better mind than ours would live in!

As an example of the strangeness of some of these animal universes, let me cite the case of the frog, which was communicated to me recently by Patrick D. Wall of M.I.T. Apparently the recent researches on frogs indicate that, although the frog has mechanically very good eyes, it sees in a very limited way. Evidently the buzzing, blooming confusion comes in at its eyes, but what its nervous system selects out of the innumerable *sensa* which come in is limited to that which moves. One can imagine a frog sitting on a water-lily pad and looking down into the water. There is a minnow swimming, and as long as the minnow swims, the frog sees it; the minnow stands still for a little and immediately it disappears from the frog's universe; when it starts swimming again, it enters into the frog's world once more and goes on. The frog's universe must therefore be unutterably strange, a continuous emergence and disappearance of objects. What on earth would a frog's philosophy be—the metaphysics of appearance and disappearance? There may be frog *Platos*, for all we know, who would devise the most extraordinary systems to account for this fantastic reality.

Much more limited universes belong to animals of lower levels of organization than the frog. Even animals as high as dogs and monkeys quite clearly have entirely different kinds of universes from ours. They just don't notice certain things which to us are very important. The dog obviously doesn't notice the sunset or the flowers on the tree, which to us seem very beautiful. He just smells the trunk of the tree and finds something very satisfactory there.

When we come to human beings, we find that the nervous system selects from the buzzing, blooming confusion in the same way that the animal's nervous system selects, but it doesn't select anything like as rigorously. Much more comes through to the human consciousness than ever comes through to the animal, even to the higher animal. Such an enormous range of reality enters the human mind, there is such a great profusion

of material, that here James is quite right: in spite of the neurological selection and abstraction which has gone on, the profusion is a confusion. And here is where language comes in. We proceed to a higher level of abstraction by means of language and select in this conscious and semi-conscious or pre-conscious way those materials which are useful to us biologically; and, since we are not entirely at the mercy of our biological necessities, we also select those materials which are valuable socially or valuable from the point of view of aesthetics or what not.

The materials which we derive through these acts of abstraction are immediately translated into symbols which we can understand. We evidently have this innate tendency to turn all our experiences into more or less equivalent symbols, as well as an innate urge to order and meaning. The symbols may be of many non-verbal varieties, but by far the most important and the most highly organized symbol system is language. And it is through language that we impose symbolic order and symbolic meaning upon a profusion which, as it is apprehended directly, seems to us terribly confusing.

This process of abstraction and selection is extremely useful to us from a biological point of view. In fact, it is quite clear that we couldn't get on without it. It is useful to us as scientists and technologists in our efforts to control environment. It is also useful to us as social beings. But here we come once more to the ambivalence of the linguistic and symbol-making process. As we impose order and meaning upon immediate experience, it is just as easy for us to impose bad order and bad meaning as it is to impose good order and good meaning. We enjoy the process of symbolization; it is as though there was a kind of art-for-art's-sake pleasure in the procedure. But we very often find that in our enthusiasm for imposing order and meaning through symbols upon immediate experience we have made an awful mess of the experience and created a symbol pattern which leads us into endless trouble.

It is worth quoting a few examples of how this urge to order and meaning has somehow gone astray. One of the areas in which human beings have tried to impose their own kind of order and meaning is the area of astronomy. Man, from earliest times, has looked up at the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars, and has been puzzled, as anybody in heaven knows, by the extraordinary mystery of their existence. He has tried to impose upon this mystery an order and a meaning which makes sense to him as an all-too-human being; and in many cases, as we see from the study of history, he has made profound mistakes in regard to the order and meaning of the heavenly bodies—mistakes which have cost him very dearly in his social and individual life.

Consider man's attitude towards eclipses. From time immemorial, eclipses have been regarded as portents which foretold disasters. They have been felt to be closely connected with human life—and always in an extremely dangerous way. On the 27 August 413 b.c. there was an eclipse of the moon. This particular eclipse of the moon was of great historical importance because it was observed by Nicias and the Athenians, who were at the time besieging Syracuse in Sicily. They had been in considerable trouble and it was quite clear that they ought to go home, that they would probably get into much worse trouble if they stayed on.

An eclipse was profoundly unlucky in the symbol system of the Athenians; in their search for order and meaning in the universe, they had made the decision that a journey should never be started in the neighbourhood of an eclipse. So Nicias decided to postpone the return to Athens for at least a month, with the consequence that his entire fleet was destroyed

and his entire army was taken prisoner by the Syracuseans. If you have this hunger and thirst for order and meaning and are not patient enough to look into the real nature of the order and meaning, but insist that the universe is meaningful in terms of your all-too-human wishes and desires, you will certainly get into trouble.

A similar example of the extreme danger of having turned the universe into the wrong kind of symbols was illustrated by the Aztecs. They, too, wanted to make some kind of sense and order of the celestial phenomena, and they concentrated primarily upon the sun. Unfortunately they anthropomorphized it and felt that in order to keep alive, the sun must be constantly fed—and one of the things that they thought the sun needed was the blood of sacrificial victims.

As anybody who has read Aztec history knows, they had the peculiarly unpleasant method of sacrifice of ripping the heart out of the victim and holding it up to the sun. The necessity of providing the sun with a continual supply of human blood imposed upon the Aztecs the foreign policy of continually raiding their neighbours for victims. They did their best not to kill people in battles, but to take them alive; and they would bring them back to Mexico City and sacrifice them at the rate of twenty thousand a year. Needless to say, this procedure did not make them very popular with their neighbours; when the Spaniards arrived, a great many of the neighbours of the Aztec kingdom went over to their side, and this accounts for the almost miraculous success of Cortez and his tiny band in overthrowing the Aztec empire.

These two examples show how dangerous it is to try to impose symbolic order and meaning upon the world before you really understand what the world is like. Nevertheless, we shall always do this because it is very difficult for human beings to tolerate the mysterious as such—what theologian Rudolph Otto calls the *Mysterium tremendum* of the world. It is so terrible and inexplicable that he has always had to put up a smoke screen of symbols between it and himself. In one of its functions, it may be said that language is a device for taking mysteriousness out of mystery. We have always done this, and unquestionably in future times historians will see that we are still doing it, perhaps not as flagrantly as the Aztecs or the Greeks did it, but probably very badly.

This tendency to impose premature order and meaning upon the universe is illustrated in the culture of the Middle Ages. As the great French historian of medieval art, Emile Mâle, points out, in the Middle Ages the idea of a thing was always more real than the thing itself. The study of things for their own sake held no meaning for thoughtful men. The task for the student of nature was to discover the eternal truth which God would have each thing express. We may now ask ourselves what were the eternal truths expressed by individual things in the Middle Ages: They were not generalizations based upon the humble observation of facts; medieval scholars were simply not interested in the humble observation of facts. They were only interested in illustrating in the external world something that they had read either in the scriptures or in the Greek philosophers whom they regarded as authorities.

We may say that the proper relationship between words and things had been reversed during the whole of the Middle Ages. The proper relationship, I presume, is that words should be regarded as arbitrary symbols standing for things. But the men of the Middle Ages looked at it the other way around. They regarded things as being illustrations of some general abstract principle to be found in Aristotle or in some part of the scriptures. As one reads medieval literature, one begins by being highly

entertained by the extraordinary phenomenon of allegorical botany, of parables in natural history, of astronomy which tells fortunes.

But in a very short while—certainly I speak for myself—one becomes terribly oppressed by the awful humanization of nature. One has a sense of being boxed into a world where everything has a suffocating feeling of humanity instead of being other than humanity. To use a phrase of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the medieval world is one where everything 'wears man's smudge and shares man's smell'. It was only when this reversal of the relationship between words and things was changed, as a result of the new interest in science, that we entered a world where nature is refreshingly other than in the all too human world.

In our own time, we find that all the most horrifying aspects of contemporary life have arisen precisely from this wrong relationship between symbols and words. All the totalitarian tyrannies of our time have been based upon the wrong relationship of things and words; words have not been regarded by them as symbols arbitrarily standing for things, but things have been regarded as illustrations of words.

Take, for example, the whole Nazi racial doctrine. This would have been impossible if individual Jews and gipsies had been regarded as what they were—each of them a separate human personality. But they were not so regarded. Instead each of these persons was reduced to being merely the illustration of a pejorative label; the word 'Jew' or the word 'gipsy' was regarded as a category. And the individual humans, who were of course the only realities, were assimilated to this category; they were made to be merely illustrations of a bad category, which as such could be exterminated with a perfectly good conscience. What was being exterminated was not really a human being; it was merely the illustration of an idea.

We see the same thing under the Communist regimes, where individual human beings are lumped together merely as illustrations of capitalism, imperialism, cannibalistic bourgeoisie, and so on, and as such are regarded as something sub-human which it is permissible to destroy. There is no doubt at all that this tendency is one of the most dangerous which we have to face. It is one of the highest prices we have to pay for the inestimable benefit of language. We are forced to accept—because we accept the grammar and syntax of our language—the idea that whole classes of real individual things are in fact merely the expressions of some diabolic principle.

After all, one can say that wars can really only be fought if the purely human individuals engaged in them are disregarded and the opposite side is simply equated with the concretization of a bad abstraction. This is in fact what all war propaganda is: it is making people on our side believe that people on the other side are merely the concretization of very bad abstractions. I think the democratic countries don't go quite as far in this as the other ones have done, but it remains an appalling danger.

Now let us consider the dangers on an intellectual level of having a wrong form of order and meaning in the world. A few years ago I became very interested in the history of what used to be called 'animal magnetism' and was later called 'hypnosis'. When one examines the history of this very strange subject during the nineteenth century, one is flabbergasted by the attitude of official medicine, and, to some extent, of official science in general, towards the subject. Because the Victorian Weltanschauung had taken a certain form and the urge to order

and meaning had stressed the fact that material objects were somehow much more real than psychological events, it was quite impossible for most medical men to behave in any kind of scientific or even rational way towards the phenomena of animal magnetism and hypnosis.

The whole theory of hypnotic anaesthesia was fully developed by James Esdaile in 1846, before the invention of chloroform and ether, and before the invention of aseptic surgery and antiseptics. Not only was Esdaile able to perform a great number of major operations which had never been performed before, he was able to reduce the death rate following surgery, which was then 29 per cent, to 5 per cent. One would have thought that the medical profession would have sat up and taken notice, but all that Esdaile got for his pains was to be hounded out of the profession, called a quack and a charlatan, and forbidden to practise at all.

It is extraordinary that the recently published textbook of Dr Milton Marmor, the anaesthesiologist at Cedars of Lebanon in Los Angeles, really just takes up where Esdaile left off 113 years ago, that simply from pure professional and academic dislike of unfamiliar ideas, this immensely valuable procedure was allowed to remain completely or virtually unexplored for more than a century. This wasn't merely a malignancy; the members of the medical profession who persecuted Esdaile and his followers were completely the prisoners of their system of order and meaning, which had been developed in the past century or two, and they could not escape from it.

Undoubtedly the future will show that there are plenty of semantic prisons in which we are confined today which do not permit us to think straight about all kinds of very important subjects. It will undoubtedly be clear to the historians a hundred years from now, but it is not clear to us what these prisons are. We can only be quite sure that there are plenty of them.

The end