

The old linguist's beliefs

by

Ernst Lewy

The question: What is the object of Linguistic Science, seems rather empty, as long as we are occupied with our daily doings, working on the fascinating and countless difficulties that confront us in investigating any language. To recover from the captivating confusing detail, from a routine often repeating itself, we lift up the eyes unto the hills, to reflect on meaning and purpose of our work.

The greatest linguist of our times, Hugo Schuchardt, maintained that there is one linguistic, and I agree wholeheartedly — although there are many varieties of history and philology. Up to the present, even when I have tried to describe the varying structures of different languages (a good occasion indeed for producing methodical stuff) I have strictly avoided talking generalities. Only some 20 years ago I risked 8 pages on *Das Wesen der Sprache*. Now again, drawing nearer to the goal I may be allowed to confess the ideas which are the driving force in my attempt.

Without a satisfactory notion of the object of my science, a definition or description of it, I always felt that my work would be somewhat similar to sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

The definitions of language I have learned in my youth, 40-50 years ago, all contained the word: *means* — as far as I remember. Language was, then, a means to make oneself understood, or to express one's thought, or oneself. I think, it has become obvious in the meantime, not only to myself, that these definitions do not suffice. We have learned that language has a power of its own, transgressing the bounds of a «means». Although not a being

outside human nature, not a thing at all, it seems autonomous. We have seen the terrifying changes of the meaning of words, once recorded by Thucydides as a characteristic of war-time, changes working on the whole of a semantic system, e. g. in Germany. And we now see one small, but horrifying symptom as a result of this: a letter, or a newspaper from within Germany often is written in a language, almost unintelligible to German persons who once knew German quite well. Nobody to-day thinks it worth mentioning that Schleicher thought, language was a thing, a product of nature. It was a mistake of the great man. Yet now we understand better than ever, how he could fall in it.

We must try to understand, what is essential in language, without knowing its origin or future, and must avoid including the purpose in the definition. The question about the essentials of language is important. A period of civilization reveals its innermost faith by its conception of language. During the last generations many great scholars who had done good work in many fields, have felt the urge of this subject. I mention Vossler, de Saussure, Gardiner. I hope, I have learned something from them, but I do not accept their conclusions. They all have made distinctions within language; they distinguish monologue and dialogue; *langage, langue, parole*; speech and language. With all possible energy I contend, although looking for the different materials building the wonderful edifice of every language (please forgive me the simile)-there is a unity in every language, as there is, perhaps in the same sense, a unity in every human being. I add, language can be produced, or re-produced, only by a living personality (N. B. to-day the record of a gramophone and its use by the wireless, the machine abstractizing the human voice), to which is given the capacity for language, but generally speaking the capacity for one language only. Ruskin observes well: It takes a whole life to learn any language perfectly.

The wonderful description of language we owe to Humboldt embraces many of the momentous points. He says, Language is «the work of the mind, always renewed, to make the sound the servant of the thought». Since Gardiner's analysis of the matter

I am no more fully satisfied with this description. For there is a considerable part in language produced without any thought. At the same time there is much in our intellectual life that is indeed not expressed at all in our language. We can hide things away which are very important in our intellectual life.

In his description of language Humboldt did not neglect that insoluble riddle, the connection of meaning and sound, always changing in the different languages. It does not help to understanding to call this connection arbitrary. I think it wiser and more sincere to call it the enigma that it is. But I shall not forget Jespersen's attempt to push further the question in a sober way (e. g. in his treatment of the meaning of the sound «i»).

A proper definition of language should deal sufficiently with its second quality which we face: its astounding regularity. This regularity which is peculiar to every language in a different way is stamped on the mind of every speaker of his mothertongue so strongly that he can hardly avoid the regularities of his own mothertongue, when he as an alien speaks a foreign language. The order of words is almost indestructable. To prove that I refer to my own case. To tell the truth, I often have a feeling, as if only my own language is the right one for myself, and my deviation from this is almost a crime, or at least a lie. A change of language changes the mind for the worse, it seems indeed, weakens its faculties, as far as I can see, hear, and understand. Knowing that, it is somewhat hard to give a confession in a foreign language.

To prove all these generalities, I should have to give my own—linguistic—biography. My own limited experiences mostly during the last ten years have taught me much of my linguistic philosophy. And not only my linguistic philosophy. I have learned that there is an order in our fate, connected with our language, a kind of system, we do not observe quickly; a connection between the happenings of childhood and youth, and the events of middle-and old-age. Although we can not trace the relation of cause and effect to each other, we guess a kind of connection between acting and happening. We are confronted in our life

with a system of relations. The word «system» has been used often in describing linguistic facts. I shall give some examples, how it can be done.

It is a platitude, that a man's speech gives his ideas by the vocabulary he uses. Take the most generally known single piece of speech and language, the Lord's Prayer. The most important notions of human moral life are united here. It takes a human life to try to understand them. The mediaeval commentator understood well, that the one word «Father» here expresses the idea of human brotherhood. Once I did not understand this line: «give us this day our daily bread». The last ten years have taught me as they have many others, why Jesus taught his pupils, i. e. the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the European man, to pray so. The real acquisition of a man's vocabulary may mean a spiritual rebirth, a mental revolution.

Take another example. The word «Uebermensch», super-man, was coined by Goethe. A dangerous idea by itself, without any doubt. Nietzsche took this word into his vocabulary and the idea behind the word became a cornerstone of his systes of hybris: «Der Königsberger Chinese», the Chinaman of Königsberg, as a description of Kant; der «Moraltrumpeter von Säckingen» as a description of Schiller; «Sklavenmoral», slave-morality, as a name for Christianity; «die blonde Bestie», the blond beast, as a kind of ideal; «der Wille sur Macht», the will to power, *lubido dominandi*, *lubido potentiae*, *potentiae cupido*, ἡ ἐπιθυμία τοῦ βούλεσθαι ἄρχειν τῆςχῆς as the driving force, not only in politics. Hazlitt remarks well, Shakespeare knew «that the love of power, which is another name for the love of mischief, is natural to man». It may be worthwhile to note whom Thucydides characterized by the words ἐπιθυμία, ἐπιθυμέω Alcibiades.—Nietzsche went as far as to write, in the prayer-like lines to the star—: Mitleid soll Sünde für dich sein, compassion shall be thy sin. Such words, and the ideas behind the words, forced an weak uncritical brains infested already with super—nationalism—were they not bound to breed the idea of masterrace, of Herren-Rasse? It was a necessary consequence that the linguistic sys-

tem of Nietzscheism led into abyss, The language of individuals, becoming the language of human communities, rules these by force of the intellectual systems behind the single words.

It will be already clear enough how I have in mind to define language: language is equal to the intellectual systems of the speaker, these systems becoming voice and sound.

This seems to mark the scope of linguistic science.

The sounds of a language are its phrases and words, its grammar and vocabulary. So it is only natural that linguistic science is concerned with grammar and vocabulary of every language. The limit of this endeavour is our personal ability or inability. But grammar and dictionary, represented in sounds, form only a small part of the aims, which we linguists are keen to reach. The intellectual systems, on which every act of speech is founded, constitute the other part of linguistic science, a part sometimes rather neglected. Yet I think, only the knowledge, or at least the attempted knowledge, of these systems, will enable us to understand the bewildering mass of single facts, which hard working linguists have dug out.

Some more examples will show what I mean.

V. Brøndal, describing «Le Français langue abstraite» in a remarkable small book, has pointed out, that French has a general noun: *on*; a general connection between nouns: *de*; a general connection between sentences: *que*. It would not be difficult to denominate these features of the language, they seem to be fragments of an intellectual system indeed. Brøndal calls it «abstract». The name is not so important. The more important thing is that, as we can see, these three features of French are connected. I wonder if it is possible to prove it. He, who refuses to see the connection between these three important elements cannot, by force of logic, be forced to see it. It may be called evident, obvious without reasoning, known by intuition, to use the somewhat dangerous word, which however was used by Croce in this sense many years ago. I should say, that these three words represent a kind of intellectual system, or, to say not too much, parts of such a system. It is however obvious, that the system, to which

these three words belong, or seem to belong, does not suffice to describe the whole structure of this language.

Comparing French and Latin, we quickly observe that those three little «abstract» French words have no full Latin counterpart; and see three very common Latin words *semper*, *hodie*, *multum* superseded by French words the formation of which has something in common: *toujours*, *aujourd'hui*, *beaucoup*. It does not help much to understand why e. g. *multum* was replaced by *beaucoup*, by saying that «it came from the language of the merchants», or that «*multum* was not suited to survive». It survived in Italian and Spanish. An attempt of explanation or at least the insertion into a system, can be made when we consider words of similar meaning and formation: *toutàcoup*, *maintenant*, *bientôt*, *longtemps*. These words belong with *toujours* and *aujourd'hui* to that part of the general grammatical system, called adverbs, adverbs of time. French likes to express elements of this system in a way we can not at all call: abstract. I have not found a better expression to label it, than realistic, or naturalistic, in the sense of the literary Flaubert-Zola-realism. Again the name, with which we try to describe the character of these words, is not important. It is more important to see that the special structure of these words cannot be connected with the abstract structure of *on*, *de*, *que*. We learn that in one language different systems of conception may be used, and may be represented in different ways.

If we compare the structure of these two sets of French words with the corresponding ones in the other Romance languages, we might call them characteristic of French, as they do not exist in this, abstract and realistic, shape in the other Romance languages. But French is not illustrated fully by these two sets of expressions. There are other features of French common to this language and to other languages of the Atlantic region, e. g. the isolation of flexion (*de la mère* = *matris*, *je suis venu* = *veni*) is more or less common to almost all languages of the Atlantic region—not so much to Irish—and so, cannot be considered as a characteristic feature of French. Thus, there are features of

one language, systematically connected with each other, but connected with features of other languages, too. In analysing a language, it will be no easy task to determine: 1) which features of the single language form a system; 2) are these systems connected with each other, or separated; 3) are there features in one language common to this and other languages?

This is not the place to give an exhaustive characteristic of French. We miss so much the knowledge of Gaulish which has affected the development of Latin as spoken in Gallia, as the people speaking Latin in Gallia, remained Celtic and Pre-Celtic. One little thing may be noticed: the Gaulish names, composed of two adjectives as *Ollc-dagus*, *Dago-marus*, find a correspondence in such occasional French names as *Bon-doux*, *Beau-sobre* (and in some parallels in Irish). This looks like a feature, which has come down from Gaulish to French, as this kind of compound names is a rather rare thing as far as I know.

I quote an example which I met the other day, of elements in a language systematically belonging together. There is in Russian a kind of perfectivation of the verb: the preterite of the verb *vzjati* «take» is combined with the preterite of the other verb with the help of a connecting particle, e. g. *vzja-l i* (or *da*) *posho-l* «he took and went», and means «he went away quickly». The combination of two verbs, the first meaning «to take», *each in the same form*, marks «an unexpected and quickly and decisively finished action». A similar way of expression exists in some Finno-ugrian and North-Germanic languages. I ought to have seen from the fact that the verb «to take» produces a perfective meaning, that the verbs meaning «to drop, to loose» or «to throw» should produce a sense of «limited duration». Alas! although always an admirer of a-priori-reasoning, when displayed by my lamented friend Viggo Bröndal, I missed this chance of using it myself! Only on re-reading the Cheremiss texts collected by myself 30 years ago, and published 20 years ago, I see that the verbs *shuem* «to throw» and *koltem* «to let, to send», connected with a verbal noun (NB. not in the same form as the verb concerned), give to this verb a sense of *limited* duration. In the other languages, mentioned

above, I have not observed anything comparable; but we may yet find what now we are looking for.

The a—priori—reasoning cannot of course provide us with the facts, still less with the knowledge, how far they are distributed in various languages. The consistency of a system must not be the same everywhere. A grammatical system found in vestiges in one language, may be fully developed in another, or turned in a different direction. An example taken from the rather perilous ground of idiomatic expressions will show what I mean.

We compare a set of English and German idioms, their meaning almost identical, their structure almost completely different: I am hungry, thirsty, sleepy mich hungert, dürstet, schläfert (ro:

	ich habe Hunger, Durst, Schlaf)
I am well, ill	mir ist wohl, unwohl, übel (or: ich fühle mich wohl, unwohl)
I am (feel) cold, warm	mir ist kalt, warm
I am sorry	es tut mir leid (ich bedaure)
I feel sick, disgusted	mir ist übel, mich ekelt
I like, dislike, hate	mir gefällt, misfällt, ich kann nicht leiden
I pity, please, wonder	ich bedaure (mich jammert), mir gefällt, es wundert mich, ich wundere mich, möchte gern wissen
I don't care	mir liegt nichts daran

As well in English, as in German these idioms form a system to be described easily: concepts representing motions of the mind and physical sensations, are usually expressed in English by subjective verbs; in German, however, the impersonal way of expression is more usual. In some cases in German adverbs are used: gern, ungern, lieber, tast, leider (ich gehe lieber = I prefer walking), where English has the verbs: I like, dislike, prefer, like better, am inclined, afraid.

Comparing these two sets of expression one might almost involuntarily be induced to draw psychological conclusions: only by *describing* the English way of expressing these emotions

as a kind of pushing oneself into the foreground, as emphasizing the personal responsibility of the human being, one *includes* into the description of a grammatical relation, a picture of human psychology. On the other side, the German way of expression seems to subordinate modestly the speaker to an un-named force, the «ES». The political and historical situation of to-day seems to re-affirm such an interpretation, but at the same time warns us that this attempt to realize a grammatical structure, might be produced only by a moment's situation. In any case I should not insist upon the truth of my interpretation, but prefer to mention an English adjective and noun the meaning of which perhaps is to be connected systematically with those verbal expressions mentioned above: *self-conscious* and *understatement*. Self-conscious means—to quote H. C. Wyld—«over-conscious of oneself, of one's movements, behaviour etc. in presence of others easily embarrassed, awkward, shy»; in German it would be «befangen». An etymological translation into German: «selbst-bewusst» would mean the direct opposite: self-confident.—Understate means: Not to state fully or adequately, not to bring out all the points of; to minimize in statement; put forward with studied moderation; reverse of exaggeration. Understatement is the act of understating. I do not know any language as well as I know my mothertongue, but there is I think in the German vocabulary no corresponding word or expression. If one could form, in contrast to «übertreiben», the word «untertreiben», it would mean what understate means; but «untertreiben» would be a formation only to be used in humorous talk. The adjective «bescheiden» has a different shade, the «studied» of the moderation that is in understate, lacks here, the «inverted arrogance». Should not the same «over-emphasizing the personal responsibility» I sought in those English psychological verbs, be traced in these two words?

As antithesis is a good leader for thinking only in the beginning, I should like to subjoin some Irish idioms. Here an almost thorough - going way of expression is used. The word: system, here hardly can be avoided.

tà ocras, tart, codladh, fuacht orm	I am hungry, thirsty, sleepy, cold
tà eagla orm, tà sùil agam	I fear, I hope
is cuma liom, is maith liom	I don't care, I like
nì maith liom, is fearr liom	I dislike, I prefer

Nominal words (substantives, adjectives) are connected with the help of the «substantive verb»(estar) and «the copula» (ser) with different prepositions with which the pronoun is combined. «I am hungry» is in Irish: it-is hunger on-me, so to say.

Yet here this system is more developed than elsewhere. Idioms like: is beag orm è, it is small on me = I don't like it at all; is beag agam é, he is small with me = I have no great opinion of him, is mòr liom è, it is big by me = I think it too much; tà airgead agam ort, is money with me on you = you owe me money, show the same structure and a variety of meanings hardly to be guessed at from the meaning of the single word. The careful analysis of these facts of semantics will need much work. One feature connected with these idioms, however, shall be mentioned. Comparing examples as tà aithne agam ar «I am acquainted with».. = knowledge is with me on .. and cuir sè aithne ortha «he became acquainted with them»=he has put knowledge on them (this again compared with cuir eagla air «make him afraid»=put fear on him, cuir smacht air «keep him in subjection»=put restraint on him, tà an fuar ag cur air «the cold is affecting him»=is the cold with putting on him), we see that the verb cuirim «put, place» is something like a systematical supplement to the substantive verb. We might suggest, reasoning a-priori, that there might be others, too.

I shall not venture any «psychological» explanation of this remarkable system of expressing one's feelings, not mentioned, as far as I know, in the books concerned with linguistics. I must say, it is very coherent and consistent, and so the thought may arise—as we like thinking that the consistent is the original—that this system came into existence in this linguistic area. But I see no way of proving that.

Or could we try it in this way? We see in full agreement the

meanings of English *but* and Irish *acht*, and, as well as in English as in Irish, the idea of contrast and exemption connected with, or derived from, a local conception, *but* connected with *out*, *acht* connected with *ass* «out of, from». If the idea of contrast started from a local conception, how the ideas of connection and of explanation could do that? English *and* represents an old inheritance, =Germanic *und*, Irish *agus* is Olde Irish *ocus* «near»; English *for* «because» was once a local proposition: «before», as Old Irish *air* that is: «for, before» and «because». The Irish system seems more consistent, and so I should be inclined to make it responsible for the English development, still more, as continental German has nothing that could be compared to the development of the meaning of English *but* and *for*; «because» being in German «*denn*» connected with the temporal adverb «*dann, then*».

Here we saw two languages near to each other in space in a systematic relation, and this relation induced us to suggest a historical connection in time. But «the persistent energy of things», the inner system of the world, the grammatical categories, may make that in very different languages words—and ideas—are connected with each other in very different ways, the same grammatical category having a very different form.

The Teutonic languages have, as one of their characteristic and most attractive features indeed, the so-called preterite-present verbs, forming by flexion and meaning a class among the verbs, in the different Teutonic languages somewhat differently developed and characterized (e. g. in English by not having an infinitive). They don't describe the action, as many verbs do, but the intellectual, the moral mode of an action, therefore being called in a most fitting mode: modal verbs. In Basque words representing similar ideas: *ahal* 'to be able', *ezin* 'not to be able', *nahi* 'to will', *behar* 'to be forced, need', *omen* = Spanish *dicen que*, German *sollen*, *othe* *peut-être*, *wohl*, *ohi* 'to use' are called auxiliary verbs or adverbs, being put usually before the verbal flexion, they themselves without any flexion. The same class of ideas has found in Basque and Teutonic languages a very different expression.

The whole question of the impersonal verbs which is nearest

to what was said about those English-German-Irish idioms, cannot be discussed here. Yet I shall mention some irritating details. That the French Latin school grammar translates *miseret me* and *pudet me* by *j'ai pitié* and *j'ai honte*, is not as remarkable as that Russian has, besides the subjective verb *xochu* to express «will, wish, long for» the impersonal formation too: *mnê xochetsja* «it is willed to me, is maith liom, I long to». Thus «I am hungry» is expressed by *mnê xochetsja êstj* «to-me is-wished to-eat», certainly an idiom rather different from the Irish *tà ocras orm*. Both expressions may be called impersonal, in so far as the person participating in the matter does not become the personal subject of the expression; but the difference is so strong that one feels it how necessary is an overhauling of the grammatical terminology. An impersonal expression, somewhat similar to the Russian mode, to express the idea «to wish, to will»—the least impersonal emotion we know about—is found in Armenian and Georgian, and in Georgian even for the idea «to think». This might indicate an intellectual system, very different from that represented by the famous *cogito, ergo sum*.

The contrast between linguistic systems seems to represent the contrast of different *Weltanschauung*, a difference of mentality, revealing itself as essential behind and through the bewildering variety of sounds and forms. The difference, however, between languages and mental systems behind the cover of sound does not mean that any language is objectively superior to another, as our taste for one or another cannot be ruled out by any reason. Nobody's like for his mothertongue can be restricted by way of logic and praxis. There is no yardstick to measure the powers of one language or another. I have found in every language other qualities of the human mind developed, and so I should think that a real and perfect international language should contain in itself all grammatical categories expressed in the different languages. To-day we are still very far from that as we do not possess any register of the grammatical categories represented in the languages, the wonderful variety of which seems to manifest more

intellectual power than the political actions of human beings seem to suggest. Here the cause of the linguist's optimism.

It was an error springing from the curious overrating of European civilization in 19. century—an error shared by the most opposite characters of the then German linguistics, as Schleicher and Steinthal, and repeated in other parts of the world still lately—that the Indo-European languages are the most perfect model of language—and poetry. To-day the regularity of Mongol conjugation does not shock any linguist, and the fine system of the Finno-Ugrian languages does not reveal to any linguist mental poverty. To-day cantos of the Kalevala, the Finnish epic of peasant-heroes, are—besides the Old Testament—regarded as the height of human poetry, for their humane perfection and bright beauty by which human beings are consoled and encouraged in dark days.
