THE DEFINITION OF THE WORD AND THE SENTENCE¹.

By ALAN H. GARDINER.

It ought not to have been very difficult, one would have thought, to analyse the difference between a word and a sentence. Everyone, whether philologist or layman, knows that these two have, so to say, a quite distinct 'feel' about them; 'yonder house,' or simply 'house,' yields no satisfaction, while 'yonder house is Tom's' does so, and it seems reasonable to suppose that the presence or absence of satisfaction is a vital feature in the distinction which we make in using the terms 'word' and 'sentence.' Yet when such great authorities as Hermann Paul and Wilhelm Wundt are consulted, we find this point wholly ignored. Wundt defines the sentence as "the splitting up into its parts of a whole that is present in consciousness²," and Paul defines it, in much more cumbersome fashion, as "the linguistic expression, or the symbol, for the fact that several presentations or groups of presentations have become combined in the mind of the speaker, and the means for producing a like combination of the like presentations in the mind of the listener³." A simple example will, I hope, finally demonstrate the insufficiency of such pedantic definitions. If I say to a friend 'come for a walk,' it is indeed clear, with Wundt, that the notion which I have in my mind is communicated to my friend piecemeal, but that friend would be very much hurt if he thought that my sole aim in thus speaking to him were to chop up for his benefit a transient phenomenon of my consciousness. Obviously something is left out in Wundt's definition, and what is left out is precisely any explanation why a sentence, as opposed to a word or a mere combination of words, always seems in a certain measure 'satisfactory'—satisfactory, that is to say, inasmuch as it is self-sufficient and complete psychologically and socially, even when, as occurs often enough,

¹ A paper read before the Philological Society, Dec. 2, 1921.

² "Die Zerlegung eines im Bewusstsein vorhandenen Ganzen in seine Teile." W. Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie: Die Sprache*, 2nd ed., II, 241.

³ "Der Satz ist der sprachliche Ausdruck, das Symbol dafür, dass sich die Verbindung mehrerer Vorstellungen oder Vorstellungsguppen in der Seele des Sprechenden vollzogen hat, und das Mittel dazu, die nämliche Verbindung der nämlichen Vorstellungen in der Seele des Hörenden zu erzeugen." H. Paul, *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, 4th ed., IV, 121.

it may also provoke resentment or dissatisfaction of one kind or another. The same objection holds good of Paul's definition: when I say 'come for a walk,' there is evidently something more intended than the mere communication from speaker to listener of a notion that has occurred to the former; somehow or other the dynamics of the situation is neglected in this definition, just as in that given by Wundt. The insufficiency of Paul's analysis is drastically revealed when such a question as 'is this Jones' house?' is compared with the statement 'this is Jones' house.' Here the same presentations or groups of presentations are combined in the speaker's mind and also conveyed to the listener, and yet the two sentences have an utterly different import. Could there be clearer evidence that the essence of the 'sentence' must be sought in some other direction? None the less, I have looked in vain for any more convincing analysis. The definitions due to English scholars are simpler, without answering objections of the type already brought; so Stout, "The sentence...is the expression of a unit of thought"; and Sweet, "The sentence is a word, or group of words, capable of expressing a complete thought or meaning¹." But why do we go about troubling our neighbours with our units of thought? Why do we inflict our 'complete thoughts' or 'meanings' upon them? Ought we not to be content with mere thinking, instead of launching our thoughts upon the air? Again, the often expressed view that a sentence alone can have meaning or convey a thought seems to attribute to the terms 'thought' and 'meaning' too restricted and technical a signification. To me, at least, it appears that if I say 'yonder house,' pointing at the same time, I do express a meaning and, in so far, convey a thought, though that meaning or that thought certainly does not constitute a sentence.

In a recent volume of the *Indogermanisches Jahrbuch* (vi, 1918), the various definitions of the sentence have been collected and critically examined by a scholar whose name I do not remember. Unfortunately, I have been unable to obtain this article, so I pass at once to my own opinions, which are the result of a strenuous effort to rid the problem of all abstractions, to look at Language in its setting of real life, and to regard sentences as the social facts, familiar from daily intercourse, which they obviously are. There are a thousand sentences spoken for every one that is written, and surely the right method of approach is to

¹ These and other definitions are collected conveniently by A. Noreen, *Vårt Språk*, v, 51-61. My friend Dr Grapow points out that Paul Kretschmer has understood the sentence in very much the same manner as myself but has omitted the essential reference to the listener in his definition; see Gercke-Norden, *Einleitung*, I, 516-7.

investigate speech, not as we find it in books or grammars, but as perhaps the most vital of all social phenomena, as the indispensable instrument of our social existence, where we use sentences at every moment to give or to ask information, to express wishes or give orders, or in some way to exert influence upon the minds of our fellows. Most writers on Language have, of course, been more or less alive to this standpoint, but Marty alone, so far as my reading goes, is entirely impregnated with it. His statement of the purpose of Language¹ agrees closely with my own definition, which runs: *Language is the name given to any system of articulate symbols having reference to the facts of experience, whereby speakers seek to influence the minds of listeners in given directions.*

This definition adds at least one new dimension to Language as usually viewed, namely the relation of speaker to listener. I do not mean to say, of course, that the relation of speaker to listener (with the converse relation) has been completely neglected by philologists; it is constantly cropping up in Paul, in von der Gabelentz, in Jespersen and in many other writers. But I do maintain that it is only very inconsistently kept in view. Still more is the neglect of this relation evident in the treatment accorded to Language in other sciences. Formal Logic is, as ever, the worst offender². Formal Logic lives, if I may be pardoned the expression, in a holy terror of becoming verbal; but as she pretends to abstract from words themselves, while never ceasing to employ them in framing her propositions and syllogisms, what hope is there that she should pay any attention to either speaker or listener? As regards psychology, I would not venture to dogmatize in so disrespectful a manner; but a few recent excursions into psychological literature suggest that here too there is more than an inclination to identify speech completely with thought, and so to ignore, if not the actual audible and articulate character of speech, at any rate the attitude to a listener which speech essentially implies³.

The four elements always present in normal speech, *i.e.* in speech as used in any social *milieu*, are (i) the speaker, (ii) the listener, (iii) the

¹ A. Marty, *Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der allgemeinen Grammatik und Sprachphilosophie*, I, 22.

² See Schiller, *Formal Logic*, 1912, for a trenchant condemnation of this discipline.

³ In the symposium entitled *Is Thinking merely the action of Language Mechanisms?* (this *Journal*, XI, 54 foll.) none of the writers lays stress on the fact that one of the stimuli practically always present when the language-habit comes into play is the proximity of a listener. Would Professor Watson's infant run all over the house crying 'box' (p. 86) unless there were either actually or potentially present some person accustomed to act upon the suggestion thus given?

things spoken of, and (iv) the actual verbal symbols or words. With these elements in mind we shall find it easy to give, not indeed quantitative, but at any rate qualitative definitions of both the word and the sentence. Language itself seems to retain a consciousness of the four distinct elements composing it, for when the verbal symbols have as their object of reference the speaker or the listener, these are not spoken of as 'they' or 'it' like any other thing or persons, but have designations of their own, namely 'I' and 'thou.' The fourth element, the verbal symbols, do not likewise claim a personal pronoun of their own, since their essential rôle is to efface themselves in favour of the meanings which they carry.

The principal types of sentences are statements, affirmative and negative, questions, imperatives with other hortatory forms of speech, and exclamations. The exactness or exhaustiveness of this classification does not matter for my purpose. Clearly the difference between these various kinds of sentence resides in the difference in each case of the speaker's attitude towards the listener: at one moment he supplies the listener with information, either by stating a thing or else by contradicting an erroneous impression; at another moment the speaker seeks information or addresses a command, or else makes an ejaculatory appeal for sympathy. These are, of course, by no means all the attitudes to a listener which speech can express; but for jests, taunts, threats, sarcasms and so forth Language has created no special forms. Now, since the various species of sentence, as above enumerated, have been universally recognized, it is little short of marvellous that the character common to them all has been universally overlooked. Clearly that common character must constitute the essence of the 'sentence,' and this essence consists in the presence of some volitional attitude towards a listener on the part of the speaker. Of course a sentence always does more than convey a volitional attitude of speaker towards listener; it always contains a reference to certain things or ideas spoken about. But to contain a reference to things or ideas is the characteristic of 'words'; every sentence consists of one or more words, though not every word is a sentence. My definitions of 'word' and 'sentence' therefore run:

A Word is an articulate sound-symbol in its aspect of denoting something which is spoken about.

A Sentence is an articulate sound-symbol in its aspect of embodying some volitional attitude of the speaker towards the listener.

Let us now put these definitions to the test. I begin with the stock-example of the word 'fire.' If I utter this word quite irrelevantly, at

least it has what may be termed dictionary meaning. It may, however, mean more than this; it may actually refer to a specific fire, if such is in my mind when I utter the word. But as yet the word gives no satisfaction, it is not a sentence; it states nothing, asks no question, gives no command, in fact has nothing about it which can suggest why the speaker thrusts it upon the attention of the listener. The listener, if there is one, may remark "what about fire?" This question, when analysed to the bottom, means "What do you mean *me* to understand about fire? How am *I* intended to understand the word fire?" Otherwise expressed, the listener demands some volitional attitude on the part of the speaker which will somehow involve and concern the listener himself. Now the word 'fire' may be spoken in such a tone, and in such surroundings, as leave no doubt as to the speaker's meaning. If he utters the word while rushing from a house with a scared face, it is quite obvious that he desires to communicate the fact that the house is on fire; or if he is an officer addressing the word to his men, arms having already been presented, then it is obvious that his intention is to give a command. In both cases 'fire' is at once a word and a sentence: it is a word inasmuch as it refers to this-house-on-fire or firing-of-those-guns, and it is a sentence inasmuch as a listener or several listeners are involved in the act of communication or command. Such one-word sentences are now admitted by all modern grammarians, and it is not to be supposed that any objection will be raised on this score¹.

A conceivable objection might, however, be found in the utterance of the word 'you,' which, when it occurs out of context, is certainly felt as a mere word and not as a sentence. And yet there is here, always present, an attitude of the speaker towards a listener. But my definition said 'volitional attitude' and not simply 'attitude.' *You, your, yours* and sometimes *our, ours* contain a reference to the listener as whole or part of what these words speak of; just for this reason they are words, but they are not sentences until they imply in addition a volitional attitude on the part of the speaker. If the question is put 'whom will Tom send?' and the answer is 'you,' then 'you' is a word by virtue of the fact that it refers to a thing spoken about, in this case the listener, but it is now also a sentence because the articulation conveys the information to the listener that it is he whom Tom will send. The same

¹ See P. Wegener, *Der Wortsatz* in *Indogermanische Forschungen*, 39 (1920), 1-26. In no book that I have consulted is there shown a better understanding of the true nature of Language than in the same author's *Untersuchungen über einige Grundfragen des Sprachlebens*, Halle, 1895.

argumentation will apply to 'yours' as answer to the question 'whose pen is this?'

Such exclamations as 'alas,' 'hurrah' or 'damn' may perhaps be quoted as objections. We feel them as self-sufficient and accordingly, it must be supposed, as sentences; sometimes, too, it will be admitted, they make a deliberate appeal to the sympathy of a listener, and so come well within my definition. For my own part, I am prepared to concede, however, that such exclamations might possibly come to the lips even in solitude. Now in such a case, I think, it is for the psychologist to decide whether there is any dual function on the part of the speaker causing him to act as listener as well as speaker. In articulate remarks addressed to oneself, such as sometimes undoubtedly occur, a speaker actually does seem to be acting a double rôle; if a man says to himself "You must do such and such a thing," this is an autosuggestion modelled on the form usually assumed by the suggestions of others; the coercive, imperative tone is borrowed from Language as a social phenomenon, and we are here dealing with a form of Language which is clearly secondary. The same kind of answer may be made if it is objected that the lyrical poet writes only for himself, though undeniably he writes in sentences. Sir Walter Raleigh in his essay on Style comments as follows: "Yet it were rash to say that the poets need no audience; the loneliest have promised themselves a tardy recognition. The poet seems to be soliloquizing because he is addressing himself, with the most entire confidence, to the small company of his friends, who may even, in unhappy seasons, prove to be the creatures of his imagination." Hardly less than poetry, many books of science and philosophy might at first sight seem to lay claim to emancipation from an audience; their sentences seem to state what is, and writer and audience are, to say the least, in eclipse. But when we look closer, the attitude towards a circle of readers is seldom far from the surface; no book is written without some desire to instruct, to convince, or to place on record for oneself or for others.

How far sentences, and not merely disjointed words, occur in silent thought is a question of deep interest, to which it is to be hoped that psychology will give us a detailed answer. So far as my own limited and unpractised introspection goes, though I am very conscious of verbal elements in ordinary thinking, yet it is only when I have some writing in view or when I wish to fix some conclusion in my memory that I am aware of framing complete unspoken sentences. If we were in the habit of thinking in finished sentences, surely the difficulty which is often

found in formulating a thought would not be experienced at all. In the cases to which I have referred, it may, moreover, be contended that there is a latent audience. But—and this is the important point—even if such is not the fact (the answer rests with psychological experiment) my definition of the sentence will not be invalidated. For of course it is possible for the sentence, as for almost anything, to be transferred to a usage for which it was not originally intended and where it ceases to be what it was designed to be except in the historical, evolutionary sense. Such a transferred use of the sentence is seen in what we are wont to call subordinate sentences, which, as every grammarian knows, are merely sentence-like equivalents of words, whether nouns, adjectives or adverbs. It is established that many subordinate sentences did actually originate in real sentences, real assertions, as for example noun-clauses of the type ‘I see that he is content’ from ‘I see that: he is content.’ How little of the true nature of a sentence there is in what we call subordinate sentences is well exhibited in such a case as ‘that he has gone proves that he does not care,’ where if we lop away the two so-called subordinate sentences there remains for the main sentence only the word ‘proves,’ which in its isolation no rational person will admit to be a sentence at all. Jespersen and others have pointed out the need for a radical reform in our terminology here¹.

On my definition the vocative will have to be a word-sentence, since it both names the listener and also invites his attention. Otherwise no alteration whatsoever will have to be made, so far as I can see, in our ordinary classification.

There is, however, just one objection to which I can give no quite satisfactory answer, though I fancy it is not of much importance. Occasionally a mere word may indicate an attitude of respect or disrespect towards the listener, and if the choice of that word be intended to please or offend, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that on my definition the word is then a sentence. Thus when a Frenchman, in addressing a close kinsman or intimate friend, suddenly replaces the pronoun *tu* with *vous*, this *vous* may often be practically equivalent to the sentence ‘I am very angry with you.’ Such overtones of meaning are perhaps the most powerful weapon that speech possesses. Meredith illustrates this point with consummate skill in a passage of *Rhoda*

¹ Jespersen, *Sprogets Logik*, 38–9. So, too, Paul, *op. cit.*, 296–7. *The Report of the Joint Committee on Grammatical Terminology*, p. 14, likewise recognizes the difficulty, for it recommends that in cases where a complex sentence “contains a subject and predicate of its own it be called the *Main Clause*, but that where it does not, it be called the *Main Predicate* or the *Main Clause*, as the case may require.”

*Fleming*¹, where the literal meaning of the spoken words sinks into insignificance beside the emotional values (added in brackets by the author) with which they are pregnant.

"Then he perceived in dimmest fashion that possibly a chance had come to ripeness, withered, and fallen, within the last scoffing seconds of time. Enraged at his blindness, and careful, lest he had wrongly guessed, not to expose his regret (the man was a lover), he remarked, both truthfully and hypocritically, 'I've always thought you were born to be a lady.' (You had that ambition, young madam.)

She answered: 'That's what I don't understand.' (Your saying it, O my friend!)

'You will soon take to your new duties.' (You have small objection to them even now.)

'Yes, or my life won't be worth much.' (Know, that you are driving me to it.)

'And I wish you happiness, Rhodia.' (You are madly imperilling the prospect thereof.)

To each of them the second meaning stood shadowy behind the utterances. And further,—

'Thank you, Robert.' (I shall have to thank you for the issue.)

'Now it's time to part.' (Do you not see that there's a danger for me in remaining?)

'Good-night.' (Behold, I am submissive.)

'Good-night, Rhoda.' (You were the first to give the signal of parting.)

'Good-night.' (I am simply submissive.)

'Why not my name? Are you hurt with me?'

Rhoda choked. The indirectness of speech had been a shelter to her, permitting her to hint at more than she dared clothe in words.

Again the delicious rose glowed between his eyes.

But he had put his hand out to her, and she had not taken it.

'What have I done to offend you? I really don't know, Rhoda.'

'Nothing.' The flower had closed."

The discussion of these obscurer purposes of Language would lead us too far afield, and my object in the present paper is not to consider any new meanings to which the terms 'word' or 'sentence' might be extended, but rather to analyse the little comprehended but universally felt senses in which they are familiar to us. Let me state my definitions once again:

A Word is an articulate sound-symbol in its aspect of denoting something which is spoken about.

A Sentence is an articulate sound-symbol in its aspect of embodying some volitional attitude of the speaker towards the listener.

It is evident from these definitions that the terms 'word' and 'sentence,' abstractly considered, are quite heterogeneous. The common notion that a word is necessarily part of a sentence, and that this is all the difference which exists between the two, breaks down in the case of one-word sentences, where the word and the sentence are concretely

¹ London: Constable & Co., 1902, 379-80.

coextensive. Doubtless the reluctance which students formerly felt in allowing the existence of one-word sentences was due to the mistaken idea that if it be admitted that a word can be at the same time a sentence, the very useful distinction between the two disappears. Such, however, as I have tried to point out, is not the case; the terms 'word' and 'sentence' refer to totally different aspects of concrete linguistic phenomena, and surely it is permitted to call a rat a rodent from one point of view, and a nuisance from another. Still, the fact remains to be explained that in concrete reality no sentence exists which is not at the same time either a word or else composed of words. The reason is that we deliberately restrict the term 'sentence' to purely linguistic phenomena, and that we rule out from the field of linguistic phenomena everything that is not an articulate sound-symbol having reference to a thing, *i.e.* a word. Otherwise we might easily extend the meaning of the term 'sentence' to many other social gestures, to an imploring look or to a shake of the fist. If we did this, the sentence would cease to be a purely linguistic term, and its essential heterogeneity as contrasted with the word would become quite apparent.

One last thought is suggested by the foregoing discussion. At what angle is the critic of Language to place himself? Is the meaning of a sentence that which is in the mind of the speaker at the moment of utterance, or that which is in the mind of the listener at the moment of audition? Neither, I think. Certainly not that which is in the mind of the listener, for he may utterly misconstrue the speaker's purpose. But also not that which is in the mind of the speaker, for he may intentionally veil in his utterance the thoughts which are in his brain, and this of course he could not do if the meaning of the utterance were precisely that which he held in his brain. Obviously we must postulate for the critic a position which ignores neither the speaker nor the listener, nor yet again the words that pass between them. I think that the following formulation will meet the case: *The meaning of any sentence is what the speaker intends to be understood from it by the listener.*

Postscript.

The article in *Indogermanisches Jahrbuch* VI (1918), 1-20, referred to above (p. 353) has now come to hand, and proves to be a well-written and thoughtful discussion, by Karl Bühler, of prevailing opinions on the sentence. The writer starts from the view that speech has three functions, namely *Kundgabe*, *Auslösung* and *Darstellung*, *i.e.* approximately 'self-expression,' 'demand for response' and 'description.' It is

shown that none of these functions alone yields a satisfactory definition of the sentence, though this must necessarily be defined, not in reference to its mode of origination, but in reference to its purpose. Bühler therefore finds the essence of the sentence to lie in its possession of what is common to the three functions of speech, namely *Sprachzweck* ('purpose') or *Sinn* ('sense'). The former term, when analysed further, leads, as I believe, directly to my 'volitional attitude of speaker to listener,' though Bühler does not see this, failing to recognize the absolute indispensability of the listener to language-theory¹. The use of the term *Sinn* is decidedly a step in the wrong direction, being even less clear than *Sprachzweck*, and leading to a hair-splitting distinction between *Sinn* 'sense' as the characteristic of the sentence, and *Bedeutung* 'meaning' as that of the word (p. 18). Bühler does not realize that each of his 'functions' enters into *every* genuine linguistic utterance, *i.e.* employment of speech as a social instrument. Every sentence is *Kundgabe* (roughly 'interjectional') inasmuch as it expresses what the speaker has to say, *Auslösung* (roughly 'imperative') inasmuch as it claims, at the very least, the attention of the listener, and *Darstellung* (roughly 'assertive') inasmuch as something or other is always spoken about. Each of these three functions may come into the foreground as the specific purpose of a given utterance, and from this variation arise the different types of sentence. In conclusion, I venture to recommend Bühler's paper as a stimulating and valuable contribution to the topic; I think he has failed to solve the problem, but he has seen many of the difficulties and pointed in the right direction.

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¹ On p. 13 Bühler falls into the common error of regarding the use of language in solitary meditation as a proper use of language as such. I must insist once again on my contention that, however important this use of language may be and is, nevertheless it is secondary and a by-product—as much so, as when a book is used as a paper-weight. No progress can be made with the theory of language if the latter be removed from its proper sphere, namely social intercourse, where for its successful functioning a sympathetic interaction of speaker and listener is demanded, besides the existence of a world and of a tongue common to both.