

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

FRANZ BOAS

Columbia University

THE question of interrelation between language and culture has been much discussed and the opinion is still widely held that language is an important determinant of culture. I little doubt that this opinion is strongly supported by our emotional attitude towards our mother tongue and the ease with which our most intimate thoughts find expression in our native speech. There are certainly few poets who have been able to express themselves with equal ease and force in their mother tongue and in an acquired language.

Other attempts at an evaluation of language as a means of expressing thought are based on the ground that it is difficult to formulate an abstract and logical thought in the languages of people of lower, perhaps even of an alien culture.

The problem has to be looked at from two angles, the one, in how far does language fulfill the needs of communication and of thought in a given culture; the other, in how far does language influence the line of thought, in how far does it help or hinder the development of culture.

The former question is not difficult to answer. An examination of the vocabularies of people of various types of culture shows that words exist for everything that is essential in the culture and that elaborate distinctions are found that reflect the importance of objects and activities in the lives of the people. We may observe this most readily in our own languages. The development of electrical power, of the automobile, of modern science, of new political devices, of new economic organizations, have enriched our vocabulary with terms for new experiences and objects without number. Language has supplied our needs of new symbols, even though our linguistic technique is so feeble that we had to resort to combinations of letters of the alphabet, like FDR, CIO, BMT, to convey complex groups of ideas or attitudes. The reverse of this phenomenon is our lack of knowledge of the specific vocabulary of aspects of our culture with which we are not familiar. Occupational vocabularies are on the whole confined to occupational groups and only a few words of such a vocabulary become common

property. Conversely we lose the vocabulary of occupations that go out of use, and of vanishing conditions like that of falconry, of the feudal system, of weapons no longer in use. These may survive in the minds of those familiar with history, but they are no longer parts of the living vocabulary of the people.

In every culture the vocabulary reflects the relation of man to his natural environment and gives testimony of the kind of life he leads. The Eskimo uses many terms for snow: snow falling, snow on the ground, snow-drift, drifting snow, soft snow; for all these aspects are of importance in his life. These terms must be ancient, for they are not derived from a common root, but distinct in origin. The seafaring Oceanian and the inhabitants of the northwest coast of America have many terms for the sea in its various aspects as well as for canoe and canoe-building. On the other hand the modern Aztec has lost every trace of the terms related to his ancient religion. To give another example: the potlatch system of the northwest coast of America has given rise to a large vocabulary relating to borrowing, loaning, interest at various rates, indebtedness incurred in contracting marriages or in the destruction of property for the purpose of rising in social rank. A large vocabulary exists also to designate rank. In all these cases of development of a special vocabulary we may judge of its antiquity by the number of independent, specific stems. More modern terms will be found often to be derived from stems in wider use. Thus the Kwakiutl terms for rank may be of moderate antiquity, since all are derivatives of existing stems, although the grammatical form of many of them is not easily understood. The chief is "standing at the head alone," or "being at the head," the chieftainess "lifting her blanket," namely when giving a great feast when she tries to have her blanket not soiled by grease, the chief's son "the one standing in front" (of his father); the chief's daughter "the one sitting still in the house." A chief's wife of lower rank is designated by a term that cannot easily be equated with other terms but seems to be related to the term for "wealth."

This view of a correlation between the use of terms that can be derived from older stems and the relative newness of the cultural feature so designated can be supported by the frequent reluctance of speakers of native languages to adopt terms of foreign languages the general connotation of which they do not understand, and to substitute new derivatives which describe those characteristics that strike them as significant. Thus a tele-

graph may be called "talks along a line," an automobile "stubnose vehicle," a horse "wonderful dog," if the dog was the only domesticated animal known.

Of course, it ought not to be assumed that the etymology of such new terms remains conscious for any length of time. Proof of this is that words of this type wear down rapidly and that knowledge of their etymology is lost to the speakers. This is proved by numerous cases in which by metathesis or other phonetic processes the etymology is obscured. The words become symbols like all others which are tokens of concepts regardless of their historic origin.

I think on the basis of such data we may infer that languages are able to supply terms for new ideas as they arise and that culture determines the course of development of the vocabulary.

While this will be conceded for concrete objects, the question arises whether abstract ideas can be readily expressed in primitive languages and whether the lack of devices adapted to their formation may not hinder the development of abstract concepts.

In regard to this question we ought to consider that a great many of our abstract concepts are not an outgrowth of the language of the common people, but have arisen among the educated and have gradually found their way into the common language, not without losing in many cases their function as tokens of abstract thought. Such words as *existence, essence, character, religion, quality, quantity*, originated among literary persons and came to be adopted with the increasing complexity of culture. There are others of different character: *love, hatred, friendship, freedom, envy, thought*. Have primitive languages their equivalent? The conditions of primitive culture are such that the absolute abstract term itself can hardly ever be the subject of conversation or the object of activities. The situations talked about are always concrete. I may talk of my love, hatred, or friendship in regard to a person, but I do not talk about these attitudes in an absolute sense. Therefore, if corresponding words exist they can occur only in possessive relations. If the structure of a language permits I can say "my sympathy for his pitiable condition is great," but I cannot say sympathy is the attitude of having pity. Still, when conditions arise which require the expression of the absolute noun, grammatical devices taken from more concrete situations are generally available which make it possible to create a word, at the time of its creation unidiomatic, that

will adequately express the absolute idea. The Eskimo can form an abstract noun from any verb: goodness, pity, love; but it does not occur in everyday conversation except in reference to some tangible object. In languages of different structure the abstract noun may even exist as subject acting upon a person, as "hunger acts upon me," where it is open to question whether hunger is felt an animate actor or not; or "I have pains" where it is equally uncertain whether pains are felt as an object possessed, although the grammatical forms require such formal interpretation. The endeavors of missionaries to render the many abstract terms they require, show how unidiomatic terms may be created and come to be accepted—although for one acquainted with the language they may not render in the least the thought to be expressed—and become accepted tokens when the ideas are grasped more fully.

As a matter of fact etymological investigation shows in many cases that the fundamental ideas expressed in stems are so general that they appear to us as highly abstract. Thus we have languages that have a stem meaning "movement," and all specific forms of movement, like to walk, to fly, to swim, etc., are derived from it. "To say, to wish, to think" may all be derived from the same stem, meaning "the formulation of a thought process by spoken or unspoken language." This does not mean that the generalized notions which we derive by analysis are present in the minds of the speakers for whom the words, as they exist now, are merely tokens of specific actions. It seems not unlikely that in very early times such sound complexes of very vague connotation existed and that languages as we know them now were built up on the foundation of such elements.

I think our general experience in the field of linguistic data proves that language is a reflex of culture and that there are everywhere linguistic devices that enable the language to follow the demands of culture.

There is, however, another aspect from which our problem has to be considered. We have so far spoken only of words and their relation to culture. It is another question in how far the categories of grammar and the general classification of experience may control thought. To give an example: In our speech the category of time is all-important. Whether an action was done in the past, in the present, or in the future must be expressed. We must express whether we speak about a definite or indefinite object. We must state whether we mean singular or plural. These are obligatory categories, and although a child expresses itself in the early stages

of speech development without them, the adult speaker cannot omit them, except by a forced experiment, or when he has to speak a foreign language the structure of which he does not know. This condition is found in many trade jargons.

The obligatory categories of languages differ fundamentally. As just stated, number, definiteness or indefiniteness of noun, time, are obligatory in most European languages. Some Indian languages either lack the obligatory category of number, or substitute for it distributive, collective, or other similar ideas; they may lack the obligatory category of time, which is expressed when needed by devices which fulfill the functions of our adverbs; they also lack (like Latin) the obligatory category of definiteness. On the other hand, they may require a much more rigid localization than is required in our language. Location near me, you, or him may be obligatory; the source of knowledge, whether something is known by one's own sense-experience, by evidence, or by hearsay; numerous time aspects, not tenses, such as "to be in a condition, to get into a position, to be discontinually in a condition, to be repeatedly in a condition, to terminate a condition," or the corresponding terms for action, all these may be obligatory in one language or another. It is obvious that the mental picture aroused by a spoken sentence will be fundamentally different according to these categories. We could read our newspapers with much greater satisfaction if our language would compel them to say whether their reports are based on self-experience, inference, or hearsay! The strict localization of some languages creates a much more vivid picture than our indifference to localization. If I say "the children are playing," an Indian of a certain tribe could not get a clear picture of what I have in mind, because he would have to say, for instance, "children (or child) whom I see here, are (or is, were or was) playing in the woods which I see here." The speaker must be definite as to locality, but he is indefinite as to how many children there are and when they were playing. When hearing the statement the picture conveyed to him may be entirely different from the one the speaker wishes to convey. It is an exaggeration of the conditions prevailing in our own language when we are conversing. The form of our grammar compels us to select a few traits of the thought we wish to express and suppresses many other aspects which the speaker has in mind and which the hearer supplies according to his fancy, so that the more generalized the obligatory categories, the more we are apt to find dif-

ferences between the complete idea the speaker wishes to convey and the situation which the hearer recreates from the speaker's utterance. In different languages some emphasize one group of categories, others others.

There is little doubt that thought is thus directed in various channels. If I say "the father built a new house for his son" and the Indian says "the son was the reason for his father's housebuilding," we stress purpose, the Indian causality. Such a tendency pervading the language may well lead to a different reaction to the incidents of every-day life and it is conceivable that in this sense the mental activities of a people may be in part directed by language. I should not be inclined to overestimate this influence, because devices for expressing finality as over against causality are ever-present, and may rise into idiomatic use.

The morphological structure of words may have a similar influence. Although the complete words are merely tokens of concepts, their structure may direct thought in certain directions. Some Indian languages emphasize in all activities the means by which the action is performed—with the hand, the mouth, by means of an instrument such as a knife, or by pulling, pushing, etc. Further, they may indicate the form of the object acted upon as long, round, flat, rope-like, etc. Although the categories may not be intensely felt, they direct the thought in certain channels when handling experiences and may in this way exert a partial control over actions.

In this sense, we may say that language exerts a limited influence upon culture. It may, however, be safely said, that when changes of culture demand new ways of expression, languages are sufficiently pliable to follow new needs. Furthermore, under new conditions, the categories that are discovered by etymological analysis become more and more mere symbols and their etymological value does no longer elicit the consciousness of the category that the analysis reveals.

Under modern conditions culture controls the growth of language; the opposite influence is slight.

All this does not touch upon the obscure problem of the processes that may have existed in the earliest formation of languages. If we may trust morphological analysis, the fundamental categories of languages were very varied and we may assume on the basis of what we observe now, that cultural activities determined largely the development of these categories. It is intelligible that forms of objects, their physical qualities, their avail-

ability for human use, should have become the basis of generalization, or that activities should have been grouped according to the parts of the body or other instrumentalities used, or that a roving people may have differentiated movements according to the character of the country traversed—but it seems impossible to determine the conditions that led to the particular variety of categories found in a given language.