LANGUAGE
in Thought and Action

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Foreword

This book began as a revision of *Language in Action*, published in 1941. Events since that date have naturally caused me to re-examine the whole of that earlier book. Some statements to be found there, unhappily, have been given a sharper, tragic significance by ensuing events; some statements, on the other hand, especially those in which it was asserted that the semantic discipline could be applied to the solution of many social and individual problems, now appear to me to have been somewhat oversimplified. I still believe that such application is possible; but it is not quite so easy as I am afraid I made it sound. The deeper I got into the task of revision, the graver the deficiencies and omissions seemed to be. The attempt to repair these deficiencies has resulted in something more than a revised *Language in Action*. So much has been changed and so much has been added that more than half the material in the present volume is new.

Two tasks confront the student of semantics. The first is the refinement of the basic formulations of the science. This task is, naturally, highly technical and of deep concern to specialists. The second task, no less urgent, is that of translating what is already known in semantics into usable terms. Today, the public is aware, perhaps to an unprecedented degree, of the role of verbal communication in human affairs. This awareness arises partly, of course, out of the urgency of the tensions everywhere existing between nation and nation, class and class, individual and individual, in a world that is changing with fantastic rapidity. It arises, too, out of the knowledge on the part even of the least reflective elements of the population that enormous powers for good or evil lie in the media of mass communication. Thoughtful people in all walks of life feel, therefore, the need of systematic help in the huge task that confronts all of us today, namely, that of interpreting...
1. Language and Survival

One cannot but wonder at this constantly recurring phrase “getting something for nothing,” as if it were the peculiar and perverse ambition of disturbers of society. Except for our animal outfit, practically all we have is handed to us gratis. Can the most complacent reactionary flatter himself that he invented the art of writing or the printing press, or discovered his religious, economic, and moral convictions, or any of the devices which supply him with meat and raiment or any of the sources of such pleasure as he may derive from literature or the fine arts? In short, civilization is little else than getting something for nothing.

JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON

Whenever agreement or assent is arrived at in human affairs ... this agreement is reached by linguistic processes, or else it is not reached.

BENJAMIN LEE WHORF

What Animals Shall We Imitate?

People in our culture who like to think of themselves as tough-minded and realistic, including influential political leaders and businessmen as well as go-getters and hustlers of smaller caliber, tend to take it for granted that human nature is “selfish” and that life is a struggle in which only the fittest may survive. According to this philosophy, the basic law by which man must live, in spite of his surface veneer of civilization, is the law of the jungle. The “fittest” are those who can bring to the struggle superior force, superior cunning, and superior ruthlessness.

The wide currency of this philosophy of the “survival of the fittest” enables people who act ruthlessly and selfishly, whether in personal rivalries, business competition, or international relations, to allay their consciences by telling themselves that they are only
obeying a "law of nature." But a disinterested observer is entitled to ask whether the ruthlessness of the tiger, the cunning of the ape, and obedience to the "law of the jungle" are actually evidences of human fitness to survive. If human beings are to pick up pointers on behavior from the lower animals, are there not animals other than beasts of prey from which we might learn lessons in survival?

We might, for example, point to the rabbit or the deer and define fitness to survive as superior rapidity in running away from our enemies. We might point to the earthworm or the mole and define it as the ability to keep out of sight and out of the way. We might point to the oyster or the housefly and define it as the ability to propagate our kind faster than our enemies can eat us up. If we are looking to animals for models of behavior, there is also the pig, an animal which many human beings have tried to emulate since time immemorial. (It will be remembered that in the Odyssey Circe gave ingenious and practical encouragement to those who had inclinations in this direction.) In Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, we are given a picture of a world such as would be designed for us by those who would model human beings after the social ants. The world, under the management of a super-brain-trust, might be made as well-integrated, smooth, and efficient as an ant colony, and as Huxley shows, just about as meaningless. If we simply look to animals in order to define what we mean by "fitness to survive," there is no limit to the subhuman systems of behavior that can be devised: we may emulate lobsters, dogs, sparrows, parakeets, giraffes, skunks, or the parasitical worms, because they have all obviously survived in one way or another. We are still entitled to ask, however, if human survival does not revolve around a different kind of fitness from that exhibited by the lower animals.

Because of the wide prevalence of the dog-eat-dog "survival of the fittest" philosophy in our world (although the atomic bomb has awakened some people to the need for a change in philosophy), it is worth while to look into the present scientific standing of the phrase "survival of the fittest." Biologists today distinguish between two kinds of "struggle for survival." First, there is the interspecific struggle of different species of animals with each other, such as between wolves and deer, or between men and bacteria. Second, there is the intraspecific struggle among members of a single species, as when rats fight other rats, or men fight other men. There is a great deal of evidence in modern biology to show that those species which have developed elaborate means of intraspecific competition often unfit themselves for interspecific competition, so that such species are either already extinct or are threatened with extinction at any time. The peacock's tail, although useful in sexual competition against other peacocks, is only a hindrance in coping with the environment or competing against other species. The peacock could therefore be wiped out overnight by a sudden change in ecological balance. There is evidence, too, that strength and fierceness in fighting and killing other animals, whether in interspecific or intraspecific competition, have never been enough of themselves to guarantee the survival of a species. Many a mammoth reptile, equipped with magnificent offensive and defensive armaments, ceased to walk the earth millions of years ago. If we are going to talk about human survival, one of the first things to do, even if we grant that man must fight to live, is to distinguish between those qualities that are useful to men in fighting the environment and other species (for example, floods, weather, wild animals, bacteria, or grasshoppers) and those qualities (such as aggressiveness) that are useful in fighting other men.

The principle that if we don't hang together we shall all hang separately was discovered by nature long before it was put into words by man. Co-operation within a species (and sometimes with other species) is essential to the survival of most living creatures. Man, moreover, is the talking animal—and any theory of human survival that leaves this fact out of account is no more scientific than would be a theory of beaver survival that failed to consider the interesting uses a beaver makes of its teeth and flat tail. Let us see what talking—human communication—means.

Co-operation

When someone shouts at you, "look out!" and you jump just in time to avoid being hit by an automobile, you owe your escape from injury to the fundamental co-operative act by which most of the
higher animals survive, namely, communication by means of noises. You did not see the car coming; nevertheless, someone did see it, and he made certain noises to communicate his alarm to you. In other words, although your nervous system did not record the danger, you were unharmed because another nervous system did record it. You had, for the time being, the advantage of someone else's nervous system in addition to your own.

Indeed, most of the time when we are listening to the noises people make or looking at the black marks on paper that stand for such noises, we are drawing upon the experiences of others in order to make up what we ourselves have missed. Now obviously the more an individual can make use of the nervous systems of others to supplement his own, the easier it is for him to survive. And, of course, the more individuals there are in a group accustomed to co-operating by making helpful noises at each other, the better it is for all—within the limits, naturally, of the group's talents for social organization. Birds and animals congregate with their own kind and make noises when they find food or become alarmed. In fact, gregariousness as an aid to self-defense and survival is forced upon animals as well as upon men by the necessity of uniting nervous systems even more than by the necessity of uniting physical strength. Societies, both animal and human, might almost be regarded as huge co-operative nervous systems.

While animals use only a few limited cries, however, human beings use extremely complicated systems of sputtering, hissing, gurgling, chucking, cooing noises called language, with which they express and report what goes on in their nervous systems. Language is, in addition to being more complicated, immeasurably more flexible than the animal cries from which it was developed—so flexible indeed that it can be used not only to report the tremendous variety of things that go on in the human nervous system, but to report those reports. That is, when an animal yelps, he may cause a second animal to yelp in imitation or alarm, but the second yelp is not about the first yelp. But when a man says, "I see a river," a second man can say, "He says he sees a river"—which is a statement about a statement. About this statement about a statement further statements can be made—and about these, still more. Language, in short, can be about language. This is a fundamental way in which human noise-making systems differ from the cries of animals.

The Pooling of Knowledge

In addition to having developed language, man has also developed means of making, on clay tablets, bits of wood or stone, skins of animals, and paper, more or less permanent marks and scratches which stand for language. These marks enable him to communicate with people who are beyond the reach of his voice, both in space and in time. There is a long course of evolution from the marked trees that indicated Indian trails to the metropolitan daily newspaper, but they have this in common: They pass on what one individual has known to other individuals, for their convenience or, in the broadest sense, instruction. The Indians are dead, but many of their trails are still marked and can be followed to this day. Archimedes is dead, but we still have his reports on what he observed in his experiments in physics. Keats is dead, but he can still tell us how he felt on first reading Chapman's Homer. From our newspapers and radios we learn with great rapidity facts about the world we live in. From books and magazines we learn how hundreds of people whom we shall never be able to see have felt and thought. All this information is useful to us at one time or another in the solution of our own problems.

A human being, then, is never dependent on his own experience alone for his information. Even in a primitive culture he can make use of the experience of his neighbors, friends, and relatives, which they communicate to him by means of language. Therefore, instead of remaining helpless because of the limitations of his own experience and knowledge, instead of having to discover what others have already discovered, instead of exploring the false trails they explored and repeating their errors, he can go on from where they left off. Language, that is to say, makes progress possible.

Indeed, most of what we call the human characteristics of our species are expressed and developed through our ability to co-operate by means of our systems of making meaningful noises and mean-
ingful scratches on paper. Even people who belong to backward cultures in which writing has not been invented are able to exchange information and to hand down from generation to generation considerable stores of traditional knowledge. There seems, however, to be a limit both to the trustworthiness and to the amount of knowledge that can be transmitted orally. But when writing is invented, a tremendous step forward is taken. The accuracy of reports can be checked and rechecked by successive generations of observers. The amount of knowledge accumulated ceases to be limited by people's ability to remember what has been told them. The result is that in any literate culture of a few centuries' standing, human beings accumulate vast stores of knowledge—far more than any individual in that culture can read in his lifetime, let alone remember. These stores of knowledge, which are being added to constantly, are made widely available to all who want them through such mechanical processes as printing and through such distributive agencies as the book trade, the newspaper and magazine trade, and library systems. The result is that all of us who can read any of the major European or Asiatic languages are potentially in touch with the intellectual resources of centuries of human endeavor in all parts of the civilized world.

A physician, for example, who does not know how to treat a patient suffering from a rare disease can look up the disease in the *Index Medicus*, which will send him in turn to medical journals published in all parts of the world. In these he may find records of similar cases as reported and described by a physician in Rotterdam, Holland, in 1873, by another physician in Bangkok, Siam, in 1909, and by still other physicians in Kansas City in 1924. With such records before him, he can better handle his own case. Again, if a person is worried about ethics, he is not limited to the advice of the pastor of the Elm Street Baptist Church; he may go to Confucius, Aristotle, Jesus, Spinoza, and many others whose reflections on ethical problems are on record. If one is worried about love, he can get advice not only from his mother or best friend, but from Sappho, Ovid, Propertius, Shakespeare, Havelock Ellis, or any of a thousand others who knew something about it and wrote down what they knew.

Language, that is to say, is the indispensable mechanism of human life—of life such as ours that is molded, guided, enriched, and made possible by the accumulation of the past experience of members of our own species. Dogs and cats and chimpanzees do not, so far as we can tell, increase their wisdom, their information, or their control over their environment from one generation to the next. But human beings do. The cultural accomplishments of the ages, the invention of cooking, of weapons, of writing, of printing, of methods of building, of games and amusements, of means of transportation, and the discoveries of all the arts and sciences come to us as free gifts from the dead. These gifts, which none of us has done anything to earn, offer us not only the opportunity for a richer life than our forebears enjoyed, but also the opportunity to add to the sum total of human achievement by our own contributions, however small.

To be able to read and write, therefore, is to learn to profit by and take part in the greatest of human achievements—that which makes all other achievements possible—namely, the pooling of our experiences in great co-operative stores of knowledge, available (except where special privilege, censorship, or suppression stand in the way) to all. From the warning cry of primitive man to the latest scientific monograph or radio newsflash, language is social. Cultural and intellectual co-operation is the great principle of human life.

This is by no means an easy principle to accept or to understand—except as a kind of pious truism that we should like, because we are well-meaning people, to believe. We live in a highly competitive society, each of us trying to outdo the other in wealth, in popularity or social prestige, in dress, in scholastic grades or golf scores. As we read our daily papers, there is always news of conflict rather than of co-operation—conflict between labor and management, between rival corporations or movie stars, between rival political parties and nations. Over us all hangs the perpetual fear of another war even more unthinkably horrible than the last. One is often tempted to say that conflict, rather than co-operation, is the great governing principle of human life.

But what such a philosophy overlooks is that, despite all the competition at the surface, there is a huge substratum of co-operation
taken for granted that keeps the world going. The co-ordination of the efforts of engineers, actors, musicians, utilities companies, typists, program directors, advertising agencies, writers, and hundreds of others is required to put on a single radio program. Hundreds of thousands of persons co-operate in the production of motor cars, including suppliers and shippers of raw materials from different parts of the earth. Any organized business activity whatsoever is an elaborate act of co-operation, in which every individual worker contributes his share. A lockout or a strike is a withdrawal of co-operation—things are regarded as “back to normal” when co-operation is restored. We may indeed as individuals compete for jobs, but our function in the job, once we get it, is to contribute at the right time and place to that innumerable series of co-operative acts that eventually result in automobiles being manufactured, in cakes appearing in pastry shops, in department stores being able to serve their customers, in the trains and airlines running as scheduled. And what is important for our purposes here is that all this co-ordination of effort necessary for the functioning of society is of necessity achieved by language or else it is not achieved at all.

The Niagara of Words

And how does all this affect Mr. T. C. Mits? From the moment he switches on an early morning news broadcast until he falls asleep at night over a novel or a magazine, he is, like all other people living in modern civilized conditions, swimming in words. Newspaper editors, politicians, salesmen, radio comedians, columnists, luncheon club speakers, and clergymen; colleagues at work, friends, relatives, wife and children; market reports, direct mail advertising, books, and billboards—all are assailing him with words all day long. And Mr. Mits himself is constantly contributing to that verbal Niagara every time he puts on an advertising campaign, delivers a speech, writes a letter, or even chats with his friends.

When things go wrong in Mr. Mits’ life—when he is worried, perplexed, or nervous, when family, business, or national affairs are not going as he thinks they should, when he finds himself making blunders—Mr. Mits may blame a number of things as responsible for his difficulties. Sometimes he blames the weather, sometimes his health or the state of his nerves, sometimes his glands, or, if the problem is a larger one, he may blame his environment, the economic system he lives under, a foreign nation, or the cultural pattern of his society. When he is pondering the difficulties of other people, he may attribute their troubles too to causes such as these, and he may add still another, namely, “human nature.” (He doesn’t blame his own “human nature” unless he is in a very bad way indeed.) It rarely, if ever, occurs to him to investigate, among other things, the nature and constituents of that daily verbal Niagara as a possible source of trouble.

Indeed, there are few occasions on which Mr. Mits thinks about language as such. He wonders from time to time about a grammatical point. Sometimes he feels an uneasiness about his own verbal accomplishments, so that he begins to wonder if he shouldn’t take steps to “improve his vocabulary.” Once in a while he is struck by the fact that some people (although he never includes himself among these) “twist the meanings of words,” especially during the course of arguments, so that words are often “very tricky.” Occasionally, too, he notices, usually with irritation, that words sometimes “mean different things to different people.” This condition, he feels, would be cured if people would only consult their dictionaries oftener and learn the “true meanings” of words. He knows, however, that they will not—at least, not any oftener than he does, which is not very often—so that he puts this down as another instance of the weakness of human nature.

This, unfortunately, is about the limit of Mr. Mits’ linguistic speculations. But in this respect Mr. Mits is representative not only of the general public, but also of many scientific workers, publicists, and writers. Like most people, he takes words as much for granted as the air he breathes, and gives them about as much thought. (After all, he has been talking ever since he can remember.) Mr. Mits'
body automatically adjusts itself, within certain limits, to changes in climate or atmosphere, from cold to warm, from dry to moist, from fresh to foul; no conscious effort on his part is required to make these adjustments. Nevertheless, he is ready to acknowledge the effect that climate and air have upon his physical well-being, and he takes measures to protect himself from unhealthy air, either by getting away from it, or by installing air-conditioning systems to purify it. But Mr. Mits, like the rest of us, also adjusts himself automatically to changes in the verbal climate, from one type of discourse to another, from one set of terms to another, from the listening habits of one kind of social occasion to those of another kind of social occasion, without conscious effort. He has yet, however, to acknowledge the effect of his verbal climate on his mental health and well-being.

Nevertheless, Mr. Mits is profoundly involved in the words he absorbs daily and in the words he uses daily. Words in the newspaper make him pound his fist on the breakfast table. Words his superiors speak to him puff him out with pride, or send him scurrying to work harder. Words about himself, which he has overheard being spoken behind his back, worry him sick. Words which he spoke before a clergyman some years ago have tied him to one woman for life. Words written down on pieces of paper keep him at his job, or bring bills in his mail every month which keep him paying and paying. Words written down by other people, on the other hand, keep them paying him month after month. With words woven into almost every detail of his life, it seems amazing that Mr. Mits’ thinking on the subject of language should be so limited.

Mr. Mits has also noticed that when large masses of people, for example under totalitarian regimes, are permitted by their governments to hear and read only carefully selected words, their conduct becomes so strange that he can only regard it as mad. Yet he has observed that some individuals who have the same educational attainments and the same access to varied sources of information that he has, are nevertheless just as mad. He listens to the views of some of his neighbors and he cannot help wondering, “How can they think such things? Don’t they see the same things happening that I see? They must be crazy!” Does such madness, he asks, illustrate again the “inevitable frailty of human nature”? Mr. Mits, who, as an American, likes to regard all things as possible, does not like the conclusion that “nothing can be done about it,” but often he can hardly see how he can escape it. Occasionally, timidly, Mr. Mits approaches one more possibility, “Maybe I’m crazy myself. Maybe we’re all nuts!” Such a conclusion leads to so complete an impasse, however, that he quickly drops the notion.

One reason for Mr. Mits’ failure to get any further in his thinking about language is that he believes, as most people do, that words are not really important; what is important is the “ideas” they stand for. But what is an “idea” if it is not the verbalization of a cerebral itch? This, however, is something that has rarely, if ever, occurred to Mr. Mits. The fact that the implications of one set of terms may lead inevitably into blind alleys while the implications of another set of terms may not; the fact that the historical or sentimental associations that some words have make calm discussion impossible so long as those words are employed; the fact that language has a multitude of different kinds of uses, and that great confusion arises from mistaking one kind of use for another; the fact that a person speaking a language of a structure entirely different from that of English, such as Japanese, Chinese, or Turkish, may not even think the same thoughts as an English-speaking person—these are unfamiliar notions to Mr. Mits, who has always assumed that the important thing is always to get one’s “ideas” straight first, after which the words would take care of themselves.

Whether he realizes it or not, however, Mr. Mits is affected every hour of his life not only by the words he hears and uses, but also by his unconscious assumptions about language. If, for example, he likes the name “Albert” and would like to christen his child by that name but superstitiously avoids doing so because he once knew an “Albert” who committed suicide, he is operating, whether he realizes it or not, under certain assumptions about the relationship of language to reality. Such unconscious assumptions determine the effect that words have on him—which in turn determines the way he acts, whether wisely or foolishly. Words—the way he uses them and the way he takes them when spoken by others—largely shape his beliefs, his prejudices, his ideals, his aspirations. They constitute
the moral and intellectual atmosphere in which he lives—in short, his semantic environment.

This book is devoted, then, to the study of the relationships between language, thought, and behavior. We shall examine language and people's linguistic habits as they reveal themselves in thinking (at least nine-tenths of which is talking to oneself), speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It will be the basic assumption of this book that widespread intraspecific co-operation through the use of language is the fundamental mechanism of human survival. A parallel assumption will be that when the use of language results, as it so often does, in the creation or aggravation of disagreements and conflicts, there is something wrong with the speaker, the listener, or both. Human "fitness to survive" means the ability to talk and write and listen and read in ways that increase the chances for you and fellow-members of your species to survive together.

Applications

Since one of the purposes of this book is to help the reader understand more clearly how language works and how this understanding can be applied to the practical situations of life, the reader will find at the end of each chapter a section entitled "Applications." Some of these are designed to enable the reader to test how clearly he has understood what the author is saying in the chapter; others suggest operations or activities by which the reader can experimentally test out some of the ideas set forth.

In those Applications where the reader is invited to analyze examples of language in action, it should be emphasized that there is seldom one—and only one—"right answer." The point is, rather, to become conscious of what is going on: what silent assumptions of the speaker or writer and of the listener or reader appear to be involved in a given example.

If the reader discusses his analyses or experiments with others who are reading this book, he should try to avoid hair-splitting and verbal free-for-alls. It is well to be able to give a clear account of one's reasons for reaching a certain result, but one can learn a great deal by listening carefully to what others did and what their reasons are for their conclusions.

The ideas in this book will be helpful in proportion as the reader puts them to the test of actual experience and decides for himself how valid and useful they are for his own thinking and living. The Applications throughout the book are simply starters in this direction, but it is important that what is read here be put to the test of experience.

We all tend to assume that what we have read without too much difficulty we have understood. This assumption is not, of course, always justified. The reader may find it interesting to check his own interpretative processes (and perhaps also the clarity of the writer's exposition) by going over the following list and indicating which statements agree with, which statements disagree with, and which statements have no relation to what has been said in this chapter.

1. Human beings should study the entire animal kingdom in order to find out which animals are most worth imitating.
2. Heathens believe in the law of the jungle; Christians do not.
3. The Battle of the Bulge is an example of intraspecific struggle.
4. Cockroach powder and DDT are weapons of interspecific struggle.
5. Intraspecific struggle must be replaced by co-operation if man is to survive as a species.
6. So far as we can observe, animals do not increase their store of knowledge from one generation to the next.
7. If you fall in love, you should read a good book.
8. Through language man is able to profit by the experience of the dead as well as the living members of his species.
9. There ought to be laws prohibiting strikes and lockouts.
10. Cultural and intellectual co-operation is the great principle of human life.
11. However, there is little prospect that human nature can be so altered as to make co-operation possible on a wide scale.
12. Because we are over-deluged with words, everybody should keep his mouth shut.
13. Man has little or no way of controlling his semantic environment.
14. Because language is so important people have got to learn to think more logically if they want to solve their problems.
15. Because language is so important, learning the correct definitions of words is basic to human survival.
16. Language, thought, and behavior are intimately related to each other.
17. When a discussion leads to increasing and deeper disagreement, there is something wrong with the language habits of one or more of the persons involved.