4. Semantics and Society

In an ideal society of robots, each of whom had a preassigned role which he performed without demur, the only function of language would be to expound knowledge and pass information, so as to facilitate cooperation between members of society. We are only too aware that this is not the case in human society: all kinds of conflicts and pressures arise between one individual and another, or between one group and another, and language takes a major part in the way these interactions are played out. Although theoretically, and often in practice, conceptual meaning is the most important element in linguistic communication, its importance in some situations becomes reduced to almost nil; and more generally, the seven types of meaning listed on p. 23 vary a great deal in their contribution to the total communicative effect. My task in this chapter is to consider how our semantic competence is harnessed to various social needs, a task in which I cannot fail to take some note of the moral questions involved in the 'strategic semantics' of propaganda and loaded language generally.

Five Functions of Language

Before proceeding, let us look at the most important communicative functions of language.

Apart from the neutral *informational* function which everyone tends to assume is most important, language can have an *expressive* function; that is, it can be used to express its originator's feelings and attitudes – swear words and exclamations are the most obvious instances of this. Conceptual meaning is predominant in the informational use of language. But for the expressive function, affective meaning (what language communicates of the author's attitudes – see p. 15) is clearly all-important. A third function of language is the *directive* function whereby we aim to influence the behaviour or attitudes of others. The most straightforward instances of the directive function are commands and requests. This function of social control places emphasis on the receiver's end, rather than the originator's end of the message; but it

resembles the expressive function in giving less importance, on the whole, to conceptual meaning than to other types of meaning, particularly affective and connotative meaning.

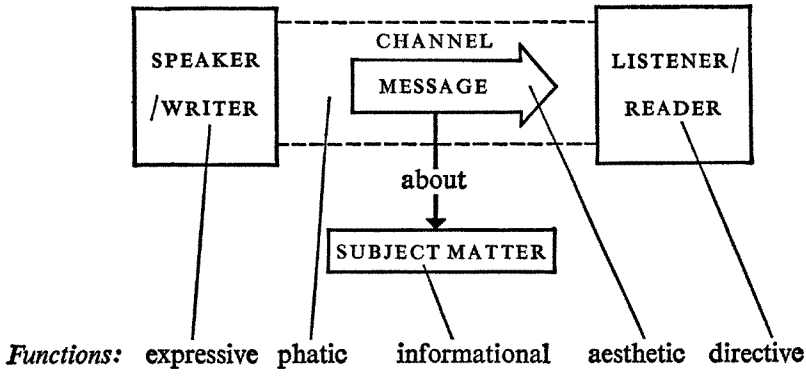
The expressive function has often been assumed to include the poetic use of language, but this view, I think, rests on an unacceptable, though popular, view of poetry as an effusion of the poet's emotions. Instead, I would prefer to recognize in poetry a separate *aesthetic* function, which can be defined as 'the use of language for the sake of the linguistic artefact itself, and for no ulterior purpose'. This aesthetic function, as we saw on pp. 37–8, can have at least as much to do with conceptual as with affective meaning. But the main semantic point about poetry is that it is language communicating 'at full stretch': all possible avenues of communication, all levels and types of meaning, are open to use. Both the poet and the reader bring a heightened sensitivity to meaning to bear on the act of communication.

Yet a further function of language, which the layman rarely takes seriously enough, is the so-called *phatic* function (after Malinowski's term 'phatic communion'), i.e. the function of keeping communication lines open, and keeping social relationships in good repair (in British culture, talking about the weather is a well-known example of this). The phatic function is at the furthest remove from the aesthetic function, in that here the communicative work done by language is at its lightest: it is not so much what one says, but the fact that one says it at all, that matters.

I do not claim that these five functions of language form an ideal classification: many other break-downs of function have been proposed, and (as we shall see) there is some difficulty particularly in separating the expressive and directive functions. In any case, allowance has to be made for the combined fulfilment of a number of different functions. Rarely is a piece of language *purely* informative, *purely* expressive, etc. Thus the remark 'I feel like a cup of coffee' may be read, in the right circumstances, as at once informational, expressive, and directive. But there is a particular interest in the present classification (which is based roughly on Jakobson, 1960): it can be neatly correlated with five essential features in any communicative situation, namely (1) *subject-matter*, (2) *originator* (i.e. speaker or writer), (3) *receiver* (i.e. listener or reader), (4) *the channel of communication* between them, and (5) the linguistic *message* itself. Each of the five functions I have mentioned can be identified with a special orientation of language to each of these factors in turn:

FUNCTION	ORIENTATION TOWARDS
informational:	subject-matter
expressive:	speaker/writer
directive:	listener/reader
phatic:	channel of communication
aesthetic:	message

or in diagram form:



The functions which most directly involve the social roles of language are the *expressive*, *directive*, and *phatic* functions; and it is to these that I shall devote the rest of the chapter. It may be wondered why the expressive function is included in this trio: after all, one can use expressive language in a social vacuum (Robinson Crusoe may have uttered an oath when he saw his clothes float away on the tide). But when we are considering the public expression of opinions and attitudes, it is very difficult to recognize a boundary between expressing one's own feelings, and influencing those of others. There is no way of telling, from inspecting the text, whether the position adopted by a writer is actually an expression of his own convictions, or whether it is assumed solely for the purposes of argument. At least in ideological and religious discussion, the two things usually go together. This is why, in the discussion that follows, I shall treat the expressive and directive functions together.

Conceptual versus Affective Meaning

Whenever language is 'loaded' towards or against a given set of attitudes, there is a danger of confusion, unless the addressee is able to distinguish between the conceptual and affective content of the message. As we noted in Chapter 2, there is an overlap between conceptual and affective meaning, in that attitudes may be overtly expressed by words

denoting emotion ('I *love* you') or words whose primary content is evaluative ('He made an *excellent* speech, but the food was *dreadful*'). Here, one might say, an attitude parades itself openly to the world, and a listener is free to agree or disagree. But two dangers can arise if attitudes and emotions are conveyed by the associative meanings of words (pp. 18–19). One is that miscommunication and misunderstanding will result from the fact that, as we saw in Chapter 2, connotations, and associative meanings generally, tend to vary from one person to another. The second danger is that if the affective meaning of the message predominates over the conceptual meaning, the listener/reader will fail to make a proper appraisal of what is being said; in short, he will be 'taken in'. There is a sense in which conceptual meaning is the overt or face-value meaning of a text: it is to all appearances what the text is 'about'. By the same token, there is something covert, implicit and potentially insidious about affective meaning: if a writer appeals to our emotions, we cannot confront his appeal with 'I disagree with what you say', or 'I do not share your feelings' in the same way as we could if he had made his feelings and values explicit. We only have a certain feeling that we are being called upon to respond emotionally, a feeling that may be difficult to put into words, and which may be even more difficult to counteract by argument.

The words which differ in associative meaning most notoriously are words referring to social groupings: nationality words, for example. We will all be fairly well agreed that an *American* is a person born or brought up in the U.S.A., and who has U.S. nationality. But affective connotations may differ according to our experiences or acquired prejudices about Americans: one set of associations might be 'Americans are brash, boastful, materialistic', another 'Americans are open-minded, generous, fair, honest'. Terms referring to religious sects are equally likely to communicate different things. In Northern Ireland, the term *Catholic* is likely to have strong connotations (differing pointedly from one group to another) not generally felt by people living in England. For instance, it is possible that an Ulsterman would consider 'a loyal and patriotic Catholic' a contradiction in terms.

The danger seems to be greatest with words referring to political ideas or movements: *anarchism, communism, fascist, imperialism, Nazi, Powellite, racist, socialist*, etc. Here there seem to be such strong connotations on one side or the other that the dictionary sense of the word can be almost forgotten. A *liberal* according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary is one 'favourable to democratic reforms and [to the] abolition of privilege'. But in South Africa and quite widely in the U.S.A. *liberal* has had connotations of one who compromises with or encourages forces

destructive to society – perhaps a dangerous political agitator. In contrast, someone on the left of the political spectrum in Great Britain will probably write off a liberal as an ineffectual moderate.

With a word like *democratic*, the connotative meaning seems to take over completely, so that supporters of two opposed political systems will claim that their own system is democratic and the other undemocratic. In such a state of affairs, it is doubtful whether 'The government of Liechtenstein is a democracy' tells us anything about the institution concerned, except that the speaker approves of it.

An unrestrained partisan user of language will tend to resort to what Hayakawa (in *Language in Thought and Action*) calls *snarl words* and *purr words*. Snarl words are words whose conceptual meaning becomes irrelevant because whoever is using them is simply capitalizing on their unfavourable connotations in order to give forceful expression to his own hostility. Terms for extreme or uncompromising political views, such as *communist* or *fascist*, are particularly prone to degenerate into snarl words. The opposite category of purr words has already been illustrated in the word *democratic*; other potential political purr words are *freedom*, *human rights*, *patriotic*, *fatherland*, *equality*.

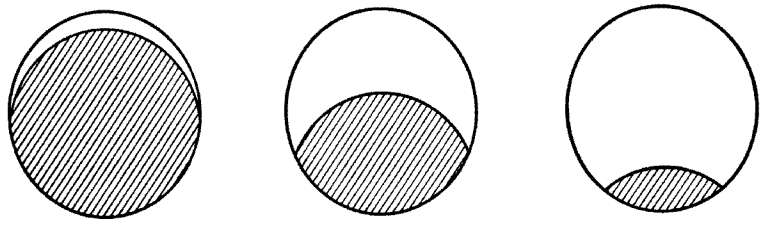
Hayakawa gives a thought-provoking example of the kind of communicative disaster to which the variability of affective meaning can lead:

> A distinguished Negro sociologist tells of an incident in his adolescence when he was hitchhiking far from home in regions where negroes are hardly ever seen. He was befriended by an extremely kindly white couple who fed him and gave him a place to sleep in their home. However, they kept calling him 'little nigger' – a fact which upset him profoundly even while he was grateful for their kindness. He finally got up courage to ask the man not to call him by that 'insulting term'.
>
> 'Who's insultin' you, son?' said the man.
>
> 'You are, sir – that name you're always calling me.'
>
> 'What name?'
>
> 'Uh ... you know.'
>
> 'I ain't callin' you no names, son.'
>
> 'I mean your calling me "nigger".'
>
> 'Well, what's insultin' about that? You are a nigger, ain't you?'
>
> *Language in Thought and Action*, pp. 67–70.

What was the cause of this breakdown of understanding on such a tender point? The white man was apparently using the word without being conscious of its affective meaning: he was using *nigger* simply as a familiar synonym for *negro*. But for the negro, the term had powerful affective connotations, as a snarl word used by whites as a term of contempt for blacks. Hence for him it was (what most people indeed recognize it to be nowadays) a symbol of racial hatred and oppression.

Nigger is a member of a class of denigratory racial, political, or nationality terms which have their own built-in affective bias: *Yanks*, *Wops*, *Japs*, *reds*, *pigs* are other examples. One may say that such terms (significantly, they usually occur in the plural) are ready-made for use as 'snarl words'.

The examples I have given suggest that the greatest dangers to intelligent communication come with cases where the affective meaning becomes a major part of, if not the whole of, the message. In the diagram below, if we let the large white circles represent the total meaning, and the smaller shaded areas the conceptual meaning, then the proportions of conceptual meaning might dwindle roughly as indicated, assuming a fairly typical use of the cited words:



typewriter (neutral, unemotive) | *America* (somewhat emotive) | *fascist* (snarl word)

'Associative Engineering': Euphemism and Image-Building

Words for which affective associations bulk large are by no means limited to areas such as race and politics. In private life, unpleasant associations are unavoidable in dealing with such subjects as death, disease, crime, and punishment, and it is on these subjects, as well as on the taboo-ridden subjects of sex and the excretive processes of the body, that *euphemism*, the linguistic equivalent of disinfectant, has an inevitable influence. Euphemism (Greek: 'wellspeaking') is the practice of referring to something offensive or indelicate in terms that make it sound more pleasant or becoming than it really is. The technique consists of replacing a word which has offensive connotations with another expression, which makes no overt reference to the unpleasant side of the subject, and may even be a positive misnomer (as when a hostess asks a guest whether he would like to 'wash his hands'). By this means, people find it possible to live with, and talk about, things that would otherwise shock or disturb them. *Disease* and *indisposition*, now established words for illness, were originally euphemisms, meaning 'lack of ease' and 'lack of ability to do things'. *Concentration camp* was also originally a euphemism ('a place where the non-combatants of a district

are accommodated') applied to a camp where political prisoners and prisoners of war are kept – a place no better, and in many cases much worse, than a prison. And there are many more well-known examples.

A euphemism is in a way the opposite of a snarl word: instead of maximizing the unpleasant associations of a term, one tries to purge the subject of its damaging affective associations. But a euphemism is in the nature of things a palliative, not a cure. The unpleasant connotations of the word are, after all, not the fault of the word itself, but of what it refers to. So the euphemistic expression which replaces the original term soon gets tarred with the same brush. This is why, for example, there are so many euphemisms in English for *lavatory* (itself originally a euphemism meaning 'wash-place'): *privy*, *water-closet*, *toilet*, *cloakroom*, *restroom*, *comfort station* (this last favoured on American campgrounds), not to mention the now ubiquitous *loo*. An example of a different kind, this time from the political field, is the multiplication of terms we use in referring to economically less favoured parts of the world: such areas are no longer referred to as *backward* or *undeveloped*, but as *developing countries*, *less developed countries*, *emergent nations*, *third world countries*, etc.

It is to an example like this last, in which euphemism has a more conscious and persuasive character, that the expression 'associative engineering' seems appropriate. In a sense this is not euphemism at all. *Emergent nations* is not a nice label for something nasty: it is a label chosen with strategic tact, to pick out the optimistic and progressive aspect of the phenomenon labelled, and to play down the pessimistic aspect. The choice of term embodies a point of view, a political argument. A case where associations are more obviously chosen for political effect is *apartheid* ('separatehood'), considered as a euphemism for 'racial discrimination' or 'the colour bar'. It is an important point that the originators of the term would be unlikely to consider it a euphemism, or accept the offensiveness of what it refers to. 'Separatehood', they would say, does not have to involve racial inequality: and they would claim that the choice of a name involves not just a question of connotative meaning, but of conceptual meaning: to change 'apartheid' to 'racial discrimination' would be to talk about quite a different matter.

'Associative engineering' is not just a negative process of glossing over unwanted associations. Its positive side, the acquisition of pleasant associations, is equally important, and is well illustrated by the 'image-building' techniques of modern advertising. Manufacturers of men's cosmetics overcome the potential effeminate image of their product with aggressively masculine associations, in which the choice of product names like *Brut* plays a part. A desirable image of affluence and exclusive

high-living can be obtained by straightforward word-painting ('White tie, red sash, sunburnt ladies and steel bands – a real Caribbean affair ...') or indirectly, by details of style:

From the most distinguished
tobacco house in the world
(from an advertisement for Dunhills)

Cigarettes by John Player, England

In the first of these two extracts from cigarette advertisements, the choice of the word *house* is the detail to which I wish to point. *House* might be considered by the uninitiated an unremarkable alternative for *firm* or *manufacturers*; but its associations are with gentlemanly businesses carried on by long-established family firms – a far cry from the factory conveyor-belt. In the second phrase, it is not so much the choice of words as the syntactic construction (that of *by* connecting two noun phrases) that suggests exclusiveness. This construction usually indicates some kind of artistic activity: *Landscape gardening by X*; *Floral arrangements by Y*; *Costumes by Z*; so here again there is an effort to dignify the somewhat tarnished image of cigarette-makers and -marketers with overtones of quality and distinction.

Again, taking 'associative engineering' in the more general sense of 'strategic choice of label with regard to improving associations', we find cases which, like *emergent nations*, involve an issue of conceptual meaning, of how one 'conceptualizes' an institution. A B.B.C. programme on 11 February 1969 reported a proposal for establishing a new category of ordained priest, who would do full-time work in a factory or office in addition to his pastoral duties. When the question arose of what this new type of cleric would be called, the B.B.C. interviewer made three suggestions: *auxiliary priests*, *part-time priests*, and *worker priests*. For reasons not difficult to appreciate, all of these were rejected: 'auxiliary priests' and 'part-time priests' sound too much like second-rate assistants, whereas 'worker priests' seems to allege that other priests do not work. Thus the arrival at a satisfactory title (*self-supporting priests*) was a matter more of discarding titles with unfortunate associations, and which would be likely to offend, rather than of finding a positively suitable name for the job. But I have given a strategic explanation: the church authorities, on the other hand, could give a conceptual explanation; e.g., that *part-time priest* is theologically inaccurate because a priest is a priest all the time, even when working in a factory; that *worker priest* is pleonastic in as much as all priests have work to do. Thus an issue of associations, of 'the right image', can easily be turned into an argument about dictionary meanings.

'Conceptual Engineering'

Examples like *apartheid* show that propaganda does not just take the form of capitalizing on the affective meaning of a word at the expense of its conceptual meaning; more importantly, it becomes a matter of enlisting on one's own side the conceptual meaning of a word, so that the favourable associations can be claimed for oneself, or the bad associations used to stigmatize one's opponent. If the view is taken (as I have taken it here) that conceptual meaning is a more fundamental part of linguistic communication than associative meaning, then this is a case of 'the tail wagging the dog' – of language brought to a state where the associations of a word determine its choice, and where the conceptual meaning is reduced to an ancillary consequence, which has to be 'squared' in order for the use of the term to be legitimate. The situation reminds one of the principle of 'might is right': just as the first action of a successful rebellion is to legitimize its rule and illegitimize that of its predecessor in power, so many people turn to the dictionary (or the private dictionary stored in themselves) as a guarantee of verbal legality. Thus the principle of 'conceptual engineering' becomes part and parcel of 'associative engineering'.

Consider the word *violence*. Because of the irredeemably bad associations of *violence*, any public justification of political activities which lead to physical force or conflict must maintain the thesis that 'our actions are non-violent'. The *Guardian* reported on 2 September 1969 that a Mr O'Sullivan was arrested for trying to steal arms from a factory in Dagenham. When asked whether he was a 'militant', O'Sullivan replied that he did not know what the word meant, and went on: 'If it means using violence, I wouldn't agree. I would prefer to use the word *force*. Sometimes you must use force as a means to an end.' From this extract, it is difficult to tell whether O'Sullivan was purely indulging in associative engineering (using *force* roughly as a more pleasant synonym for *violence*, as one might prefer to call someone a *lady* rather than a *woman*); or whether he would have backed up his choice by dictionary arguments; e.g. that *violence* involves 'an extreme degree of force', 'aggressive force', or 'force which results in injury', etc.

The same sort of equivocation may be used to defend authority against harmful publicity. Bolinger (*Language – the Loaded Weapon*, Chapter 10) quotes the following case:

> In 1943, when General Dwight Eisenhower rebuked General George S. Patton for striking an enlisted man, an Army official in Algiers denied that General Patton had 'at any time been reprimanded by General Eisenhower'.

The spokesman had denied something, but had he denied that a rebuke had been administered? Only when *rebuke* and *reprimand* are synonyms. But in the army, *reprimand* also has the specific meaning of a formal proceeding. So by denying the technical charge, the spokesman had managed both to speak the truth, and to give away nothing. This sort of manipulation is possible because the meanings of abstract words are to some extent indeterminate (see pp. 119–22). There is always room for disagreement on whether a given feature of meaning (such as the element of 'aggression' associated with *violence*) is a criterial feature, or simply a frequent connotation of the word.

Definition by partisan fiat can often go to the extent of reshaping the conceptual meaning of a word, so that it no longer matches the interpretation of most speakers of the language. After the kidnapping of a British diplomat by the Quebec Liberation Front, a spokesman for that organization referred to the kidnapping as a 'purely military action' against the 'British colonial government in Quebec'. The use of *colonial* here (in despite of the British North America Act of 1867) is one that I shall not speculate on; but *military* is a clearer case of conceptual engineering, in which the notion of open armed conflict is suppressed, but the moral implications of warfare are maintained: in a military situation, killing and the seizure of prisoners can be justified. The same communiqué referred to demands for the release of 'political prisoners', who in fact were members of the QLF jailed for such crimes as bomb-planting and blackmail. Here again, the valuable associations of *political prisoner* (overtones of secret police, imprisonment without trial, conviction merely for holding certain opinions, Amnesty International, etc.) were pressed into service against the Canadian authorities, at some cost to the normal understanding of what a political prisoner is. The QLF members in jail were probably 'political prisoners' in the sense that they had done what they had done for political reasons: but what they had done was 'criminal' in a legal sense, independently of their political convictions. Reduced to a semantic argument, the question at issue was: Does *political prisoner* mean 'a person imprisoned for holding certain political views' or 'a person imprisoned as a result of the illegal consequences of his political views'?

'Position'

Strategic semantics takes on a more elaborate form when it is a question not only of defining words, but of constructing a whole argument in favour of a given attitude. If one studies a piece of propaganda, one can usually find a structure analogous to a logical proof, except that the con-

nections between one proposition and another, and even the underlying postulates, tend to be associative rather than conceptual. This quasi-logical network, which we may call the propagandist's *position*, is rather like a linguistic suit of armour protecting his attitudes. Polemics generally consists in trying to maintain one's own position intact whilst blasting holes in that of one's opponent.

For a simplified illustration of a position, we may return to the term *violence*, as considered earlier, and reconstruct the following 'proof' as the rationale underlying a person's linguistic behaviour:

(1) Being violent is bad.
(2) Being violent entails being aggressive.
(3) We are not aggressive.
(4) Therefore we are not violent.
(5) Therefore we are not bad.

A more extensive illustration will be provided by the following paragraph from a leaflet dropped on Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact authorities at the time of their military take-over of the country, on 21 August 1968:

> Responding to the request for help received from leading Party and state leaders of Czechoslovakia who have remained faithful to *socialism*, we instructed our armed forces to go to the support of the *working class* and all the *people of Czechoslovakia* to defend their *socialist gains*, which are increasingly threatened by plots of domestic and foreign reactionary forces. [Italics added.]

The four expressions italicized in this extract are assumed, for the purpose of propaganda, to have strong favourable connotations. These expressions provide the 'associative postulates' which are the starting point for my analysis:

(1) Socialism***
(2) The working class***
(3) The people of Czechoslovakia***
(4) Socialist gains***

The three asterisks (***) are a mark of favourable affective meaning, and if one wishes, one may mentally translate them into conceptual terms by the phrase 'is/are good'. Thus 'Socialism***' can be rendered 'Socialism is good'. The object of the analysis is to arrive by deduction as many times as possible at the proposition 'We***'. The number of times this can be done is an indication of the strength of affective bias in the passage. Here are two specimen 'proofs':

A. (1) Socialism*** (given)
(5) Therefore being faithful to socialism*** (from 1)
(6) Therefore the leading Party and state leaders of Czechoslovakia who have remained faithful to socialism*** (from 5)
(7) Therefore to give help to the leading Party and state leaders...*** (from 6)
(8) Therefore responding to a request for help from the leading Party and state leaders...*** (from 7)
(9) We have responded to a request for help from the leading Party and state leaders... (stated)
(10) *Therefore we**** (from 8 and 9)

B. (4) Socialist gains*** (given)
(11) Therefore to defend socialist gains*** (from 4)
(12) Our armed forces went to defend socialist gains (stated)
(13) Therefore, our armed forces*** (from 11 and 12)
(14) Therefore to instruct our armed forces to defend socialist gains*** (from 11 and 13)
(15) We instructed our armed forces to defend socialist gains (stated)
(16) *Therefore we**** (from 14 and 15)

'Proofs' similar to B could also be constructed starting from postulates (2) and (3). The analysis is only fragmentary, and I would not want to claim that it is anything more than a parody of a strict logical proof: nevertheless, it shows how the logical and conceptual content of language can be enlisted in support of the affective content. This may be called euphemistic propaganda: its aim is to show that what appears to be an invasion is actually nothing but a friendly intervention. Hence many of the values are positive values indirectly attached to the originator of the message. For propaganda which concentrates on the denigration of 'the enemy', a similar analysis could be undertaken, but the values represented by *** above would be 'bad' rather than 'good'.

In the Warsaw Pact example, there is a fairly direct relationship between the 'position' and what is actually asserted by the text; in other words, the argumentation is overt and undisguised. In other circumstances, the 'position' is conveyed in a more subtle and indirect manner, and one type of indirectness is exemplified in the following, from a report published by the John Birch Society in the U.S.A. in 1964:

> How are we reacting to the realities of our world? What do we think of the steady gain of Communism – of the millions killed, tortured and enslaved by this criminal conspiracy? Do we still laugh at Khrushchev's claim that our children will live under Communism? Do we shrug off Cuba? Will we shrug off Mexico? Are

we concerned about the certain, documented, real influence Communism exercises in Washington? Do we watch with curiosity? Do we pull down the curtain on these disturbing thoughts? Do we draw down the warm covers of apathy around our necks?

What is interesting about this paragraph is that it overtly asserts nothing (it consists entirely of questions), and yet it presupposes or takes for granted a considerable number of propositions about Communism:

(1) Communism is gaining steadily.
(2) Communism is a criminal conspiracy.
(3) Millions have been killed by Communism.
(4) Millions have been tortured by Communism.
(5) Millions have been enslaved by Communism.
(6) Khrushchev has claimed that our children will live under Communism.
(7) Communism exercises certain influence in Washington.
(8) Communism exercises documented influence in Washington.
(9) Communism exercises real influence in Washington.

These statements are part of the writer's 'position', but they are presented obliquely, in the form of presuppositions contained within noun phrases. Presupposition is a relation which has been much studied in recent linguistics, and will be considered more carefully later (see p. 277). But for the present, we can simply note that as a propaganda tactic it not only has the advantage of indirectness, but is a way of presenting one's position to the reader as if it is a matter of common knowledge, which no one in his right mind would question.

I have presented 'conceptual engineering' and 'position building' chiefly from the directive point of view; but they could equally be considered from the expressive point of view, as ways in which a man's thought processes rationalize his attitudes. Like Orwell, we may well be worried as to whether bad habits of thinking and feeling and bad habits of language are part of the same vicious circle. Whether, for example, a tendency to argue from *ad hoc* definitions which suit one's case may not have causes and repercussions deeper down, in the degree to which people's feelings and prejudices are allowed to dominate intellectual processes. Similarly, looking at society as a whole, we may speculate that as more irresponsible propaganda gains currency, so it becomes more difficult to think clearly and in a disciplined way.

The Phatic Function

Having seen how the expressive and directive functions of language may reflect divisions and tensions between one social group and another, we

turn now to the phatic function of language, the function of maintaining cohesion *within* social groups.

While phatic communion is important – perhaps far more important than we realize – for maintaining the equilibrium of society, it suffers from the major drawback of being, on the whole, dull and pedestrian. To show that our intentions are friendly, we indulge in 'small-talk', 'chit-chat', or 'sweet nothings'; for example, greetings, farewells, and routine polite questions such as 'How's the family?' and 'What happened to Spurs on Saturday then?'. The words are empty of meaning, in the sense that so long as a conversational hiatus is filled, what one says matters little. With strangers and casual acquaintances, it is advisable to have a repertoire of inoffensive remarks at your command, and on the whole, assertions must be uncontroversial. Hence the importance (in Great Britain) of remarks about the weather: if you say 'The nights are getting longer these days, aren't they', no one can possibly disagree with you. On the other hand, if you say as you pass a stranger 'Cold weather, isn't it', and he replies, 'No, actually the temperature today is higher than the seasonal average', you may well feel that he has mistaken the purpose of your remark, by treating it as *informational* rather than *phatic*.

Interesting explanations of phatic language have been put forward by experts in other fields than linguistics. The ethologist Desmond Morris, in *The Naked Ape*, notes that human small-talk has analogues in the animal world, notably in the mutual grooming customs of monkeys. He points out that this is one of the chief cooperative activities in which monkeys partake, and that whereas it has the practical effect of keeping the fur clean and clear of parasites, only an extension of this function to the social function of maintaining group cohesion can account for the inordinate amount of grooming in which monkeys indulge. Language in man is closely parallel to grooming in monkeys: it is an extremely important cooperative behaviour (it may have originated in the need for close cooperation in activities such as hunting); but the amount of talking that goes on can only be adequately explained by the secondary function of maintaining social contact.

A different account of phatic language as a substitute activity has been put forward by the social psychiatrist Eric Berne in *Games People Play* (1966). He argues that phatic communication (which he calls 'stroking') is an adult substitute for the unusual amount of handling and cuddling that a human baby requires, and normally receives, for his proper development. When he grows up, the human being does not lose this constant need for physical reassurance, but a great deal of the need is rechannelled towards reassurance administered by verbal rather than physical contact. Thus phatic language becomes characterized, in

Berne's terms, as a mutual stroking ritual, in which a balance is maintained between the amount of pleasure administered and received.

Here is an example of what Berne calls 'an 8-stroke ritual' (the dialect is American English):

A: Hi!
B: Hi!
A: Warm enough forya?
B: Sure is. Looks like rain, though.
A: Well, take cara yourself.
B: I'll be seeing you.
A: So long.
B: So long.

This ritual is satisfactory, because each participant receives four strokes, and goes away well disposed to the other, having had the right amount of reassurance. When A and B first met, they may have had to partake in a more elaborate ritual; when they get to know one another well, they will probably make do with a more streamlined ritual of two strokes:

A: Hi!
B: Hi!

If B strokes too little or too much, the result is to upset the balance. An over-effusive reply will give A the feeling that B is looking for a way to take advantage of him; an under-effusive reply such as

A: Hi!
B: (no reply)

will leave A feeling anxious and unrewarded.

In a context such as this we can appreciate why silence can be so devastating to good social relations: it is not just a neutral response but can easily be interpreted as a hostile one. We might, indeed, equate the phatic function in general with the avoidance of unlooked-for silence. Particularly at social functions such as sherry parties, the conversational ball must be kept in the air at all costs, or else one seems to be breaking off diplomatic relations with one's interlocutor. This presents a problem: topics such as health and weather are soon exhausted, and further things to say must be invented. From this, it is easy to see how joke-telling, saying witty things, and general verbal foolery acquire importance quite out of proportion to their apparent merit.

Phatic language has its parallels in public affairs. Everyone is familiar with occasions when statesmen and politicians make public utterances

which are elaborate ways of saying nothing. The cliché formula about 'full and frank talks on a wide range of subjects of mutual interest' has become almost *de rigueur* for announcing the outcome of political meetings whose confidentiality remains sacred. We might say such 'non-communiqués' are attempts to maintain communication channels (namely, to satisfy the expectation of the mass media and the public that *some* sort of statement should be made) in cases where the actual passing of information would bring to light differences which the negotiating parties are trying to pretend do not exist. This is in marked contrast to propaganda statements of a more militant kind, in which a political power is emphasizing the solidarity of its own group, and the struggle it is waging against hostile forces. In the one case there is reliance on neutral terms such as *problems*, *discussions*, and *mutual concern*, while in the other case there is a strong tendency towards two-valued thinking and a polarization of 'good' and 'bad' associations. Anyone who describes a political situation as a 'problem' is already seeing both sides of it.

On its most exalted and public level, the phatic function is found in ceremonial speeches by heads of state. The following is the opening of President Kennedy's inaugural address:

> Mr Chief Justice, President Eisenhower, Vice President Nixon, President Truman, reverend clergy, fellow citizens, we observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.
>
> The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.
>
> We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans – born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage – and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

In this speech – a masterpiece of its genre – the informational function of language is reduced to a minimum, and although one might say that here the expressive and directive functions coalesce with the phatic, it is the non-controversial as well as the non-informative nature of the

speech that needs to be stressed. If we regard the main audience of the speech as that majority of 'average Americans' who are emotionally committed to the institutions of their country, there is scarcely anything that can be disagreed with in the speech. This significant similarity between President Kennedy's address and a remark about the weather should not, of course, blind us to the emotive power of the speech, and to the use of political affective words (*rights of man, human rights*) which shows its affinity with political propaganda. But the function of the speech is not so much to change attitudes, as to reinforce or intensify them.

Language as a Substitute for Action?

We have seen how phatic language can in some senses be regarded as a substitute for physical activity ('stroking' or 'grooming'), and the same point might be made, perhaps more forcibly, with reference to the expressive and directive functions of language. A verbal insult is like the shaking of a fist, in that it stands for (or is a ritual symbol for) physical assault. A verbal attempt to change behaviour is an alternative to brute coercion. The language of militancy (using that significant word in its widest sense) is inescapably marked by a strong preference for military metaphors: *fight, struggle, victory, never surrender, campaign, crusade, close our ranks, defend our rights, make a stand.* One is reminded of the famous judgement on the United Nations that 'Jaw, jaw, is better than war, war'. People would find the history of degrading and acrimonious dispute in the United Nations easier to bear if they realized that it is necessary, if human beings are to live at peace and to survive, to have a substitute, in the form of verbal shakings of fists, for physical conflict.

The school of General Semantics (which has had continuing though moderate influence in the U.S.A. since Alfred Korzybski published *Science and Sanity* in 1933) is dedicated to the belief that misuse of language is a major cause of human conflict, and a major danger to the future of the human race. Hayakawa, the best-known popularizer of this school of thought, puts it as follows in the introduction to *Language in Thought and Action* (pp. 15–16):

> It will be the basic assumption of this book that widespread intraspecific cooperation 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 of aggravation of disagreements and conflicts, there is something linguistically 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.

While I am in sympathy with Hayakawa's general drift, I believe that he, and other General Semanticists, make the mistake of assuming too readily that 'bad' language is a cause, rather than a symptom, of human conflict. This attitude can lead to an over-optimistic faith in the curative powers of semantics:

> No full fledged science [of semantics] has yet appeared, but it is obviously on the way. When it does appear, God help the orators, the spell-binders, the soothsayers, the propagandists, the Hitlers, the orthodox Marxists, the dogmatists, philosophers and theologians. The Wonderland in which they perform their enchantments will then be clearly seen for what it is.
>
> Stuart Chase, *The Tyranny of Words*, 1937, p. ix.

But if it were somehow found possible to ban the inflammatory use of language, one suspects that men would soon resort more readily to blows on the head; if the 'hidden persuaders' were suppressed, brute force would become the first rather than the last resort.

On the other hand, there does seem to be a sense in which an overemphasis on affective rather than conceptual meaning constitutes a perversion of language: the central and explicit aspect of meaning, that which man relies on to order and to convey to others his experience and understanding of the world, should not be irresponsibly pressed into the service of emotion and prejudice. The lesson to be learned is that only by educating ourselves and others to a 'semantic alertness' can we keep such dangers at bay.

Summary

According to the scheme presented at the outset of this chapter, language has at least five functions in society:

1. conveying information (*informational*)
2. expressing the speaker's or writer's feelings or attitudes (*expressive*)
3. directing or influencing the behaviour or attitudes of others (*directive*)
4. creating an artistic effect (*aesthetic*)
5. maintaining social bonds (*phatic*)

and many abuses or mistakes in communication involve the confusion of these different functions.

I have concentrated here especially on the directive and phatic functions of language, since they most clearly show language in the service of, or in interaction with, other forces in society. Studying these functions

is also instructive in disposing of the fallacy that the main purpose of language is always to convey information, and the related fallacy that conceptual meaning is the most important semantic ingredient of all messages.

Directive language (in propaganda and loaded language generally) capitalizes on the affective and associative power of words, often with the result that conceptual meaning is subordinated to associative meaning, and is manipulated in its interests.

The phatic function, again, robs conceptual meaning of its central position in the communicative process: what information is conveyed may well be an insignificant matter in comparison with the fact that communication is being kept up at all. Not *what* is said, but *the fact that* it is said becomes crucial.

In spite of the undoubted power that language can have over the attitudes and behaviour of men, it must surely be a mistake to assume that in the social sphere, any more than in the psychological sphere, man is the slave, and language the tyrant. The relation between language and social organization or social control is a complex one of reciprocal dependence. This means that for the health of humanity, we should train ourselves to the same kind of responsible and critical scrutiny of linguistic communications as of social and political institutions.