

The Cognitive Aspect of Language

Despite considerable divergence of opinion within the realm of linguistics, there appears to be an underlying orthodoxy, or core belief system to which all but a handful of language professionals adhere. I could not describe these ideas as a school of thought or even a movement, because they are generally viewed as axioms: as the irreducible, primary facts of language whose validity remains beyond analysis or question. They are the given, requiring no proof or explanation, but on which all proofs and explanations rest. As an implicit element of nearly every popular linguistic theory today they have been accepted in varying degrees by the vast majority of editors and translators. Such is the prominence of these ideas that evidence of their influence can be seen in nearly every textbook (particularly texts dealing with Grammar and usage) currently in wide circulation.

The following are the primary tenets of these theories.

Most language professionals believe that language is a cultural phenomenon developed as a tool of communication.

The definition of words is a social convention (whether stipulative or reportive), based on a tacit agreement to follow these designations purely as a matter of convenience.

Experts in linguistics, to whom editors turn for guidance, generally regard language as a product of random influences. This view of language as contingent leads one to accept contradictions as inevitable, discourages analysis as folly, and penalizes the use of rational judgment in favor of acceptance based upon popular usage. It reduces Grammar to an arbitrary collection of rules that must be memorized and adhered to, for no other reason than to mimic those around us; in the way that a parrot can learn to speak but is unable to comprehend the meaning of anything it says.

WE DISAGREE

Communication is an obvious benefit of language, but not the primary function. Language is the product of a conceptual consciousness and the inevitable result of the practical implementation of man's mind. It is the means by which man grasps the evidence of his senses and apprehends reality. Editors do not require rules as much as an understanding of the factors upon which the rules are based. Researchers and editors alike must develop an understanding of the means by which concepts relate to one another to form thoughts. Addressing the problem of communication is pointless if one fails to consider the nature of what one wishes to

communicate.

Words are not arbitrary mental constructs unrelated to the facts of reality. They are the means by which information is isolated and integrated in an effort to bring order to our conscious awareness. Concepts act as the mental equivalent of concretes; each possessing an identity of a specific nature. Words are used to represent concepts and the definitions of those words can be objectively validated through a process of logic. When writers or editors fail to correctly identify, isolate, and integrate the words they use, their thoughts become a chaos of undifferentiated sense data, and floating abstractions. In such a disconnected state, errors are inevitable and effective communication doubtful. A lack of precision in the process of conceptualization is the source of most language difficulties. Editors must learn to perform the process of conceptualization themselves, and be able to retrace the conceptual chains of all vocabulary they use.

Language is not a product of random influences, nor is grammar an arbitrary collection of rules to memorize. Just as editors must learn to identify and select specific words to identify concepts of a specific nature, they must also learn to identify and describe the relationship of concepts to one another. It is through grammar that these relationships are described and by means of logic that those relationships can be accurately identified.

Rather than having editors memorize a system of arbitrary grammatical constructs, we prefer to train our staff in the application of logic as the primary tool of cognition in the processes of language formation. Editors learn to identify the nature of the words they use, with grammar acting NOT as a set of rules to be obeyed, but as a list of choices derived from an understanding of the facts to be describe. By focusing on the cognitive aspect of language, editors do not emulate the language forms of others, but rather develop the skills needed to create language themselves.