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ON BEING LINGUISTICALLY
AT SEA
BACK TO THE ROOTS

*“Je doute qu’il y ait un dialogue
de la chenille et du papillon”*

A. Malraux

The most ordinary events astonish only those who think about them. What can be more natural than two people talking? They are from the same country, they speak the same language, they understand one another. They have things to say to each other and they say them. Anyone who would try to question such evident truisms would be seen as attempting to be a spinner of paradoxes. And yet...

Translated by R. Scott Walker

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PUTTING OUT FEELERS

First of all is it as natural as it appears that two people should stop and speak? To an impartial observer of the behavior of one's peers this would not seem to be the case. Most of the people we rub elbows with daily—in the street, in the subway, on a beach, in a hotel or even in the apartment building where we have lived for ten years—are people whom we do not accost and to whom we never speak. In order for people to speak to one another, certain circumstances must exist; there must be a ritual of introduction and a mutual consent that often occurs only after a certain resistance has been overcome. There are important differences to be observed in this respect among different peoples and, within the same nation, among people of different classes. But in every case dialogue is preceded by a preparatory phase of prudent observation, reserve and mistrust during which the partners size one another up and seek to situate themselves in relation to each other.

What do we mean by, "They are from the same country, they speak the same language"? I am thinking, for example, of two Frenchmen in a train who have initiated a conversation brought about by a chance incident that brings them closer together: the window is open or closed, a package is not stowed correctly in the overhead rack, an argument with the ticket-taker, a smoker looking for a match or just a simple remark concerning the weather or a question about the train's schedule. This is sufficient to break the ice, but at least this much is needed. But let us imagine that both are curious and more disposed to chat in order to kill the time than to read a book or watch the countryside roll by, each pursuing his own internal monologue. They will begin to make acquaintance, cautiously, moving through successive steps by speaking of banal things. "I'm getting off at the next stop". "Oh, I have to go to the end of the line, and that's a long way". One of them is unfamiliar with the itinerary, where the other makes the trip every week "for his job". Each remains free to halt the game at any moment and to withdraw. But let us suppose that they have discovered a few points in common: similar work or origins, wartime experiences or imprisonment, vacation trips they have taken, special celebrations. The game becomes more serious. From there they might move on

to politics, the business crisis or even, still in general terms, their families and the education of children. Nevertheless, all of these tentative feelers, which may continue for the entire trip, will not necessarily lead to an introduction. They will go their separate ways without an exchange of names and addresses for they are certain that this conversation is unimportant because it will lead nowhere.

The common language between these two strangers who have chosen conversation over silence in order to occupy the time is the language of inconsequential banalities that, in fact, express nothing and signify nothing other than perhaps a fear of solitude and emptiness or a vague need for fellowship and reassurance. And yet this language is sufficient to create an atmosphere of confidence and human warmth. It can thus serve to facilitate authentic exchanges at the level where action commences. Let us say that it has the same communication value as tail-wagging among dogs and the accompanying mutual exploration of odors, or the tentative groping of wrestlers before engaging in their actual struggle. To achieve a true language of communication, several attempts of this kind are often necessary. A large portion of linguistic exchanges takes place at the level of this gentle stroking and lubricating language. The function of language, at this level of pure politeness, is to counter silence, to assuage mistrust, to restrain aggressive tendencies.

But it also happens, and just as frequently, that a banal conversation can turn bitter, that it lead to a Homeric quarrel between strangers, for the most unimportant of reasons—the train window being open or closed, someone shoving in a hurry to get off first, someone else unable to see because of another's head—and bystanders may also become involved. The mechanism setting off such disputes is the same, other than their rapidity, as in the case of friendly banalities. But a great deal more heat is given off, and a verbal quarrel could easily lead to blows were it not for the intervention of bystanders or fear of the police. To continue with the mechanical metaphor, let us call this type of linguistic exchange friction language. Friction language is no more significant, properly speaking, than, gentle stroking language. The cause of the dispute is quickly exceeded, or even forgotten, when insults begin flying. If this language is useful it is so to the extent

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that it abruptly releases latent aggressiveness and generally provides a nondangerous outlet. In English, in fact, we use a metaphor drawn from steam engines and call this “letting off steam”, releasing pressure that has built up to a dangerous level.

Friction language and gentle stroking language are forms of behavior that accompany activity but that are rarely directly related to it. Two travelers are in the same compartment, sealed off, idle, together for several hours. Their conversation has no bearing on what they are doing or what they are experiencing other than to alleviate their common boredom or the need to drown out the background noise that leads them to raise their voices causing misunderstanding. Two friends may be having a drink together when they suddenly begin quarreling over American foreign policy or the Russians and Afghanistan, neither of which involves them remotely or proximately at this particular moment. And here is the third observation that can be made with regard to language: most of the time it is apparently lacking in pertinence, lacking in consequence and serves no purpose. Its lack of relevance to its environment or current activities can be expressed, again using a mechanical analogy, by speaking of language “in neutral” as opposed to language whose gears are engaged for action. It is certain that this free play of language is accompanied by a feeling of pleasure that is all the greater for being shared. Language is a diversion meant to occupy leisure time. Its aesthetic function most often outweighs its utilitarian function or functions. And this holds true at all levels of culture and civilization.

Let us return to our travelers enclosed in their compartment and absorbed in the most unprofitable but most pleasant of pastimes, freely discussing any number of things with no obligations or sanctions. Let us take the position of an observer sitting in the corner, hiding behind a newspaper or book, determined not to get involved in the conversation yet not missing a word of it. What can the series of exchanges between *A* and *B* teach *O*, things of which perhaps not even *A* and *B* are aware? Many things, especially what we have already noted regarding the atmosphere of confidence or mistrust that has been established, the purposeless and gratuity of their remarks. If *O* is a would-be philologist, he will note right away if *A* and *B*'s language is in harmony or not; he will identify the education level of the speakers, their origins as

indicated by their regional accents, their class, their profession, their religious belief or their political party. In the language community that makes up a nation, there are several houses facing different directions, although the walls dividing the rooms may not be airtight. Each has a point of view, a way of looking at things, an orientation, as we say using a series of optical metaphors. Each has specific tastes, and tastes and colors cannot be disputed. And yet this is what we do constantly when we talk, if only to explore the other person's territory, recognize the respective limits and the common areas, agree on similarities, differ on differences. One can never say that two persons engaged in conversation are speaking the same language unless there is a concerted agreement, a long-time understanding, unless they are accustomed to living together and seeing things from the same point of view. Two persons that chance has placed together for the first time can never be certain of speaking about the same things, even if they use the same words. They can only agree on trite things, whose reassuring banality can mask all sorts of interpretations. They only understand one another to the extent that they do not seek to understand, that is to grasp the differences between their two points of view. They only speak to one another to the extent that they say nothing. Ask each one to explain what the other means and their agreement will collapse at once; quarrels will arise, not quarrels about words but quarrels about what underlies these words. And underlying the words is the experience of each one, his class, his party, his family origins, his occupation, his milieu.

RECONNOITERING THE TERRITORY

Between the language of individuals resulting from the history, the education and the experiences proper to each one of us, and the language of a country, which for most of us is our language, the observer can try to establish a series of distinctions corresponding to an approximative statistical distribution. For lack of anything better, we can term these distinctions milieux, classes or regions, while being careful, if possible, to avoid excessively "reifying" these terms whose definition is so difficult apart from linguistic criteria. There can be no causal relationships other than between

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phenomena of the same kind, linked together by a constant and measurable functional relationship. But for language and its relationship with what we call social classes, we do not possess any precise statistical data, not even the beginnings of an inventory. We allow ourselves to be guided by certain instincts, flair, the habit of listening to people speak and watching them act, which belongs in the aesthetic order in the same way as musical judgment. Whether it be a matter of vocabulary or of syntax, our expertise is based on a partial test and remains eminently subjective. However, and this is often based on fleeting impressions, we do not hesitate, from their very first words, to “situate” people we hear talking in terms of their social scale, assigning them a rank, formulating hypotheses about their education, their origins, their work. The things language teaches us about them reinforce what we believe we have learned from their general behavior, their clothing, their table manners or their way of greeting. What part of all this is exclusively linguistic? It is difficult, if not impossible, to say. For although language is a form of behavior, there is behavioral language that enhances language: mimicry, timber of the voice, sound volume of speech, pitch of the sounds. All of this enters into what we call signification.

We have assumed the simple example of a silent observer who understands the language spoken by *A* and *B*. Or who thinks he understands and who even benefits from a certain detachment. Let us go now to another country, preferably a very distant one so that the feeling imparted is almost totally foreign. The observer, who in this hypothesis does not know the language, is present for the same scene. No experience can better convey the impression of the absurdity of language, of its detachment from a living context, of its irreality. The voices seem strident, anticipated gestures are either absent or exaggerated. The observer has a feeling of insecurity that can even turn into anxiety. He feels excluded, foreign, alienated. His tongue is tied. The slightest gesture, the most ordinary and everyday action is blocked by insurmountable difficulties. Buying a stamp, asking for directions in the street, ordering a meal, buying a ticket, reading a newspaper, counting change: everything becomes an insoluble problem. One can then understand that trying to make oneself understood by gestures is

futile when the gestures themselves no longer have the same significance.

The experience of *being totally at a loss* linguistically helps us to understand what happens when we are *partially at a loss* linguistically upon changing groups or milieux. We understand what is being said around us to the extent that we can connect it to a previous experience or, perhaps, to the ensemble of conditioned reflexes from childhood or that have associated a given group of sounds to one situation and then given groups of sounds to other given groups of sounds. The group of sounds, or phoneme, appears first of all associated with a complex linguistic act in which a gesture accompanies the word and in which external circumstances explain and comment on the gesture. But decisive progress in the acquisition of language occurs at the moment in which a certain number of associations are sufficiently stable that they can be detached from any real context and summon up the series of conditioned reflexes to which they were originally linked. When one says to a child, "Here's your *tartine* (snack)", handing him a piece of bread and butter with a stick of chocolate, the first steps are taken in a linguistic assembly that leads to a reflex association of acceptance or refusal. The meaning of the word *tartine* will expand until it provokes similar salivation when it refers to bread smeared with butter, with jelly or with honey. And then one day, apart from any real and concrete context, the young student will be able to say of his history essay, "I really spread it on thick" ("*J'en ai mis toute une tartine*"). A foreigner unfamiliar with the tradition of a *tartine* as an afternoon snack will probably not understand how such an association arose, nor see what kind of link there might be between the satisfaction of a teacher of whom it is hoped that he will assign a good grade and the young student who has temporarily satisfied his hunger pangs.

Naturally in most cases we are totally incapable of recreating the history of our vocabulary, and conscientious parents who might keep notebooks recording the first appearance of this or that word in their child's language are quickly unable to keep track. All observations made concerning early infancy, however, bring out a certain number of facts. The infant invents nothing. He imitates; he reproduces. And just as circumstances are never exactly the same (if nothing else than in the symmetry of parent/child

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relationships), he tries new words, progressively testing. Sanctions are generally immediate. Either the word is appropriate and accepted, or the listeners smile and then correct the child. Adults and adolescents are no different in their methods. They pick up words and expressions as they go along; they reproduce them in analogous circumstances. The sanctions are just as immediate. Either the word is accepted by the group or it is rejected. It cannot be repeated enough that language is a social institution. Language is the manifest sign of the existence of a group, and an individual's integration into the group is achieved precisely by that individual's acquisition of the group's language. This evolution lasts a lifetime, and each change of groups requires a linguistic apprenticeship that is inseparable from the acquisition of the sounds and customs of the group by the individual who seeks to become integrated into it. The child moves from the family setting, where all the essentials of the linguistic mechanism have already been inculcated in him, to the school setting and then to the professional setting. And each time *his* language is enriched. If the transitions are too abrupt, he is unhappy and takes refuge (temporarily) in silence. If the contrasts are too sharply pronounced, he becomes bilingual, adapting his language each time to the surrounding circumstances. The slang of the playground, or that of the workshop, then coexists alongside the language that he must use with his teachers and the "inside language" of the family, with never any confusion or mixture. The more an individual's history is rich in changes of this nature, the more his language becomes complex, the more the differences are marked and the more the linguistic personality is shaped. Add to this all that reading provides, both scholarly reading and leisure reading, that is amalgamated for better or for worse with the rest, and we begin to have a faint idea of the complexity of what we call language for each one of us.

ONE WORD FOR ANOTHER

Since for adults language is most often dissociated from external circumstances and the immediate action, its significance for others is limited to the chain of associations it provokes in the memory of the one who is listening, a chain of associations that is always

and necessarily different from the one that caused the emergence of a given expression in the mind of the one who speaks. This is why it is even possible to say that one word is always taken for another and that the signification of a word does not exist, if we understand by signification an absolute identity between the chains of association that a word provokes in *A, B, C*, etc., at a given point of the dialogue. And yet, we are tempted to say from common sense and obvious facts that language does indeed function, we understand one another. No doubt we understand through language. We agree on a word. But it is this agreement that is significant, not the language. The word is a sign of a provisional agreement, an instrument for passing a message; it is not, and cannot be, a message in itself.

Moreover, what exactly do we understand by “word”? Generally discussions of language revolve around the “meaning” that can be or should be given to a word. And such discussions are all the more animated, or even inflamed and violent, when the word is more abstract, namely when the chain of associations linking it to a direct linguistic act, such as, “Do you want a snack?”, is longer and more complex. If we accept the descriptive and phenomenological point of view that I have attempted to describe, the answer cannot be in doubt. An abstract word has no meaning in itself, it has meaning only through the associations it causes to form step by step in the memory of each person. It is linked to our history, our sensitivity, our personal experience. It is charged with our full affectivity. And to the extent that it “expresses” anything, it is ourselves that it expresses and the entire unlimited series of our prior attitudes, our actions and reactions, each time this word has been pronounced in our presence. The same thing could be observed, in another form, by saying that the meaning of the word is a reflection of our education, the milieu we have lived in, the groups to which we have been attached. For in this history no one can say how much is due to pressures or enticements of the group and how much to the spontaneous adherence of the individual. The imitation instinct is but a form of the preservation instinct, and like every phenomenon of attraction, like every tropism, it can be examined both from the viewpoint of what attracts and from the viewpoint of what is attracted. Continuing in this respect, and in order to breathe new life into a worn-out image, the meaning of a

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word for each of us is the vector that defines the habitual orientation of our passions. It is interesting to test this theory with a series of key words—words such as fatherland, labor, working class, money, profit, interest, society, past, future, order, liberty—to determine if the person with whom we are talking is “right” or “left” politically. And through its extreme simplicity, this binary opposition itself shows to what level the meaning of an abstraction can be reduced.

But words do exist. They can be found in the dictionary. Definitions are given for them, with examples to back them up. We are not free to change their form or to alter their use as we like. There is a correct and an incorrect way to use words and expressions. To call into question the meaning of the word “meaning” or the significance of the word “significance” is but a futile mental exercise when there is an entire tradition, an entire culture, an established authority symbolized in France by classicism and the Academy. There is no intention, of course, to deny the obvious. The immense lexicographical work accomplished in Europe since the Renaissance, which has led to creation of such monuments as the Littré, Webster’s or the Oxford English Dictionary, has contributed to perfecting and refining the marvelous instruments that are our modern languages, and no one can hope to acquire learning without their assistance. But what, in point of fact, do the best-made dictionaries offer us? Definition of words by phrases, each term of which is defined in turn in separate entries. And in this manner, step by step, progress is made in a spiral fashion, so that ultimately the understanding of one term pre-supposes understanding all the others, in a closed circuit. The dictionary, to the very extent that it has no reference to direct experience, to the total and overall linguistic act in which understanding of each expression is born, cannot give us the definition of any word. And we could never learn a foreign language simply by moving from one entry to another until all the circuits have been exhausted unless at some point there is a common term between the foreign language and our own that makes it possible for us to return to direct experience. Scholarly dictionaries, however, proceed in an entirely different manner. They give us the history of the word in the language, its distant etymology, that links us to sense impression or action; they provide

a series of examples, taken from classical authors and ranked in order of historical appearance, which helps us follow the evolution of the word, working from the etymological image and across its multiple uses. The examples cited are entire phrases that bring out the diversity of such uses. We can only understand the phrases, and hence the words, to the extent that we can associate them with a familiar experience, with an authentic linguistic act. The definition serves as a reminder for us. It adds nothing to the sum of examples that illustrate the uses of each word and that make up its meaning.

Anyone familiar with the study of foreign languages, or the problems of translation, has learned, the hard way, to distinguish between what is called the meaning of a word, which is its equivalence to another word in another language, and its value in one or another context. The two rarely coincide. The field of application of an English word is never strictly the same as the field of application of its closest approximation in French, even if the two words have an identical origin and are written exactly the same. In this sense every word in the dictionary is misleading. We cannot trust them, or rather we cannot trust ourselves, when we use them unless, by a long series of fruitful or fruitless attempts, we have learned exactly, "What to say when", as Professor Austin put it. That which can be said in a set of given circumstances is the only definition that can be assigned to "correctness" of a language, which implies both a judicious choice of terms and the construction of the phrases and expressions in which we embed these terms. Who determines this correctness? Usage, the only teacher of grammar. Usage, which is once again the imitation instinct encouraging an individual to become integrated precisely into the group that attracts him by using the language of this group. And if we can also speak of "proper usage", "tradition", "the French Academy" or "literary salons", it is only to the extent that in a given society, for example French society of around 1990, certain milieux or certain groups still enjoy a sufficient power of attraction to cause all other groups to attempt to imitate them.

It is much truer to say that correctness of language is achieved, in a given group or for a given individual, when nothing betrays the original difference of the individual within the group. The child who speaks in slang on the playground at school is obeying this powerful urge to "do like the others" and to "speak like them". If

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by chance he should slip and use a vulgar word at home or to use a slang expression in response to the teacher, he knows he has not obeyed the rule of “like unto like”, of adapting language to its specific context. Alert speakers or lecturers know how to react in a similar manner by adapting themselves to their audience. When writing this text, I myself have said nothing until now if the words I use do not evoke something in the minds of those who are reading it or if these words evoke chains of associations that are radically different from my own. Consciously or unconsciously I am referring to a philosophical education, to my English-language studies, to my experiences as an educator and as a father. Everything I write is dictated to me, at the very instant I write it, by a mass of previous reflections, or musings, discussions with friends, arguments with specialists. But I am addressing myself to an audience of which I know nothing and which is composed of an indefinite number of individuals, each one of whom has his own ideas on the problem of language, ideas that are also based on a set of reflections and readings or conversations taken from here and there. Will we be able to understand one another? Can we cause our thoughts to converge on a common object, perceive it from the same point of view, draw the same conclusions from our common observations? To achieve this it is perhaps necessary to go beyond the given elements of everyday experience, to go further in abstraction and systematization than we have until now. And this is what we shall do, even if it means returning later to more concrete things.

DIALOGUE, PRESENT AND SITUATIONAL

All abstract reflection on language, from Aristotle down to the beginning of the twentieth century, has been based on writing. But although writing offers obvious advantages for the study of language because of its permanence, its visual and tactile characteristics that are the very sign of the concrete for a craftsman’s civilization, it is necessary that we recognize that linguistic communication through writing and reading is a very special, and irregular, example of language. This example merits particular study. It is itself quite complex ever since writing

became mechanized and industrialized with the help of the printing press. It cannot instruct us directly about language, of which it is but the by-product. To understand what happens when two or more people speak, we must come back to the natural conditions of this exchange that remain to a very large extent the same today as they were at the dawn of prehistoric times.

When two persons speak they are present, simultaneously, in the same place, and this coincidence constitutes for them the present, the only reference for duration, relative to which the past and the future can be situated, or at least estimated. This present is not random; it has its own duration, a dimension created by memory of the immediate past and anticipation of the near future, which are encompassed in the consciousness that every living being has of existence. One of the essential functions of language is to bring us to specify for each of us, at every instant of an enduring experience, what is “before” and what is “after”. The grammatical tenses of verbs fulfill this function in great part, but not exclusively. The expression of time is likewise an important function of nouns, adjectives, adverbs and the helping words through which we ask questions of others and respond to their questions. The other function of language is to specify, in relation to this precise instant in which the dialogue is taking place, what is *here* and *there*, here being determined for the speakers by the evidence of sensory and motor perception of the moment being experienced, there by a set of coordinates that correspond term for term to the disposition of man’s sensory and motor organs. We do not perceive one space but many: visual space, tactile space, auditory space, instinctive space, motor space, with quite marked differences between individuals in the relative importance and the coordination of these perceptions. Three-dimensional geometric space, which, from Greek geometers down to the middle of the nineteenth century, was taken to be either a constitutive element of matter or an essential form of our minds, is an abstraction drawn from the upright stance of a stationary human being looking straight ahead. It defines the vertical, an unstable position maintained by the correcting effort of muscles in the lower limbs; and secondarily right and left; front (things seen) and behind (hidden things). It thus coordinates visual impressions with muscular sensations linked to the activity of the arms and legs. But

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perception of space is inseparable from perception of time, immobility never being total nor permanent in a living being. What we perceive is movement, which means the constant modification of the time-space coordinates. Language expresses this inter-relation quite precisely by using the same instrumental words for both. But at the same time that it compares them, it contrasts and distinguishes them, always seeking permanence in change and change in permanence. The object is permanent; its appearance is changing. Language trusts in the permanence of the object while accepting the evidence of change in appearances. It expresses now one, now the other, calling "tree" that which loses its leaves in autumn and gets them back in the spring. But the permanence of the object is quite relative; it is but an abstraction created by the fact of our being accustomed to finding it always in the same place and in the same condition, whereas we move around it. The notion of object can be applied to whatever seems not to move, not to change without our intervention. There would be no name for anything if nature were in such a state of viscosity that we could never perceive anything but movement. And this is the kind of vertigo we feel when we attempt to imagine nature on some scale other than our own, a spatial-temporal scale extending from the infinitely small to the infinitely large. Language is exactly proportional to our perception and our vital rhythm. It responds only to the data of the senses and to the modifications in our environment that we perceive. The rough classification that we draw up between material objects and living beings expresses the difference in rhythm of perceptible changes in appearances. By matter we mean what is stable; by life what modifies matter and changes form. But stability and change have meaning only relatively among themselves and with respect to us.

The immediate given of language is thus time and space defined for at least two partners at each instant and in each place by their simultaneous presence. From this basis the world is reconstructed, or can be, both in its permanence and its fluidity. Two remarks are necessary here. First, nothing guarantees us that persons *A* and *B* are perceiving and reconstructing the same world through language. We infer that these worlds coincide if there is similarity of language; and the resemblance in organs of perception leads us to believe that this inference is justified. But nothing guarantees us

that it is; and if we bring in the element of memory, we are led to believe that *A* and *B* are not placing the same meaning in the same words. Secondly, the world being reconstructed at each instant by means of language is but a minute portion of the world perceived by *A* and *B*. The intervening choice is dictated by the particular attention that *A* or *B* pay to one or another aspect of the world, looked at with respect to change or permanence. This two-fold aspect of language, both ambiguous and partial, is combined with what we said earlier regarding the relativity of the notions of time and space, and leads us to examine the motivations that caused linguistic acts originally and that continue to cause them today. Apart from the social language we described before—gentle stroking language, friction language, useless language with no direct relationship to action, which are no doubt forms of dialogue that evolved quite late—language would seem to be, in the history of humanity, the instrument *par excellence* for survival of the species and for its emergence at the front rank of the animate beings we know. Language is linked to the vital functions of nutrition and reproduction. It stands in constant relationship to our actions on matter, on the vegetable and animal species we use for our own purposes, and on other humans. It is our perpetual interaction with our surrounding environment that it facilitates and expresses. Let us call this “interest” in the sense of “what there is between us and others, between ourselves and the world”. Language only expresses what interests us. What interests *A* does not necessarily interest *B*. The function of dialogue is to interest *B* in what interests *A* and *vice versa*. All the rest, which for the moment interests neither *A* nor *B*, is excluded from the dialogue or intrudes in it only fortuitously.

Let us call “objective, of thought” (but we could just as well say goal, objective, intention) that which interests *A* in the world at the moment in which the dialogue is undertaken with *B*. Suppose, for example, that *A* and *B* know each other and are accustomed to talking together, but *B* does not know what *A* wants of him. From our imaginary setting, then, we can eliminate all the introductory preliminaries, the tentative feelers, the rituals of introduction. But we come back to the very general case, namely the one in which *A* begins talking to *B* by saying, “I have something to tell you”, and *B* answers, “What is that?”. The function of the dialogue, from that

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point on will be to determine the object of thought through a series of successive approximations, in order to harmonize as closely as possible, through an exchange of questions and answers, *B*'s interest with *A*'s interest in the same object. Here one might have recourse to the optical metaphor of focusing. A typical example of this would be the search for a person's name. *A* might continue by saying, "I met someone you know", which already restricts the area of research a great deal for *B*, since it is a matter of a person, and since *B* knows this person. But *B* cannot "guess" who it is other than by a great stroke of chance, unless *A* continues the game by giving him increasingly precise clues. "It's a woman". "She's someone from your family". "She's tall and dark-haired". "She's rather attractive". Through a process of elimination *B*, in fact, will discover the person's name. And agreement is reached as soon as *B* says the name. "That's her". The radio game program *Twenty Questions* popularized this highly philosophical research scheme.

It is rare for language to furnish us with a proper noun, the exact description of a pre-determined object, as is the case for the person known to both *A* and *B*. In most cases the thing we are speaking about cannot be referred to with a proper noun; it is simply part of linguistic framework that designates it with only the relative precision of a lobster pot that catches the animals and that fishermen then come to empty: a trap or slot or drawer into which we force all things that have certain characteristics in common. The common noun designation for a thing, even if it is a very precise technical term, is never the same as a proper noun designation of a particular object unless we add a series of modifiers that refer it unambiguously to a pre-determined time, place and person. Contrary to what is generally believed, it is not the precision of technical vocabulary that facilitates agreement on an object of thought but precision in the use of a triple reference system that links this object of thought to the precise time and place of the dialogue and to a particular partner in dialogue. "Hand me my..."; "Give me your..."; "Leave him his..." and other incomplete phrases of this type are complete linguistic acts, immediately intelligible in the concrete situation in which the speakers find themselves, with no need to designate what is being referred to.

FROM YOU TO ME

The reference system that gives the degree of precision required by an expression composed of vague elements (verbs or common nouns) to constitute an effective and unambiguous linguistic act (sentence or clause) varies sufficiently in detail from one language to another to pose serious problems for translation and to bring out differences that can seem radical in the construction of the linguistic model of the world that these languages offer us. But certain essential traits are shared, certain paired opposites fundamental. The first opposite of this type is that of the subject who speaks and the subject who listens, speaker and listener, *I* and *You*. The second essential opposite is that of a pair of speakers engaged in dialogue, and the “what is being talked about”, that is in turn set off by a third opposition, much less clear than the previous ones in many languages, specifically in French, between those (him or her) about whom one is speaking—potential and possible partners in dialogue but for the moment excluded from the conversation—and that about which one is speaking—the world of inanimate things, plants, animals other than man. Grammar sums all this up by teaching us to distinguish in texts between the first, second and third persons, the singular and plural, the masculine, feminine and neuter. But a reflection on dialogue invites us to insist even more on the opposition between the first and second persons on the one hand (*I* and *You*, ignoring the quite secondary difficulty in French resulting from the use of “*Vous*” and “*Tu*” to designate “*you*”), and the third person on the other. We will overlook here the problem of *I* as seen by *You* (= me) and/or by *I* (= myself) and other adjunct complications.

The first observation we can make is that *I* and *You* are both evident in themselves and lacking in any kind of specific significance. *I* designates the speaking subject at the moment he is speaking and changes meaning each time a new speaker begins speaking in turn. *You* designates the subject to whom the speaking subject is momentarily addressing himself, no matter who this subject may be, male or female, one or many. There is total symmetry and constant alternation from *I* to *You* as the conversation develops, with no possibility of error on the part of the speakers present. But this clarity ceases to exist as soon as we

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leave the realm of an actual dialogue in a specific situation and begin dealing with quoted remarks. And even in a real dialogue there is no implication of any mutual knowledge of *I* relative to *You* or *vice versa*. If I stop a stranger in the street and say to him, "I'm lost. Can you tell me how to get to where I want to go?", I do not ask myself whether he might also be a stranger in these parts. He does not answer me with, "First of all, who are you?", unless my appearance arouses his suspicions. It suffices that we are together briefly, that I need him and that he agrees to answer me. With no further ado, the conversation can go on with, "where are you going? That's where I'm going myself. I'll take you there".

As soon as a third party becomes involved, the situation is different. Absent persons are always wrong. And the problem with absent people is that they are vague. They are not present, they cannot be seen, they can neither be pointed out nor asked to speak in confirmation. The function of language is to evoke them in a sufficiently precise manner so that there is no possibility of error about the person. Hence there are indications of gender and number: masculine or feminine, singular or plural. And there too the instruments of this determination vary according to the languages. Gender can be applied to nouns (through the use of an article or word-endings) as well as to what replaces them. The indication of gender may or may not be added to an indication of number. The dual or collective can be interposed between the singular and plural. Language can establish a distinction between the animate and the inanimate, between the *fas* and the *nefas*, that which speaks and that which cannot speak (as in English with *it/which* or *he-she/who*), or to the contrary it can extend the distinction of genders to the inanimate kingdom, which results in breaking all links between the notion of gender and the notion of sex or to belonging to the masculine or feminine sex. The need to carry over to other phrases the distinction concerning the noun and the verb established in the first part of the sentence, or to balance out questions and answers by eliminating ambiguities of gender or number or possession, led to the creation of relay instruments, connecting elements, like interrogative relative pronouns, whose correction with possessive or demonstrative pronouns and objectives is rather well established. It is quite clear in French with *lequel, laquelle*, etc., but disappears with *que, qui, quoi, dont*. In

English it is required for “who” or “which” but disappears with “that”. This is not the place to go into detail on grammatical complications. It will suffice simply to recall the basic principle. Each language has at its disposition a series of determining instruments for the third person (the person excluded from the dialogue, the rest of the world, others), making it possible to situate everything that the present speakers are talking about in space and time, in relation to the place and time in which the dialogue is taking place and in relation to the speakers. Conversely one can conclude that any linguistic act that does not include the necessary degree of precision, both regarding the speakers present and the object of thought in which they are interested, is an invalid act. In other words, just “blah-blah”.

FACE TO FACE AND SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

Can we attempt to draw some practical and therapeutic conclusions from the preceding abstract analysis? The first might be a heightened conviction that recourse to direct dialogue, a face-to-face conversation, without witnesses, always represents an important savings of time and of energy. Neither correspondence, nor written reports, nor long-distance telephone conversation can replace dialogue. And the advantages of dialogue are rooted both in the real presence of its partners, the human warmth that results from this exchange, and in the fact that in dialogue the roles are constantly being inverted by the play of questions and answers. The flow of dialogue is free and capricious; and shortcuts are permitted as soon as agreement is reached, along with repeating and additional explanations if doubts persist. All this is true if the partners play the game according to the rules, agreeing to listen as much as they speak, with listening being the only means of grasping the chances of potential agreement. If this is not the case, true dialogue is broken off or becomes heated. There is no dialogue other than in a search in common for agreement on an object of thought, which can very easily be defined in speaking.

A second condition for effective dialogue (or perhaps it is the same condition seen from another angle) is modesty, prudence, moderation in language, with the senses always aware of their

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relativity. Language does not any more express man than it expresses the world. One can never set up an equation saying "what I say is true, what you say is false". The true and the false can only point to the correct or incorrect use of symbols in the very partial and very fragmentary system that is our own. By forgetting the symbolic function of language, particularly in abstract discussions, one acts as if words created their object, acted on appearances, somehow modified the order of the world or increased our power. This is a magical concept that has left too many traces in our relations with our peers. Certainly there is a dialectic of master and slave; the master commands and the slave can only execute his orders and be silent. But the power of the master, manifested through language, has a source other than language. The master is stronger, he is richer, he has more bread and wine. He has his hands on the controls. This is why he can speak as master. And if the slave bows over in submission, it is because he is weak. He does not think less; perhaps this is the only consolation remaining to him.

We thus will learn to be wary of an argument without answer. It is rarely the sign of profound agreement. The language of conciliation, of equity, of justice, which is opposed to the dialectic of master and slave, supposes that men are equal by law, and the first manifestation of this equality is the right to plead one's case, the possibility of being heard, of explaining oneself. This right cannot be exercised unless society recognizes it and maintains it. Justice, the *jus dicere* or *suum cuique tribuere* of the Romans, gradually replaced a vengeful settling of scores with the dialogue of those who plead their case (or their representatives). All the conciliatory mechanisms born with the industrial age, within companies to attempt to regulate or prevent conflicts, that have developed social law by extending step by step the system of protection of the individual from misery and oppression, proceed similarly, with the only difference being that the arbitrator, the judge or the legislator either is eliminated to allow free play of supply and demand, or else is imposed and in turn attempts to speak as master. And to the extent that it has ever functioned, the democratic system, or rather the various parliamentary systems that for better or worse incarnate the democratic spirit, is nothing other than a superimposing of labor relations boards discussing

matters of common interest. The object of thought of a group can be the imminent closing of a factory for lack of orders, or the bad harvest that will drive up prices and ruin the farmer, or the threat of war, or inadequate schools. These are discussed and talked about. But at whatever level, the linguistic mechanism remains the same, other than its degree of abstraction.

But the greater the degree of abstraction and the greater the number of parties involved, the more difficult it is to organize the discussion, to guide it serenely toward greater clarity. A frequent source of confusion derives from abstraction itself, which can be located at quite different levels depending on whether it is expressed by an individual referring to his own experience or to a group composed of individuals or groups of individuals with divergent interests. As soon as the discussion involves several voices, the diversity of the points of view of *A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, etc. speaking in turn, and often using the same words with different systems of reference, adds to the confusion. Quite quickly no one knows what is being talked about, and the only thing left to know is who will have the last word. A general discussion, with no limits or controls, will lead to nothing. We can understand why prudent democracies, concerned for their survival, take so much care in training their judges and lawyers, their debaters and chairmen. For lack of verbal hygiene, for lack of discipline in debate, for lack of a true parliamentary tradition, how many of our modern democracies are but parodies and shams?

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