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English: The "Other" Language

by R. F. WEAVER

I remember one April afternoon when, in search of some flowers to send to a gracious hostess who had been very kind to me, I tramped the hot mosaic-paved walks of Lourenco Marques. Wearying of a quest that promised no success, I eventually appealed for help to a co-operative-looking passer-by, whom, since I had no Portuguese, I addressed in English. I was met without comprehension and a machine-gun chatter, accompanied by a vigorous flapping of the hands. I tried in turn some first-form French, some army "peanut" Italian, and some low Latin; but to no avail. The traffic of communication was snarled up. In desperation I hauled an old envelope from my pocket and on it sketched, with inadequate draughtsmanship, a very sorry-looking bunch of flowers. New light dawned over the Portuguese's anxious features, and in no time, using the local variety of sign language, he had directed me to a shop where I was able to buy an exquisite and very expensive bouquet.

Most travellers in a strange country will have experienced the frustration of being unable to make themselves understood, and it is little wonder that phrase books sell so readily to tourists. For, whatever one wants, whether it be flowers, food, or the nearest toilet, one has needs to express and a strong motivation to command those needs.

In our early attempts to acquire another language there exists a driving force that is equally strong. A child wanting to play with his next-door neighbour hurdles, albeit clumsily, the barrier of language and learns to understand and make himself intelligible to his playmate. The grades child is easily led by a sense of novelty and exploration into mastering a few sentences in a strange tongue. The learning process, the repetition of delicious, new combinations of sounds, the novelty of hearing one's own voice produce a phrase until now untried, the very cleverness of a Peter Pan learning to crow cock-like: all result in a spontaneous, pleasurable performance that is its own reward. I have seen joy on the faces of tiny Afrikaners trying to say "toof brush." If one could only perpetuate the pleasure of early contacts with a new language, the task of language learning would continue to be an absorbing game.

But with the slackening of the first impetus, there arises the need of a new motivation, and teachers are hard pressed to find one. To learn a language which nobody seems to use, a language moreover in which one does not think and which in any case comes less easily than one's mother tongue seems an unrewarding expenditure of time and labour, so that the early promise of proficiency in "the other language" begins to shine less brightly. It is of little use to point out why the Afrikaans-speaking child should learn English: to tell him that it is the mother tongue of over 200 million people in the world; that it has, with the reinforcement of the American peoples, displaced French as the main language of international communication; and that a knowledge of English is the key that will unlock a storehouse of literature and knowledge unmatched in western civilization. Such arguments might appeal to older, more mature, more rational people, but not to the young child. His needs are personal and immediate, and his own mother tongue is a sufficient means to realising them.

The circumstances of a two-stream educational policy contribute to an apathetic attitude towards English or Afrikaans as a second language. It was 24 years ago that I first discussed this with a fellow-examiner in Lower Grade English, a sound educationist who was to become one of the highly respected principals that have brought lustre to our prominent Afrikaans-medium high schools. He was teaching English in Bethal, and apart from a few scattered advertisement hoardings and a weekly bioscope, his pupils, confronted with the task of what was virtually a foreign language, had no contact with it outside the walls of the classroom. How could they compete — and compete they must in public examination — with children brought up in a bilingual urban community? The dice were heavily loaded against them.

In rural areas today, the picture has undergone little change. The tide of industrialisation and urbanisation has washed a large number of Afrikaner families to the cities and larger towns, into

a world where English and Afrikaans flow together. But it has still left many behind, high and dry above the mingling currents. True, they are more intensively exposed to the mass media of radio, the film and advertising; media, however, that lack the warmth of human contact. And even in our cities the language groups tend to hive off, so that there are populous suburbs of Johannesburg that are predominantly either Afrikaans- or English-speaking in their residents. The one-medium school is paralleled with a one-medium home and social environment.

We often talk of people who "speak the same language", implying that they are at one, that they understand one another and find harmony, agreement and a degree of satisfying companionship together. If we do not speak the same language, we have little chance of reaching that understanding. And so a vicious circle is described. We do not learn the other's language sufficiently well to establish easy relations, and because we cannot achieve those relations, we are deprived of the most valuable opportunities of learning the other's language.

That language is a link to better understanding has long been realised in the international field. The United States recently announced its government's intention to spend half a million dollars on setting up university schools of African languages so that trained personnel could go out to the new independent African states, equipped to meet their peoples on a common language ground and so offer advice and aid in the crucial ideological struggle that besets this continent. A similar attitude was revealed by two Cape Town newspapers, one English and the other Afrikaans, whose editors innovated the daily publication, in translation, of each other's leading articles. Not that one must agree with both — or either — but without knowing what the other man is saying, it is impossible to find any points of agreement.

On all sides, then, we are faced with this problem of isolation: in schools, in newspapers, in social relations and even in geographical environment. To escape from it, one does not have to be a traitor to one's own tongue. Listen to two reasonably bilingual South Africans carrying on a conversation or a discussion. What Cowper calls the football of conversation, is "bandied to and fro" in either language, even alternating from sentence to sentence in a phenomenal performance that bemuses any foreigner who chances to overhear it. In such a situation, isolationism cannot survive.

Our different cultures and traditions, silhouetted sharply against our different heritages and backgrounds, incline us to a narrow parochialism. Some years ago, a parent wrote to his favourite morning newspaper protesting that three of the topics offered to matriculation candidates in second language showed a lack of imagination on the part of the examiner. The three topics were: "A Visit to a Factory"; "Wandering around a Bookshop"; and "The Attractions of Natal." The writer of the letter complained that the topics were unfair since there were no factories on the platteland and no bookshops in our dorps, while 95 per cent of Afrikaans-speaking children had never seen Natal. Shades of the South Coast — or Umhloti — in the July season! And one of the prescribed works for that year was H. V. Morton's "In Search of South Africa." Such conservatism, born of a restricted environment and outlook, must surely disappear with closer contact. For his part, the English-speaking town-bred child must learn that milk is not manufactured in bottles. I once heard a teacher ask an urban class what farms they had visited. One unfortunate, underprivileged child answered that she had been to "Gillooly's Farm" — which is a picnic spot on the outskirts of Johannesburg. There is indeed a sore need for us to learn to know the other man's world.

I believe that the success and failure of second language teaching have a great deal to do with attitude, the attitude of both the teacher and his pupils. And attitude is greatly influenced by aim. It is not sufficient that learning anything should have only as its goal the acquisition of a certificate or the passing of an examination. If that is the aim, the study becomes a chore and a hated drudgery. It results, for example, in the matriculation candidate's practising and rewriting *ad nauseam* a limited series of essays, one of which by hook or crook he will present under one of the titles offered him by the examiner. Originality, spontaneity, achievement, confidence and imagination are crushed under the weight of such a system — if it merits the word — of teaching creative writing. I have seen its results year after year. In contrast to those results, I have also seen what training college students. even though poor English scholars at the time of their admission, can attain in a matter of three years. Every student has to be able to

teach through both language media, and promotion is barred to those who fail to make the grade. Language therefore becomes a bread and butter need as a vehicle of expression, and one of the many skills to be acquired as part of one's professional stock-in-trade. Its study takes on a new purpose that lifts it out of the rut of a stodgy discipline imposed for unworthy reasons. Oral skill takes on a new importance and as it develops brings with it a sense of mastery. And because most people like doing the things they can do, the attitude, which may well have been one of indifference or even antagonism, gradually and almost inevitably changes.

If the attitude is not a healthy, positive one, the teacher only perpetuates the teaching crimes of which he has been the victim and he conveys his aversion to every class he teaches. Apathy or resentment can be bred as easily as enthusiasm. I have heard some most deplorable references, which I refrain from recording, to both English and Afrikaans from people who should know better. But they are the extreme cases. More common is the teaching which is dull routine, day in and day out, lasting for 35 minutes and completed with a sigh of relief or a feeling of, "Well, that's that. Now let's get on with something worthwhile." By this attitude is failure engineered. Its components are the dreary repetition of patterns, the translation of isolated words, the stultifying of ideas, and a thorough dislike of the language. It saps the very life blood of language.

Language teaching does not have to produce such negative and distressing results. There are Afrikaans-medium high schools in the Transvaal that consistently produce written English of a high standard, judged by the most reliable measuring device we have, the Transvaal Secondary School Certificate Examination. It is not coincidence that these results should be repeated year after year. They are evidence of several years of sound approach and conscientious teaching. Some excellent Afrikaans-speaking educationists have established reputations as teachers of the English language, making their study a vocation and placing at the disposal of their colleagues the benefits of their research and experience. They are to be found not only in schools, colleges and universities but also in the fields of technology, literature and journalism, where many have overcome a unilingual handicap to become equally adept in both languages. The narrow regard them as renegades. But it is not a question of language opposed to language, for it is the most natural thing in the world to retain the tongue in which one first lisped, and few can resist doing so. The period when Afrikaans was struggling to grow and survive is behind us, as the Wonder of Afrikaans celebrations of 1959 clearly demonstrated. A mature, virile language, it has taken deep root and continues to put out healthy shoots. It will survive side by side with English in this country, and neither language will oust the other as long as both groups continue to exist in South Africa. To learn the other language is not to capitulate but to add to one's stature and to gain confidence in one's dealings with one's fellow men. Some of us have let too many years go by, and our tongues have lost their mobility, our minds the will to learn. But whatever excuses we may offer for ourselves, we dare not neglect our young people and the generations to come.

There is no easy route to the language teacher's destination. There are, however, some qualities the teacher who follows it must have. He needs to have the attitude that his task is urgent and worthwhile and a conviction strong enough to pass on to his pupils. Enthusiasm, infectious and stimulating, will find a response; apathy will not. There is an intense satisfaction, enhanced by the company of youth, in exploring new worlds and opening up new panoramas of knowledge and richness. The exploitation of the creative and adventurous urges in children can mend the halting gait with which they plod painfully along, finding dreariness and discouragement. And a sense of achievement, continually fostered, grows with each new skill. In these things lies our motivation.

Above all, if we are moved by a sincere desire to get along better together, the barrier of language has to be broken down so that, thrusting aside its wreckage, we can advance to meet one another in the place of understanding.

THE CRISIS IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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conformers of the world, and this diversity in unity is a heritage we must not lightly cast aside, least of all in religion. There is no desire for all to get into one kraal or laager — it's so dull, besides being fatal to man's search for truth.

Jt is fashionable to attack Christian National Education in a negative way — they shouldn't do this, and they shouldn't say that. Mere diagnosis of an illness does not automatically bring about a cure. Wherever possible, there must be positive treatment. We say we know what is wrong with C.N.E. It is possible that we can take preventive measures — isolate ourselves, or gargle meaninglessly with words. This may serve our own ends, but what about the children in our care? Surely they are worth some positive effort? Or do we feel that if we all thought the same way, then wrong would obviously be right, and we could live happily ever after? That, at any rate, is how the political arm of C.N.E. thinks. It is hardly likely that the English-speaking teacher will bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image, however sweet the music of the sackbut and psaltery. The danger is there all the same.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

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should help to co-ordinate and prevent unnecessary duplication, that the state should act in full publicity in these matters, etc. It is, however, also true that private initiative may fall short of its task, that the state will have to take over where stimulation fails to elicit a satisfactory result, that the state has a right to know what is done with subventions, how it is done and to what extent the general interest has been served.

A nation in so intricate a situation as the South African knows this. Yet we must help to develop an all pervading sense of educational responsibility in all its citizens as individuals, as citizens of their country and as representatives of Western culture. Just like charity, education begins at home and educational responsibility begins with those who produced the child. There is no apology for parents — and for those who are loyal to them — to confine their educational responsibility to the home (or: the school). Educational responsibility *begins* at home but then it appears to be one of the most fundamental responsibilities of the citizen as a member of a community which finally embraces a whole world.

EDUCATION AND A CENTRALIZATION POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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cation. Grants to cover at least 60%—70% of total expenditure would come from a properly-constituted central government. Each region would raise the rest of the money by taxation, but an equalisation formula would ensure that less privileged areas would not suffer.

Under this system, as is the case in England today, a number of National Advisory Councils could be established e.g. for "The Training of Teachers" and "Technical Education and Industry" and so on.

There is a need for reform in the organisation and administration of education in South Africa. Rather, however, than have unacceptable ideas and patterns of organisation foisted upon the country, it is obvious that those who fear further domination through education will cling to what they already have and will resist any change. It is clear, therefore, that the present is not the time to attempt any such change which can only result in deeper division than is unfortunately the case.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MORAL QUANDARY OF 1960 AFRICA

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may be accomplished sooner than the pessimist might imagine. The second disaster that has fallen on Africa is the state of neurosis into which people of all races have been led. This shows itself in an inability to choose: somewhat like the induced neurosis that modern Conditioning has produced in dogs. Indeed, the formula that neurosis was basically an inability to make a choice could hardly be gainsaid by any modern psychologist. Presented with pairs of alternatives both of which are disagreeable, the ordinary person abstains from choice and produces ultimately a conflict of indecision that can only be seen at a community level as a massive maladjustment. The tragedy lies in the fact that the choices are really manifold, and that the two offered seldom operate at an immediate and functional level at all.

This whole problem would make the theme for a national or even international conference of educationists, a departure that might well mark the beginning of new adjustments throughout African society. To the intelligent person of whole mind, Africa offers unlimited opportunities.