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SEMANTICS *for the* HIGH SCHOOLS

by F. MAYNE

"Unreflecting imitative verbalisations have done much to bedevil our political and historical thinking" is the thesis developed by Dr. Mayne in this trenchant and critical article.

IN the learning of English the child spends a considerable and necessary amount of time learning spelling, punctuation, sentence construction, and vocabulary. But the most important aspect of language, its meaning, is almost completely ignored except in the superficial, dictionary sense. The machine is studied, but the uses to which it is put are neglected. Now form without content, technique without purpose, can lead only to uncritical sterility and to verbal imitation which reduces human communication to little more than the socialised twittering of the gregarious birds.

Criticisms of University English Teaching

Much has been said in recent years about the high rate of failure in English at the universities. It is said that fewer and fewer students are taking English as a major subject and that the number of teachers of English is diminishing. Now in some subjects, perhaps we can call them content subjects, even immature students can be persuaded to swallow a mountain of words and to regurgitate them over an examination paper without a proper understanding of what they mean. These students may not do well; but they are more likely to pass such subjects than a subject like English which requires a well-developed critical faculty, which requires that they understand the words they use. It is a very poor English examiner who attaches any value to such abstractions as *vital, appealing, plastic, living quality, romantic, realist, profound, witty, beautiful, significant, sentimental,* and similar unanalytical verbiage which means everything and therefore nothing. And whatever criticisms of university English departments can be made, one cannot criticise them for failing to produce a critical faculty within a few months. The work must obviously begin in the schools. Moreover, the work must not be left to the desultory good intentions of unqualified teachers. What we need in the high schools is a systematic course in Semantics, specially adapted and simplified for school use, with the emphasis not on Semasiology, which deals with historical etymology, but with Significs, which studies the relation between words and things, between language, thought and behaviour. We must take seriously the dictum that "Literature is applied Semantics".

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But Literature is also Life and any attempts to develop the critical faculty in a literary vacuum will end up in the sterility of yet another technique. The study of Semantics should not be merely a literary study but should be fundamental to all the humanities and to all the sciences.

Language and Thought

In 1961 it should be a commonplace that the structure of knowledge is shaped by the structure of language. Three centuries ago we find Leibniz advocating an artificial language to be built on logical and philosophical principles and Locke demonstrating that language determines thought. Since then, Malinowski and others have shown that action determines language. If we persuade a child to act in a certain way his thought and language will conform to his way of behaving. As Aristotle said, we acquire virtue through right habit and action and not through talking about it. Words merely justify the action. Unfortunately words also justify wrong action and, according to Piaget's classification, the child is not capable of logical thinking until the age of 12. By then, however, the

child has acquired considerable skill in the mechanical mouthing of words.

Semantics, A Cure for Claptrap

The academic world, particularly the American part of it, first became deeply interested in Semantics in the thirties when Hitler was demonstrating that the word is mightier than the sword, for it is the word that decides the use to which the sword will be put. Science was subordinated to the unscientific claptrap of Mein Kampf, to unreferential nonsense like the *Aryan Race, Nordic Man, the destiny of the German people,* and *Jewish capitalist-communists.* It was seen that through language a whole people can be persuaded to behave like barbarians and to confuse group affective and conative attitudes with cognitive knowledge.

Now Semantics is not a panacea. The inflated claims of many of its adherents, such as Korzybski, show that they have fallen victims to the very vices which they themselves castigate. But it is perhaps the best single, well-defined discipline for promoting the objective thinking and communication which has become necessary to save the world from disaster. Men are still bemused by such verbal inanities as *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat, The American Way of Life,* and *White Civilisation.* Pause for a moment and try to find out what these beautiful phrases actually mean when one tries to give them anything like an exact referent. If, for instance, we find out what American activities are we might have more chance of defining *unAmerican activities.* It is perhaps significant that some Russian scholars have condemned Semantics as a bourgeois propagandist subterfuge.

How to Think and What to Think

In South Africa unreflective imitative verbalisations have done much to bedevil our political and historical thinking. Various sections of the community have, for purposes of self-interest, been separated off from the white community by such phrases as *The Indian Problem, The Hottentot Problem, The Colour Problem.* Use the words often enough, and in the minds of the group the problems come into existence. One matriculation examiner even set a question in which the candidates were called upon to discuss the "problems created by the Hottentots." One presumes that the Hottentots created their own landlessness. Or we have our old friend in which the candidates are invited to discuss "the vacillating frontier policy" of the British Government from 1806 to 1835. No opportunity is given to the candidate to discuss whether a fairly consistent attempt to maintain apartheid on the frontier was vacillating or not. The phrase has called an almost unquestioned concept into existence. We hear, too, of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism at the end of the 19th century. Yet the South African Republic was also imperialist if we accept "expansion at the expense of weaker peoples" as a more or less objective definition of imperialism. What, too, are we to make of the statement that "Milner was determined to uphold British supremacy in South Africa"? South Africa before 1910 did not exist: the referent — two British colonies and two independent Boer republics — is deliberately or unconsciously obscured. But "uphold" is a much more British word than "impose". In his selection of examples the teacher would have to be careful that he was teaching the pupils how to think and not what to think.

The study of language as the basis of knowledge is, then, indispensable. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Hobbes to philosophy was his recognition that without language knowledge could not exist. "Understanding," he said, "is nothing else than conception caused by speech . . . Reason is nothing but the reckoning of the consequences of general names agreed upon for the marking and signifying of our thoughts. . . Children therefore are not endowed with reason at all, till they have acquired the art of speech." Locke and Leibniz wrote in similar vein and all earned anathema in orthodox circles because their findings encouraged thought rather than verbal imitation. In more modern times Bergson, Croce, Ward, Stout, the Behaviorists, and the psycho-analysts have held that language is the basis of all but the most rudimentary thought.

If the study of language as a tool is neglected, intellectual development will suffer. And if there is intellectual torpor, language will become an end in itself, a mere bombination of words. "Le style est l'homme même," said Buffon. A crooked style betrays a crooked man. The man who writes or talks in well-worn phrases, pretentious polysyllables and evasive circumlocutions is a propagandist or a solemn ass. Let us tear down the words and get to the meaning — and to the lack of meaning.