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LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS
An Explication of the Britton Model of Language Functions

Language is an important tool in the creation and organisation of man's world representation, his view of the world that influences all his actions, his hopes for the future as well as his sense of his own identity, his experiences and his situation. By symbolizing, man creates a retrospect and a prospect. In his paper "What's the use? A schematic account of language functions" James Britton explains the process as follows:

"As we talk about events - present, past or imagined - we shape them in the light of, and incorporate them into the body of our experience, the total."

As man can only experience subjectively, the language at the centre of his being will be subjected to no demands other than his own, verbalizing freely what engages his attention - the kind of language James Britton calles 'expressive'. He describes it as language close to the speaker,

intimate, unrehearsed, showing his preoccupations, presenting his view of things, his commentary on the world and thereby presenting himself, taking for granted his listener's or reader's interest in his (the speaker's) person as well as his message.

James Britton distinguishes two roles a speaker can take. In the participant role language is used for a specific end, to get something done, operating in the actual world by means of representation. In its purest form it performs a transactional function. In giving or seeking information or attempting to influence and change a listener's behaviour, opinions or attitudes deliberately. If the language is not concerned with events taking place at that moment, the speaker has taken on a spectator role, operating on the representation without any effect on events in the actual world, therefore not as means to a specific end, but perhaps to improvise upon previous experience, or modify his world view by drawing upon other people's experience. The language function that characterises this

role is the poetic function, where language is an end in itself and form and meaning are inextricably interwoven.

The transactional and the poetic functions are at opposite poles of a spectrum - the range of language as the role of the speaker moves from that of participant to that of spectator. In the expressive function, however, the speaker is free to change roles as his demands fluctuate. According to Britton "it is in expressive speech that we are likely to rehearse the growing points of our formulation and analysis of experience," and it becomes "our principal means of exchanging opinions, attitudes and beliefs", an important means for influencing each other and for affecting public opinion. This may occur in personal, private interaction, much as a first draft. Britton here sees an important role for the listener in such a situation, who "would ideally concern himself first with the speaker and his thinking, those mental processes that lie behind the utterance; though, having 'understood', he

might take account also of the forms of the utterance itself and assist in its modification to suit a wider audience", (in transactional or poetic form).

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