

THE PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE

BY F. V. KEYS

LANGUAGE, like most transcendent things, is usually taken for granted. This is not surprising. We learn to speak before we are aware of the process; and it is likely that in this the child repeats the history, linguistically, of the race. Primitive man probably was unconscious of the gradual encroachment of the word over all other forms of expressive gesture; his preference of it must have been instinctive, as continued experience recommended it by its superior carrying power, and its amazing expressiveness, leaving meanwhile the hand free to perform other services. Imagination, indeed, can find no moment of human history more dramatic to dwell on than that when the "lingual gesture" emerged supreme, and the articulate word found its way upon the lips, the clear idea into the brain, of man; but the magnitude of the achievement whereby man became the speaking animal, its superlative significance in orienting the whole subsequent development of the race, are matters of surmise rather for the heirs of the bequest than for its originators. So closely indeed is the very consciousness of man identified with language, so difficult is it for him to disentangle himself from its all-enfolding vesture, that it failed to preoccupy profoundly the acute Greek mind, which was content to accept human speech as a gift of nature, or at most as arising in a "convention". And although Dante himself was counted among the philologists of the dawning Renaissance, it has been left for scholars inspired by the evolutionary view of all phenomena to gauge the full grandeur of the fact of language while attempting to trace it to its source in "the dark backward and abysm of time": one of these, who was also a philosopher, contending that "when, amidst the discordant, noisy, many-voiced choir of utterances . . . there was first heard on earth a sound that conveyed clear sense, objective meaning, there came a moment of sublimest poetry; the sixth day of creation dawned."

But neither philologist nor philosopher has apprehended so deeply the supreme intrinsic value of language, nor expressed with such majesty its mystery, as did the mystic who penned the Fourth Gospel.

To-day, when the question of language has surged to the front as one of the burning issues in contemporary history,—requiring the most delicate handling in the drawing up of treaties, and presenting almost insuperable difficulties in their execution,—it is timely to invite attention to the nature and function of what is undoubtedly, as an achievement, the top of man's performance. In it, as in none of the arts, he has mirrored himself; for through the word he escapes from the arrested motion of the plastic arts and from the vagueness, the ambiguity, of music, while preserving no mean portion of music's exquisite quality of suggestiveness; and, like music, but again more lucidly, it reveals him at the most critical moment of experience, the moment of transition, on which all that follows depends. So intimately, so tirelessly, does language companion his experience, that, when it fails him, silence itself becomes eloquence. In the word, art and nature fuse irresistibly, filling with imaginative splendor the contents of public and private life. Over against the utterances of a Demosthenes, a Cicero, a Burke, born of the urgent national danger, may be placed the million unrecorded poems that escape from the lips of the sensitive and go to swell the muted music of humanity, the obscure and piercing melody that attunes to beauty the personal life. For language creates experience as well as reflecting it. The word perpetually hovers over the surface of the subconscious, that sea of the myriad unformulated elements where, intensely aware of itself, the mind floats at ease, depending on the word to seize on whatever may emerge from the deeps, to give it form, reveal its nature, make it communicable, to ourselves no less than to others. By means of the word, man can objectify himself, take his own measure. Its power, whether over himself or others, is incalculable: it can strike from centre to centre, across the continents, and the centuries. Its effectiveness, when consciously wielded as a weapon, is so terrific, that in time men will have recourse to no other.

Thus, nothing in our equipment as social beings is so intimately and intensely ourselves as the language we use; above all, the language we are born to. Our mother-tongue is fraught with all the traditions, great and trivial, that find their focus in our personality and converge to build up the precious sense of identity. Every language, it has been observed, has what is known as its ground-melody, and before we could know it we have been rocked to that measure, and its burden will to the last sing to us as can no other. Only in our native language are we mentally completely at ease; while every family possesses its own intimate idiom, which will recur spontaneously when its members meet across the separation of years, bringing back the fresh imprints of childhood and loosening the tongue from the last restraint of instinctive formality. Those who are born to the same language share the knowledge not only of what it denotes, but of those infinitely more potent elements, its connotations. In so far, that is, as these represent the accretions of the national or cultural experience, the historical implications, to a given people, of a term; for the train of association roused in each individual by a word varies with his experience and perpetually eludes examination and frustrates inquiry, even his own. It is this connotative force of words that introduces something incalculable into the play of language, whether the dialogue be carried on between individuals, or nations. The connotation of a word constitutes its secret "charge", which is liable to explode inopportunely or in the wrong direction, disrupting intercourse and wrecking its object, which is understanding. A gift for language, whether in speakers or writers, involves a sure intuition concerning this obscure charge with which all words are, on occasion, endowed: an intuition that permits the born poet and orator to touch the single note that will awaken a full chord of response, and supplement his plain-song with the deep effects of harmony. In times of social and political crisis, all the terms involved in the controversy become "loaded" with the passions of contending parties or nations; while in epochs that, as the saying goes, make history, the very denotation of certain words will suffer changes that make the use of them ambiguous if not self-contradictory. The last ten years have played havoc with the whole vocabulary of politi-

cal and national terms, in so far as their former meanings are concerned, and never before has intelligence been so openly flouted by the assumption or retention of names and titles by those who alike in principle and action deny their historic validity. Here, indeed, a common tongue helps little toward understanding. Yet when, out of the crucible of the present violent transition, language emerges with new implications, finer shadings, each national idiom will bear its own peculiar image and super-scription. Frail symbols though they be, and light as the breath that bears them, words still bear the freight of the mingled fortunes, the glory and the infamy, of the peoples.

It is small wonder, then, that its language is to each nation its most precious, its inalienable, possession. It is at once the shrine of its individuality, and the most potent source of it. To suppress it, is to suppress what is peculiarly its own in the spiritual life of a people; it is a form of sacrilege, the more odious when it is committed against what French scholars call a "language of civilization", the organ of a traditional and living culture. On the other hand, the very fact of this apparent identity of language with the soul of a people makes it the object of attack on the part of a power whose aim is not merely economic or even political conquest, but spiritual dominion, the making over of another mind into its own image of life, the imposing of its own fashions in experience, so to speak, upon the subject people. This form of conquest is opposed by the victim as a spiritual assassination. Both the attempt on language, and the resistance to it, belong to the modern, not the classic, world. They have grown out of nationalism in its modern sense, and with the growing self-consciousness of the social body within the last hundred years, the struggle for mastery has deepened in intensity and bitterness. The vast empires of Alexander the Great and Cæsar Augustus were not sown with the fires that for the last century and more have been smouldering in Central and Eastern Europe, and that burst into flame with the first breath of freedom that blew across the ruins of the autocracies of Russia, Prussia, and Austria.

Of these Powers, Russia was the most easy-going in the matter of language in regard to the peoples she held subject, and Prussia, for obvious reasons, the most drastic. For obvious rea-

sons; for Bismarck's empire excelled in organizing and imposing public education; and the public school, with its obligatory attendance, is the nursery of the cult of the national language and what the government interprets as the national genius. It is evident, indeed, that nowhere today are the public schools devoted exclusively to raising the general human standard of articulate intelligence. Even though they function to this end, they tend to become everywhere centres of national self-consciousness, teaching the national history as a modified hero-saga, stressing the virtues of the native at the cost of the foreign actors in the epic. Compulsory education is the most powerful weapon hitherto put into the hand of any State. From the first, Germany recognized this, and left nothing in her schools to chance, which has remained the presiding genius of so much of our Anglo-Saxon education. The cult of the national genius—as interpreted by Bismarck—centred in the study of the native tongue, which was “purified” as much as possible from foreign elements, to correspond to a fancied purity of a “Germanic race”. An immense propulsion to this activity was given by the rise, throughout the nineteenth century, of the comparative study of languages, which, hailed by early scholars as the means of harmonizing nations by proving the unity of languages and cultures, became like the public schools in other hands the tool to sharpen the sense of particularity, as ethnology provided the politician and the imperialist with new slogans to their own ends. There is no sadder contrast afforded by the irony of history than the national animus displayed during the years immediately before the Great War by German intellectuals,—not to mention the ignominy of the notorious Ninety-Three signatures,—compared with the temper prevailing among the group of German philologists at the opening of the nineteenth century, pioneers of the finest type of intellectual progress, men of genius who collaborated with French and English scholars in complete scientific disinterestedness and the utmost social amenity.

Nothing, it seems, is incapable of abuse. But some deep-seated psychological cause, some type of arrested development, can alone explain the rapid confusion on the part of the German intelligence of nationalist with human values, resulting in a

perverted judgment that exalted immoderately the notion of the national dignity and function, and taught the expansion of its spiritual dominion as a religious mission.

The means of that dominion, its sacred weapon, was above all the German language—a German language purified, as far as possible, from the dross of “foreign” elements. The writer well remembers the spontaneous laughter with which the German children, too young to have lost a healthy common sense, received the instructions of teachers to substitute for the familiar and easy French terms current ever since the eighteenth century the clumsy and cumbersome “Germanic” equivalent, even though the awful name of the Iron Chancellor himself was invoked as the authority for the injunction. From the same source proceeded the emphasis with which the language of the conqueror was imposed on Alsace, and the linguistic lines tightened in Prussian Poland. It was the savage offensive against their mother-tongue as the language of culture that was perhaps the most potent cause why the populations of Poland and Alsace never became reconciled to the German rule: its aim was to weaken, by proscribing their language, their spiritual identity, which was the essential element of their personality. Neither the Russian nor the Austrian bureaucracy approached the Prussian in the thoroughness with which this method of “assimilation” was applied. In “Russian” Poland there were many Poles who neither spoke nor understood Russian. The Hapsburg Government showed in this as in other matters the vacillation that to the “imperial” German has seemed an inherent trait in the Austrian character, the “slovenliness” that aroused the Prussian contempt. Only rarely an attempt was made to interfere linguistically with the powerful Magyar within his own boundaries of Hungary; but the pan-German group had its representatives at Vienna, and so deep had the obsession of the Teutonic mission become that even an advanced liberal could urge moderation in imposing the German tongue on Czechs and Slovaks on the ground that “it doesn’t matter what tongue they speak, provided they think German thoughts”.

But if comparative philology and the spread of compulsory education put a new and powerful weapon into the hands of re-

actionary and oppressive States, they also forged into steel the will of the subject peoples to withstand the proposed obliteration of their national consciousness. Everywhere, during the course of the nineteenth century, the spread of the public schools heightened the self-consciousness of the masses, however little it may have added to their fund of natural sagacity. For the first time literacy opened a million eyes to peruse the daily press and the broadsides of the political propagandist. Just as the printing press aided the Reformation by widening the scope of its appeal, so the rise of popular education coincided with the blossoming of the Romantic movement, with its stress on individualism and the national pasts, into the cult of nationalism, that super-personality embodied in the individual, but transcending his limits and inspiring him to the utmost effort, the last sacrifice, that it may live. A vast gathering momentum to this cult came from the growing ranks of the literate. Forgotten ancestries were drawn from oblivion to fill the pages that for the first time in history yielded up an intelligible content to the humblest eye and stirred obscure bosoms with pride of lineage. The vague traditional faltering report of "old unhappy far-off things" was confirmed, clarified, and driven home to the heart and the intellect by writers of imagination versed in the sources of the national history. And everywhere, language emerged as the token and shrine of the national identity. While the independent Powers were founding university chairs for the teaching of earlier stages of the national language and literature, among the subject peoples, especially those who had once been great European Powers, the preservation of the national tongue, or its rescue from decay and even from oblivion, became the focus of a slow but powerful expansion of a national self-consciousness set toward the goal of national independence. These linguistic revivals were met by the heady counter-current of the new interest and zeal for their own tongue on the part of the political masters, and the strife of tongues sharpened to the point of exasperation the psychological differences between sovereign and subject peoples. Each felt that he was defending something sacred and inalienable, and every attempt to resist the imposition of the dominant language was repudiated as an encroachment on the linguistic do-

main of the sovereign, whose long insolence of rule had made him confuse liberty with dominion.

The most dramatic of these battles of the tongues was that carried on by the Czechs against Vienna. In their case, it was a struggle for life. The country of John Huss had almost lost its literature with its Protestantism. The Jesuit crusade that with fire and sword brought the country again under the sway of Rome in the century after the Austrian victory at the White Hill in 1620, succeeded so well that nearly all Czech literature perished. The confiscated estates of the Czech nobility passed into the hands of foreigners ignorant of the language of the country. By the latter part of the eighteenth century Czech had sunk to the level of a vernacular on the lips of the illiterate masses. The thrilling story of the revival of what was once a great civilized tongue was told by Dr. Jelinek of the University of Prague in a course of lectures on contemporary Czech literature delivered at the Sorbonne four years before the War. The Romantic revival of the closing eighteenth century was identified at Prague with a nationalist movement that sought its inspiration and its instrument in the restitution of the national language. The pent-up energy of a powerful race was put into the task. In an incredibly brief time Czech became the vehicle of cultivated intercourse and of a rich imaginative and historical literature. The patriotic Romanticism of the first writers became imbued with democratic realism under the influence of Russian and French and Scandinavian literature. Men of genius, and of popular origin, put their whole life into the movement. The Greek and Latin classics were translated into the vernacular, and once again, as in the time of the Renaissance, those masterpieces of the human mind sustained the fainting language of the people and expanded it to compass their own splendid imaginative and philosophic range.

Before Austria proceeded, after the tragedy of Serajevo, to the long-planned annexation of Serbia, the cause of the Czech language had been won. A national theatre and university had been opened at Prague, and the leaders in the last stages of the language struggle had fitted themselves to be leaders not only of an independent Czecho-Slovakia, but of democracy in the Balkans. This rôle has been shaped for them by their history. Forming

the extreme western wedge of Slavism thrust into the heart of Europe, in close contact with the laborious and methodical German temper, near enough to France to catch the accents of her logic and her passionate idealism, the Czechs have proved in their political forms and methods the same happy fusion that is reflected in their literature—of logical acumen with rich and delicate emotion. The latter quality is the glory of Russian literature, but Russia has no counterpart to such critics as Masaryk and Machar. And it was the irresistible call of the native tongue that drew forth the distinctive genius of the Czechs to impress upon literature and politics its lucid common sense, its grace and brilliance, its instinct for democracy.

But the phenomenal revival of shrunken languages was not confined to the cases where these were struggling against a settled campaign for their extinction. Everywhere the rise of democracy found the accents of vernaculars to express the sharpening of individualism. Languages that had long slumbered in semi-consciousness on the lips of the people remote from centres of government and culture again entered the lists of literature, and stirred patriotic impulses. Such was the revival of Welsh in Wales, of Irish in the South of Ireland, of Low German as a literary medium, of Provençal in the poetry of Mistral and the prose and verse of Roumanille. None of these languages had ever been the vehicle for the ideas of modern civilization, nor had they ever played a part in the shaping of distinctive national and historical cultures. Where the language impulse was allowed free play, it satisfied itself in a purely literary and cultural expression. Wherever there were political separatist movements afoot, it added its momentum to the political struggle. Now openly, now obscurely, the clash of tongues throughout Europe, from Iceland to the Balkans, preceded the clash of arms, and had perhaps a decisive influence in determining the long-delayed issue—sapping the strength of the Central Powers which fought for dominion and centralization against the deepest instincts of a large fraction of the conscripts under their command, imbuing their opponents with the fervor of a religious instinct.

The triumph of the Allied arms has meant linguistically the triumph of all the vernaculars, noble or obscure, that throughout

the nineteenth century were attempting to maintain or establish themselves in despite of political dominion. The fact that the self-determination of peoples is in so many cases also the self-determination of languages, immeasurably heightens the critical nature of the process. Linguistically, people have emerged from the grip of war with sensibilities lashed to exasperation. All kinds of reactionaries, theological and political, are busier than ever exploiting the situation to their own ends. It is true that into all the treaties in force today was written a clause protecting the linguistic rights of minorities. But the fact that many of the minorities of today belong to the political masters of yesterday, does not facilitate the definition or the observation of "rights". The loudest complaints naturally come from the would-be recipients of a linguistic justice they were not generous in bestowing. The great and real practical inconvenience of the increase of "official" languages has been used to suggest comparisons favorable to the former enforced uniformity over wide areas, just as the cry has been raised of the Balkanization of Europe—as if the instability of the Balkans was not due precisely to the imposition of alien suzerainties over people stirred by a profound sense of their distinctive national identity. Business agents and tourists have been inconvenienced by the turn things have taken. Americans especially often fail to appreciate the linguistic aspect of self-determination, accustomed as they are to travel over wide areas unmolested by a foreign tongue. Yet the American himself has not escaped the impulse of the age toward linguistic particularism, nor is he unacquainted with the feeling of enmity toward a language as such, because he repudiates the policies and actions of the nation that owns it.

During the War there appeared the first serious and compendious work on the American Language; while nowhere among the enemies of Germany which were also Great Powers was the German language repudiated to the extent that occurred in the United States, throughout the schools and universities. The incident is full of instruction. It should incline the American to sympathize with the nations which are escaping from the pressure of German language and psychology upon their personal and political life. To the world at large it reveals the essentially

popular stamp of American culture, its quickness to respond to mass movements, especially when arising from what is believed to be an attack on democratic principles. The cultures of the Old World, derived from aristocratic traditions, if more liberal in these matters, are perhaps also more sophisticated.

Apart, however, from all local and immediate conditions, the question of linguistic self-determination—as of individual rights in general—has its philosophic bearing. The multiplying of the forms of human intercourse indefinitely is not in itself desirable: the time and energy devoted to acquiring a new tongue are a price paid willingly only when the return in spiritual and intellectual riches is recognized as commensurate with the cost. A language that offers no cultural content, either past or present, of sufficient importance to solicit the attention and study of a wider public than the professional linguist, inevitably tends to shut off the people using it from the main currents of intellectual and artistic activity, certainly when its circulation is within circumscribed numbers, settled remote from the great arteries of civilization. Moreover, Professor Meillet of the Collège de France points out the paradox of the differentiation of languages—within the confines of Europe more than thirty-four languages are spoken and printed and lay claim to official recognition—at the moment when civilization tends, as never before, toward unity. Science and the machine, he remarks, are everywhere the same; in every laboratory and observatory the same methods are pursued, and the same scientific terms employed. The paradox, however, is only one of many. One may witness the same conflicting tendencies apparent in the great movements towards uniformity, as represented severally by imperialism and communism, which are met by the rising tide of nationalism all through the nineteenth century, a form of individualism that has as yet escaped all endeavor on the part of the other tendencies to make it play their game. In quite another field we are confronted by radio and the film, the former restoring the balance between the appeal to the eye and the ear; as if Nature were intent on preserving, by means of opposing extremes, the movement of humanity along some middle course toward an objective beyond the ken of intelligence, but which instinct obstinately clings to: an instinct

prophetic everywhere of an ultimate synthesis, so rich that it shall embrace things forgotten with things still to come.

Toward some such synthesis, perhaps, all language is moving, in spite of the unexampled passion of differentiation which we are witnessing today. No one who is aware of the new atmosphere of Europe, who feels the fresh spiritual currents blowing in the serene upper air above the confused outcry of defeated ambitions, disappointed prophets and impatient pacifists, will give anything but a welcome to the new tongues that are struggling to make articulate peoples who have hitherto been little more than objects for material exploitation. Who would quarrel with brave little Esthonia, cheerfully constructing a "language of civilization" out of what has been noted by linguists hitherto as a dialect of Finnish, itself laboring under the disability of having had to compete with Swedish as the language of culture in Finland, and only now making pretensions to a complete independence? Neither Finnish nor the related Magyar belongs to the Aryan family; but Finnish has produced one of the loveliest early epics of Europe, and Magyar is the instrument of a high imaginative culture.

It is improbable that the present acute crisis will continue long enough to give any serious impulse to an artificial "universal" language, such as Esperanto or Ido, nor to the claim of any widely diffused national language to assume that function. No humanist will favor such pretensions on the part of any one language, nor lend himself to the argument of the superior expressive power of this or that idiom. He feels too well the potency and beauty of each of the great languages of culture, qualities not absent from humbler accents, wherever they are the spontaneous utterance of humanity. Meantime, science is everywhere bringing back to living use Greek and Latin roots. To the shaping of these vast impersonal agencies, science and art, may be safely committed the future of language. In their hands neither its clarity nor its suppleness will suffer. As culture becomes more and more cosmopolitan and strikes its roots deeper into nature, so much is certain: no language will prevail that does not voice what is essentially human in the spirit of man.

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HONOR COURSES IN COLLEGES

BY ROBERT P. TRISTRAM COFFIN

SOME fifteen years ago there was established in my college an English course unique, I believe, among the courses in American colleges. It was limited to six upper class men singled out as those most likely to turn out to be authors in the future. Upon these six fortunate youths the best efforts of six of the best professors of the college were expended. Each professor took the men in turn for a six weeks go at writing the essay, the short story, the play, the poem, the oration, and the translation. As some of the professors were literary men of repute in their own right, the students got a great deal of good out of the course, even though they never learned to be builders of the oration or makers of rhyme.

Quite the best part of the affair was the intimate relationship of the men with the masters. There was no trace of the chilliness of the classroom. The men "lived around" with the professors, smoked their tobacco, sprawled in their chairs, got to know them unlaced and at ease, with all the pleasant sins of human nature on their heads. At the end of each division of the course there was a senate session of all the six instructors and all the six men before the Colonial kettles of the President's fireplace, with the best philosopher of college presidents himself to preside over the reading and criticism of the work. Somehow, from my own experience in the course when I took it some years after its institution, I remember little of the literary masterpieces that we must have produced for those final meetings; but I shall always number among the things brass and bronze of my education that college family gathered about the table, the random wisdom of the scholar who devoted his life to making Dante an English classic, the four-square satisfaction of the mind of the man who presided over the poem, the calm judgments of the college head, who would have been at home among the Greeks, the