

Saturday Review

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The Environment of Language

THE WORDS men use, Julian Huxley once said, not only express but shape their ideas. Language is an instrument; it is even more an environment. It has as much to do with the philosophical and political conditioning of a society as geography or climate. The role of language in contributing to men's problems and their prospects is the subject of an imaginative and valuable study now getting under way at Pro Deo University in Rome, which is winning recognition in world university circles for putting advanced scholarship to work for the concept of a world community.

One aspect of the Pro Deo study, as might be expected, has to do with the art of conveying precise meaning from one language to another. Stuart Chase, one of America's leading semanticists, has pointed out that when an English speaker at the United Nations uses the expression "I assume," the French interpreter may say "I deduce" and the Russian interpreter may say "I consider." When Pope Paul VI sent a cable to Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin and Party Chairman Leonid Brezhnev on their accession to office, he expressed the hope that the historic aspirations of the Russian people for a fuller life would be advanced under the new leadership. As translated into Russian by the Vatican's own interpreter, the Pope's expression of hope came out in a way that made it appear that the Pope was making known his endorsement of the new regime. The eventual clarification was inevitably awkward for all concerned.

The Pro Deo study, however, will not be confined to problems of precise trans-

lation. The major emphasis has to do with something even more fundamental: the dangerous misconceptions and prejudices that take root in language and that undermine human values. The color of a man's skin, for example, is tied to plus-or-minus words that inevitably condition human attitudes. The words "black" and "white," as defined in Western culture, are heavily loaded. "Black" has all sorts of unfavorable connotations; "white" is almost all favorable. One of the more interesting papers being studied by the Pro Deo scholars is by Ossie Davis, the author and actor. Mr. Davis, a Negro, concluded on the basis of a detailed study of dictionaries and *Roget's Thesaurus* that the English language was his enemy. In *Roget's*, he counted 120 synonyms for "blackness," most of them with unpleasant connotations: blot, blotch, blight, smut, smudge, sully, begrime, soot, becloud, obscure, dingy, murky, threatening, frowning, foreboding, forbidden, sinister, baneful, dismal, evil, wicked, malignant, deadly, secretive, unclean, unwashed, foul, blacklist, black book, black-hearted, etc. Incorporated in the same listing were words such as Negro, nigger, and darky.

In the same *Roget's*, Mr. Davis found 134 synonyms for the word "white," almost all of them with favorable connotations: purity, cleanness, bright, shining, fair, blonde, stainless, chaste, unblemished, unsullied, innocent, honorable, upright, just, straightforward, genuine, trustworthy, honesty, etc. "White" as a racial designation was, of course, included in this tally of desirable terms.

No less invidious than black are some

of the words associated with the color yellow: coward, conniver, baseness, fear, effeminacy, funk, soft, spiritless, poltroonery, pusillanimity, timidity, milk-sop, recreant, sneak, lilylivered, etc. Oriental peoples are included in the listing.

As a matter of factual accuracy, white, black, and yellow as colors are not descriptive of races. The coloration range of so-called white people may run from pale olive to mottled pink. So-called colored people run from light beige to mahogany. Absolute color designations—white, black, red, yellow—are not merely inaccurate; they have become symbolic rather than descriptive. It will be argued, of course, that definitions of color and the connotations that go with them are independent of sociological implications. There is no getting around the fact, it will be said, that whiteness means cleanliness and blackness means dirtiness. Are we to doctor the dictionary in order to achieve a social good? What this line of argument misses is that people in Western cultures do not realize the extent to which their racial attitudes have been conditioned since early childhood by the power of words to ennoble or condemn, augment or detract, glorify or demean. Negative language infects the subconscious of most Western people from the time they first learn to speak. Prejudice is not merely imparted or superimposed. It is metabolized in the bloodstream of society. What is needed is not so much a change in language as an awareness of the power of words to condition attitudes. If we can at least recognize the underpinnings of prejudice, we may be in a position to deal with the effects.

To be sure, Western languages have no monopoly on words with connotations that affect judgment. In Chinese, whiteness means cleanliness, but it can also mean bloodlessness, coldness, frigidity, absence of feeling, weakness, insensitivity. Also in Chinese, yellowness is associated with sunshine, openness, beauty, flowering, etc. Similarly, the word black in many African tongues has connotations of strength, certainty, recognizability, integrity, while white is associated with paleness, anemia, unnaturalness, deviousness, untrustworthiness.

The purpose of Pro Deo University in undertaking this study is not just to demonstrate that most cultures tend to be self-serving in their language. The purpose is to give educational substance to the belief that it will take all the adroitness and sensitivity of which the human species is capable if it is to be sustained. Earth-dwellers now have the choice of making their world into a neighborhood or a crematorium. Language is one of the factors in that option. The right words may not automatically produce the right actions but they are an essential part of the process. —N.C.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Proposal for the Labor Front

I SHARE A. H. Raskin's conviction, as expressed in his excellent article "Collision Course on the Labor Front" [SR, Feb. 25], that the salvation of collective bargaining is up to labor and management. Unless labor-management confrontations stop hurting the bystanders, the public is going to step in and force a substitute procedure for collective bargaining and the right to strike.

Mr. Raskin makes excellent points when he advocates a more active role by parent federations in guiding their affiliates, more emphasis on resolving local issues, and a recasting of the mechanics of bargaining. But I have misgivings about the suggestion that in the interim the President should have at his disposal a "broad range of weapons" in addition to the Taft-Hartley injunction. I am convinced that it would put a third party at the bargaining table who would threaten an "imposed settlement" in the event the other two parties do not come to terms. In my view, compulsion is not the solution.

I have introduced legislation which, I submit . . . will make it easier for the parties to work out their own terms . . . by scaling down the economic power of union officials and restoring some measure of balance between labor and management. One proposal would extend Taft-Hartley injunctions until settlement is reached. . . . The other bills would protect individual employers by assuring secret elections in representation cases and prohibiting fines by unions.

PAUL FANNIN,
United States Senator,
Arizona.

Washington, D.C.

The MEDICO Way

IN REGARD to Senator Walter F. Mondale's article, "How Poor Nations Give to the Rich" [SR, March 11], the best way to avoid retention in this country of scholars from underdeveloped lands for specialized training is the MEDICO way.

In Afghanistan, CARE-MEDICO has established a four-year residency training program in surgery and medicine that simply duplicates U.S. training. American teachers go to the underdeveloped country and, in addition, the unique medical problems of the area are managed by modern, sophisticated techniques.

EVERETT SHOCKET, M.D.
Miami Beach, Fla.

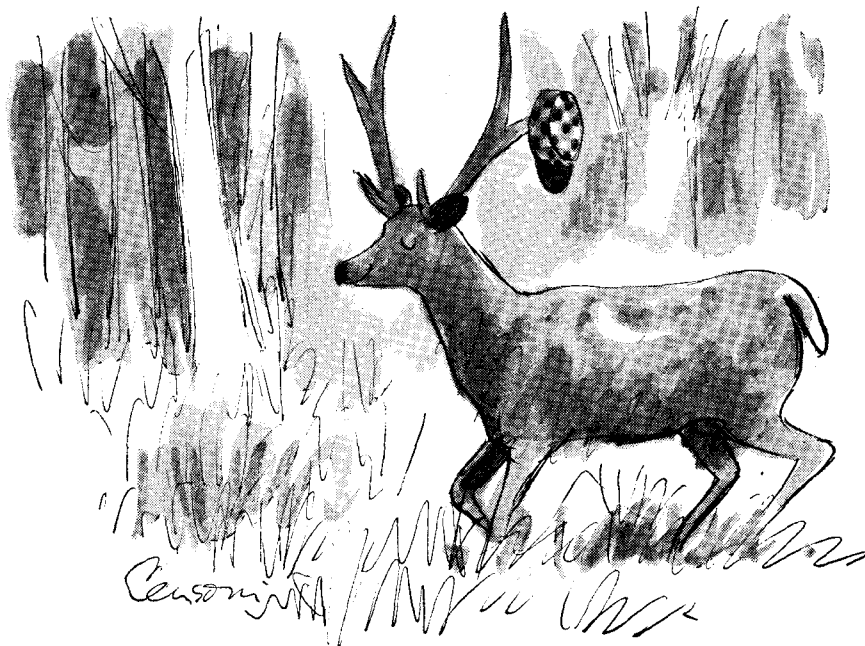
"What I Have Learned"

SR's MAGNIFICENT series of articles by various authors on "What I Have Learned" has been most helpful to me, and no doubt others have found them stimulating. Might they some day be collected in a book?

PAUL H. DYAL.
New York, N.Y.

EDITOR'S NOTE: SR is pleased to report that the series will be published as a book by McGraw-Hill at a date to be announced.

SR/April 8, 1967



Kudo for the Critics

HOLLIS ALPERT is to be commended on his fine review of *The Taming of the Shrew* [SR, March 18]. The merit of the review lay not so much in his praise of the film but that he said he liked it without beating around the bush. The reviews of critics Alpert, Arthur Knight, and Henry Hewes are among the few worthy of serious attention.

STEVE GUIMOND.
Cullowhee, N.C.

No Aliens

N.C.'s EDITORIAL, "There Are No Aliens" [SR, March 11], was most perceptive.

For three years I wandered around the world, doing most of my traveling by hitchhiking, and the only problems I encountered pertaining to passports, etc., were from my own country, the United States. Most border crossings in Europe consist of a friendly wave from the frontier officials, and to get a stamp in one's passport one usually must badger the official.

I sincerely hope this editorial is well read by our State Department.

RICHARD W. SHANE.
Pasadena, Calif.

Nepal Birthday

AT A RECENT dinner party in Katmandu, our hostess, who is also the U.S. Ambassador, Miss Carol Laise, called our attention to your travel issue of January 7. She was chagrined to find your World Travel Calendar in error regarding His Majesty's birthday. That prompted this verse:

'Tis surprising a journal so erudite
Would not get a king's birthday right.
Perhaps in America January is like
June

But in Nepal we calculate by the
phase of the moon.
And June is June.

The King was born on the eleventh
day
And that's the way it's got to stay.

If your readers hurry, they can still get
to Nepal for His Majesty's birthday.

MRS. GEORGE E. MILLER.
Katmandu, Nepal.

Student Travel

WOULD THAT every American student planning a trip abroad would avail himself of the excellent advice contained in your Educational Travel Issue [SR, Feb. 18]. Paris has always attracted students, but many encounter problems which they might have avoided had they been better informed.

The American Aid Society and other community organizations in Paris have neither adequate means nor facilities for handling the problems of an increasing number of young people who have failed to consult reputable organizations and publications.

MRS. JOHNSON GARRETT, President,
American Aid Society of Paris.
Paris, France.

Flying Sauciers?

I WONDER IF it has occurred to Goodman Ace in his writings about malapropisms [TOP OF MY HEAD, Feb. 11, Mar. 11] that in these days of chartered planes Cook's Tours might be called flying sauciers?

And I still recall the Parisian who ordered two eggs for breakfast and, when the waitress brought only one, remarked that in France one egg is an *oeuf*.

R. PIERSON EATON.
Warren, Pa.