

HOW DID LANGUAGE BEGIN?

By MARIO PEI

THERE are many theories, all unproved, as to how language began. Most picturesque among them is the "bow-wow" hypothesis to the effect that men began to speak by imitating the natural sounds they heard, or thought they heard, around them.

The barking of a dog would strike the ear of the leader of a small band of primitive humans. It would sound to him like "bow-wow," and as he tried to imitate it he would convey to the others, by pointing to the dog and repeating "bow-wow," that the creature that made that particular sound should henceforth be referred to as "bow-wow." Too simple? Yet consider how often children spontaneously fasten upon some utterance produced by one of their number and use it to designate him, pointing to him in derision as they do it.

The scientific name for this process is onomatopoeia, or "name-making." Less scientific but easier to pronounce and spell is "echoic word." You echo what you hear. If the fall of a big tree in the forest sounds to you like "crash," that is what you use to designate that type of sound. The noise produced by a bee may sound like "hum" or "buzz." Words like "click," "wham," "bang" all seem to be of echoic origin.

Different breeds of dogs bark in different ways, or the same sound may be differently interpreted and echoed by various human beings. This would account for "bow-wow," "woof-woof," "yip-yip," and "arf-arf" all appearing in the same language. If you have many languages, the differences may be far greater.

English has perhaps more echoic words than any other civilized tongue. Is this because we are more primitive and elemental? Or because our language runs more to monosyllables and avoids endings? Or because we make greater use of comic strips, where the picture largely tells the story but sound effects have to be graphically portrayed?

Yet the echoic word does not have to be monosyllabic, or even repetitive, especially if the sound it portrays strikes the ear as composite. Among early echoic words that are not repetitive are ancient Sanskrit *chish-chá*, denoting the "whiz" of an arrow in flight followed by the sound of its impact, and *kikirá*, to denote a palpitating sound like our "pitter-patter" of the heart.

Both Greek and Latin had plenty of echoic words, a few of which, like the Latin *murmur*, have been passed on to us. The Roman grammarian Quintilian describes Latin as poor in such sounds, but the facts don't seem to bear him out. Both Latin and Greek, however, are languages given to endings that denote specific parts of speech, so that many of what must have been originally one-syllable echoic words appear as two- or three-syllable nouns, verbs, and adjectives. For example, one of the Latin words meaning "to bark" is *baubari*, where the *-ari* ending is merely an infinitive suffix; the Roman "bow-wow" was evidently *bau* or *bau-bau*, though it does not appear by itself in the literary records that have come down to us. "To neigh" in Latin is *hinnire*; here again the Roman speakers must have used the root *hinn-* when they wished merely to imitate the neighing of a horse.

The Greeks did better in leaving us records of bare echoic roots. To them the croak of a frog was *koax*, but that of a raven was *kro*. The grunt of a pig (our "oink") was *gru*, but the squeal of a small pig was *koi*. The bleating of a sheep (our "baa") was to them *beh*, and it is a joke among linguists that as the Greek sounds changed during the course of centuries, the same written word came to be pronounced *vee*, which does not at all sound like a sheep, thus proving that animal language remains the same though human speech changes. Even the speakers of Sanskrit have left us their idea of "splash" as represented by *bal*, *p-hal*, or *p-hat*.

It is fairly evident by this time that different groups hear the same sound in different fashions. What to us is the "smack" of a kiss is to Spanish speakers *muá*. The "snip-snip" of a pair of scissors sound like *krits-krits* to the modern Greeks, *su-su* to the Chinese, *cri-cri* to the Italians, *riqui-riqui* to the Spaniards, *terre-terre* to the Portuguese. Our "bang" of a pistol may come out as *bam*, *pam*, *pan*, even *tau*. The "crash" of a tray of plates and cups falling to the floor is *kling* to the Danes, *krats* to the Finns, *chir-churr* to the Hungarians, *hua-la-la* to the Chinese, while the comic strip "wham" of someone sitting down suddenly and very hard is *pan* in French, *cataplúm* in Spanish, *catrapuz-bum* in Portuguese, *patatrac* or *patapunf* in Italian. Even the ringing of a phone, for which we have no echoic word (unless we accept "ring" itself, or "tinkle") may come out as *dringh* in Greek, *drin* in

Italian, *kili* in Finnish, *tlim* in Portuguese.

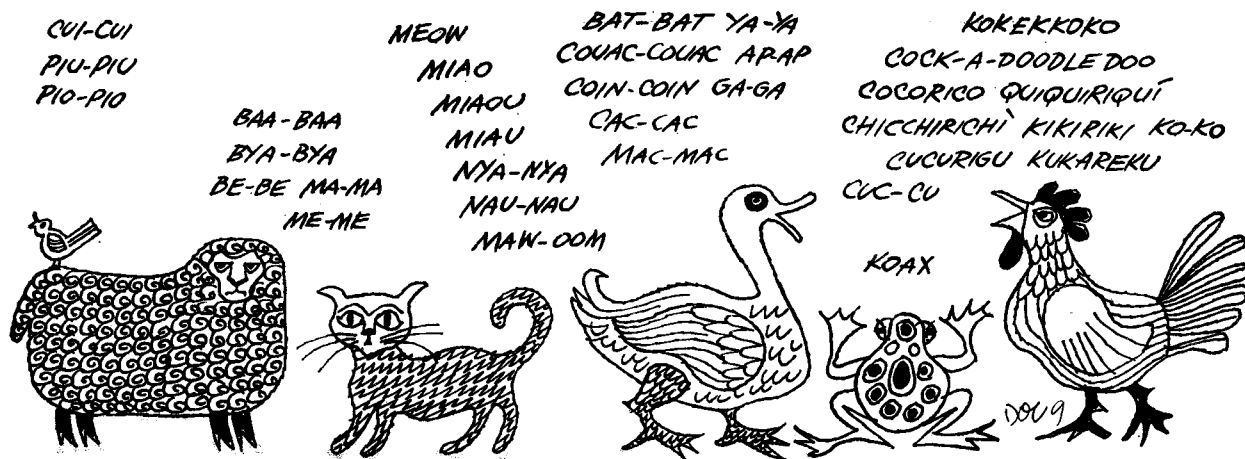
But along with this diversity there are widespread resemblances. The Latin *murmur*, which has come down to most Western languages, appears in very similar form in Armenian, Lithuanian, Greek, even Sanskrit, where *marmarah* means "noisy." Our "gurgle" is *glut-glut* in Latin, *glu-glu* in Italian. Even our "slap" has a close equivalent in Latin—*stlop-(pus)*—from which, interestingly, Italian and Spanish derive their words for "shot-gun": *schioppo*, *escopeta*. The "ho-ho-ho" of the Jolly Green Giant is *khokhot* in Russian, *kakhat* in Sanskrit.

ANIMALS have proved their superiority over humans by achieving an international language within their respective species. There is no convincing evidence that the braying of a donkey, the cackling of a hen, the quacking of a duck, the mooing of a cow is any different in China or the Soviet Union from what it is in the United States. But there can be vast differences in human reception and rendition.

Most standardized, perhaps, among animal sounds is the cow's "moo" (it may, of course, be spelled *mu*, and French has an interesting variation—*meuh*). Second in standardization is the cat's "meow" (here the spelling runs from Italian *miao* and French *miaou* to German and Rumanian *miau*). But Japanese has *nya-nya*, and Arabic has a double form, *nau-nau* for ordinary meowing, but *maw-oom* for the cat's voice in the mating season. This unanimity does not extend to the cat's "purr," which Spanish imitates as *arro-arro-arro* and French as *ronron*.

The bleating of the sheep gives rise to two renditions, one with *b-*, the other with *m-*. Greek, Latin, English, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and Vietnamese favor the first (Russian has *bya-bya*, Vietnamese has *be-be*); German, Rumanian, Chinese, and Japanese favor the *m-* sound (*ma-ma* or *me-me*). French and Arabic use both.

The crowing of a rooster and the cackling of a hen have only one element that is internationally common, an initial *k-* sound, often repeated elsewhere in the word; everything else is different. Corresponding to English "cock-a-doodle-doo" is the French *cocorico*, Spanish *quiquiriquí*, Italian *chicchirichì*, German *kikiriki*, Rumanian *cucurigu*, Russian *ku-kareku*, Arabic *ko-ko* or *qee-qee* (*q* in Arabic is a very guttural *k*, pronounced



as far back in the throat as you can get it), Japanese *kokekkoko*, and Vietnamese *cuc-cu*.

For the hen's cackle, English does not have a real echoic word. (We make up for it by imitating a turkey's "gobble-gobble," which few other languages bother about.) Here French has *cot-cot*, Rumanian has *cotcodac*, Italian has *coc-cote*, Arabic has *qa-qa*, Chinese has *ko-ko-ko*, Japanese has *kukku*, Vietnamese has *cuc-tac*. Even Latin had *co-co* or, with greater repetition, *co-co-co-co*.

We lack an imitation of the horse's neigh, which Italian portrays very graphically with *ih-ih-ih-ih-ih*. Rumanian has *hi-hi-hi*, Arabic *hem-hem*, Japanese *hi-hin*, and Vietnamese *hi*. On the other hand, we have a donkey's "hee-haw." Here French has *hi-han*, Italian and Chinese share *i-o*, German and Russian share *i-a*, Rumanian has *i-hau*, Arabic uses *ham-ham* or *hee-hee*.

There is considerable internationality in the duck's "quack-quack". French uses *couac-couac* or *coin-coin* (the latter sounds like "kwan-kwan"). Spanish has *cuac-cuac*, Italian has *qua-qua*, German shares *quack-quack* with us, Russian has *kva-kva*, Vietnamese has *cac-cac*. But Japanese begins to diverge with *ga-ga*; Rumanian carries it on to *mac-mac*, Arabic to *bat-bat*, Mandarin Chinese to *ya-ya*, and South China's Cantonese to *ap-ap*.

No language seems to have a real lion sound, though many use our own "grrr" for any kind of growl or roar. Arabic, because of some contact with lions in their native habitat, uses *u*, which is a prolonged *oo*. Vietnamese has no lion sound, but with plenty of tigers in the land the tiger's roar is imitated as *ham-lu* or *gam-gu*.

Animals have imitation words where they are well known to the people. The Nutka Indians of Alaska imitate the sound of a whale as *'hw* (constriction of the throat, strongly uttered *h*, sound

of *w*). Eskimo tribes prefer *peu-wu*. Closest to our "oink" for a pig's grunt is French *oui-oui*, which means that in France the pig is forever saying yes. Quite remote are Russian *khru-khru* and Rumanian *guits-guits*. The "peep" and "chirp" of chicks and small birds are imitated as *pio-pio* in Italian, *piu-piu* in Rumanian, *cui-cui* in French.

The dog, who contributed one of his names to the "bow-wow theory," has the most far-reaching divergences, due perhaps to different breeds but also to the fact that it was probably the first animal domesticated by man (the dog was the sole domestic animal of the North American Indians). Corresponding to our assorted "bow-wow," "woof-woof," "yip-yip," and "arf-arf" we find French *oua-oua* (pronounced "wah-wah"), Italian *bu-bu*, Spanish *guau-guau* or *jau-jau* (pronounced "how-how"), Rumanian *ham-ham* (with a of "father"), German *hai-hai* or *wau-wau*, Russian *vas-vas* or *vaf-vaf*, Arabic *'au-'au* (constrict the throat at the start), Vietnamese *gau-gau*, Turkish *hov-hov*, Chinese *wang-wang*, and Japanese *wan-wan*. Even ancient Sanskrit had *bhuk-bhuk*.

KINDRED to echoic words are interjections, those exclamatory sounds which we use to express pain, pleasure, surprise, disgust, annoyance, joy, sorrow, or simply to call someone's attention. These come closest to the natural, spontaneous sounds made by animals. Some are surprisingly international, others surprisingly different. As a sample of the first, we find in the ancient Sanskrit of the Vedas all of these familiar forms: *a*, *ha*, *haha*, *ahaha*, *he*, *hai*. But some can undergo amazing changes in meaning in the course of time. The Latin *bua* is described as "a sound made by infants to denote what they are drinking." The same word is used by children today in Italy, but it means "to hurt," "to ache," "to have a sore spot," or "to be ill." To

call someone's attention at a distance we generally use "Hey!" The ancient Greeks used *eia*, the Romans *eho*, the modern Italians, particularly in Rome, *ao*.

I once asked a girl who was completely trilingual, having been brought up in New York, Paris, and Havana in equal measure, whether she had ever gotten her three languages mixed up. She thought and thought, then brightened up. "Yes! One time, on Varadero Beach in Cuba, someone stuck me with a pin, and I yelled 'Ouch!' instead of 'Ay!'." On a French beach, she should have yelled "Aie!" or "Ouille!" In Italy it would have been "Aio!," in Hungary "Jaj!" (pronounced "yoy"), in Finland "Boi!," in Japan "Itai!"

WE indicate disgust by using "blah" or "aak" ("phooey" is a recent borrowing from Yiddish). In Spanish it's *huy* or *uf*, in Italian *uffa*, in French *fi*, *pfutt*, or *zut*, in German *pfui*. In a good many of these, there seems to be some imitation of the sound of spitting. But Latin used *pro*.

Sorrow used to be indicated by "Alas!," but this, save for the initial *a*, is not an echoic word. It comes from Old French *ah*, *las!*—"Oh, weary (me)!" Our real international exclamation of sorrow is, historically, the "woe" of "Woe is me!" This has wide range, from Latin *vae* of *vae victis* ("Woe unto the conquered!") to Welsh *gwae*, Gothic *wai*, Armenian *vai*, Old Persian *avoi*. But Latin had, side by side with *vae*, also *eu*, *cheu*, and *ei* (the last often combined with *mihi*—"Woe is me"). Greek used *pheu*, which is perhaps linked to the German *pfui*. This *pheu* has come down into the college yell of Italian university students: "*Pheu, pheu, baru!*"—"Alas, alas; way down in the dumps!" But the old sorrowful connotation is altogether lost, and the mournful Greek words have been turned into a happy rallying cry. Thus do the centuries work their ways on language.

ERICH SALOMON: CANDID HISTORIAN

By MARGARET R. WEISS

A SCANT fifteen years spanned Erich Salomon's first exposures with a small Ermanox camera and his last days facing death in Auschwitz. Yet within that interval a law practice had been forgotten, a promotion job in publishing resigned, a photography career pursued, and a historian's role assured.

"Reference books usually cite my father as the photographer whose work inspired the term 'candid camera,'" Peter Hunter-Salomon told me on a recent visit, "but he thought of himself primarily as a historian." And it was this concept that guided his son in editing photographs and text for the new book, *Erich Salomon: Portrait of an Age* (Macmillan).

Though as a photojournalist Salomon enjoyed catching cogent sideglances of the social scene—the "unguarded moments" of high society at the Hotel Kaiserhof or celebrities on Hollywood and Vine—he gravitated toward the statesmen and political leaders of his day, finding among them his most telling sub-

jects. "With a reporter's nose for news, he just seemed to know *when* to be *where*, and how to penetrate the most carefully guarded political meetings," his son recalls. "He elected to live in expensive hotels which diplomats would choose. Several factors worked in his favor: He was fluent in five languages; he needed little sleep and was accustomed to late hours; he had great dignity and a penchant for formal dress."

And, we may add, he had perseverance and ingenuity as well. Using a blend of strategy and stratagem that was in the tradition of the best of press photographers, he succeeded in documenting restricted trial proceedings in the courtroom, sitting among the deputies in the Reichstag, occupying the absent Polish diplomat's seat at the signing of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, making the first informal photographs in the White House, and taking the first pictures of the U.S. Supreme Court in session.

Tactically—and practically—Salomon affirmed "the power of the *fait accompli*"—"If you stand before the doors of the

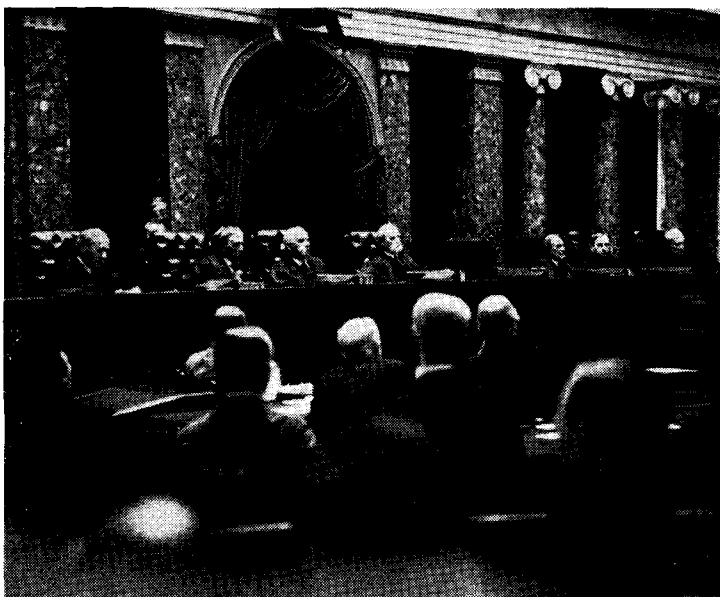
meeting room and ask the man in charge to let you in, it is not hard for that man to tell you all the reasons he can't let you in. If, however, before the meeting begins, you are already in the room, the man in charge has to ask you to leave that room—and this requires a far greater psychological effort on his part."

To facilitate capturing informal, spontaneous shots, Salomon designed a remote-control device for his camera and resorted to an assortment of "diplomatic pouches" in which the lens could function undetected. But none of this was done in the spirit of a spying *papparazzo*. Rather, he shied away from any view that would detract from the essential dignity of the individual or show the person in an embarrassing light merely for shock value.

In the rare instances when it was impossible to gain entrée into exclusive social functions or secret sessions, the photographer improvised shooting techniques that have since become standard operating procedure for visual reporting. He simply shot his picture through a window or aimed for a "symbolic" photograph, focusing on a detail such as the hats and walking sticks left outside the door of a prime minister's suite.

"There is a Salomon legend—it is not always accurate, but it is always characteristic," notes Peter Hunter-Salomon. "For example, it is true that he once made use of a window-washer's ladder to photograph a Hague conference through the window. . . . I am dubious, however, about the story which has it that he kneeled once for thirty minutes beside the bier of a cardinal, his camera hidden in a Bible."

But, unlike the legend, there is little doubt about Erich Salomon's photographic legacy. His portrait of an age is both accurate and characteristic.



Washington, 1932—First photograph of U.S. Supreme Court in session. (Camera was built into an attaché case.)



Paris, 1928—Guests of honor witness signing of Kellogg-Briand Pact to outlaw war.