

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SOCIOLINGUISTICS
TO THE PEACE-KEEPING PROCESS*

by

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The members of an audience like this are sure to be in favor of peace and comradeship among peoples. We have no lack of good will. But good will is not enough. A serious concern for peace and comradeship demands that we seek for the means of achieving that goal. Those means, I believe, consist of clear-eyed and rigorous use of the best that our intelligence can provide. In doing so, we draw upon all that the various sciences tell us about human behavior. Of exceptional importance is the science of linguistics, which analyzes how language works, and I wish in these few minutes to deal with its possible contribution to world peace.

Some of you may be wondering about the word sociolinguistics that I have used in my title. The word began to gain currency in the late 1950s to describe the studies that made a bridge between sociology and the linguistics of that time. When I gave a paper on the subject in August, 1972, before the Ninth International Congress of Linguists, I began apologetically by saying: "Those of us who work in the interdisciplinary area of 'socio-linguistics' may feel that we are here at this Congress on sufferance." [Proceedings, p. 1129.] Within a very few years, however, the need for any apology was assuredly past. This was particularly so as a result of the reaction against Noam Chomsky's theories, which caused such an upheaval in linguistics. Chomsky stated his area of interest in 1965 in these words: "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its lan-

guage perfectly. . . ." [Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, p. 3.]

You will note how far removed that is from the realities of everyday speech. When do you have an "ideal" speaker-listener? When is any speech-community "completely homogeneous"? What person in the wide world knows even his own language "perfectly"? To escape those deadening restrictions, many of us, as Chomsky's authority became more over-bearing, moved over to the field that allowed us to deal with language as found on the tongues of real people.

Others have used the label psycho-linguistics, but that approach is unsound, in my opinion, because its name implies a dualistic outlook, separating a "mental" realm from a "physical" realm. Far more cogent is "neuro-linguistics," first adumbrated by Alfred Korzybski in 1933, but pursued seriously only within the past decade or so. This is important for the recognition that the matrix of language is in the nervous system. Korzybski's frequent use of the term "neuro-semantic and neuro-linguistic mechanism" is a reflection of this.

Another area of linguistics that has developed its own name is that of "geolinguistics." It overlaps with sociolinguistics in many of its interests, but it has a main thrust of its own. This word was coined in 1943 but not developed until some years later, by Professor Mario Pei of Columbia University. He set forth its terminology and methodology in his book

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Invitation to Linguistics in 1965, pp. 121-55. The American Society of Geolinguistics got under way in the same year and continues now with an annual journal, deserving more support than it has received. The statement of its aims has been carefully formulated, and you can see how the aims are of deep interest to friends of the U.N. These aims are: "to gather and disseminate up-to-date knowledge concerning the world's present-day languages, their distribution and population use; their relative practical importance, usefulness and availability from the economic, political and cultural standpoints; their genetic, historical and geographic affiliations and relationships; and their identification and use in spoken and written form."

The findings of sociolinguistics, supported by geolinguistics, have great relevance to the pursuit of sanity and peace in the world. I have time to do little more than to mention some of the problems that are involved. The main emphasis in this field is on social interaction -- what happens among people when they speak.

One fundamental finding concerns the relation of language to race. The two must be kept separate, for there is no physiological basis for linguistic differences. Many people do not realize that the term Indo-European is purely linguistic, and many different 'races' have a form of it as their native tongue. The Nazis made a myth of the 'Aryan race'.

More complex is the relation of language to nationality. From the point of view of history, nationhood has had a strong linguistic basis. Riots over language, or at least frustration and unhappiness, have occurred in multi-lingual nations. We need merely to allude to Belgium, to Switzerland, to the Catalan and Basque problems in Spain, or nearby to the Francophones in Canada, or even in this city to the Hispanic challenge to the dominance of English. Is Senator Hayakawa's legislation for the adoption of a national language justified?

In some cultures the problem called

"diglossia" has arisen. This refers to the strong rift sometimes found between a prestigious variety of speech and an everyday variety. This state of affairs plagues the Arabic speech community and also the Greek. There the "katharevusa" versus the "demotic" has strong political repercussions. Norwegian culture has been torn apart by the struggles between "Riksmål" (later called "Bokmål") and "Landsmål" (later called "Nynorsk").

Even more fascinating is the development of trade languages, lingua francas, pidgins, and creoles. At present there is a sharp division among American linguists over the subject of "Black English." One school of thought holds that it has an origin in a widespread "plantation creole," going back to African creoles, and then was "decreolized" to a certain extent; but the other school of thought, representing the dialect geographers, holds that Blacks learned their English from the speakers in their surrounding social milieu. The issue has strong implications in American education.

Another sociolinguistic factor is the tolerance or lack of tolerance of linguistic influences from outside a speech community. It is hard not to make fun of a foreigner's mistakes or his accent. It is reported from Africa that Bantu children have the game of "playing missionary," and much fun arises from mimicking the "missionary accent." A visitor to Russia brings back the tale that he saw a sign in a cloakroom, "Please hang yourself here."

A healthy culture can accept much borrowing from across linguistic boundaries, but some cultures engage in constant guerilla warfare against foreign words and have periodic housecleanings, as when the Germans drove out telefon in favor of Fernsprecher. Some countries have even developed linguistic academies, whose effect is to stultify their language.

Other areas of language study are not so much sociolinguistics as they are "applied linguistics." Here belong the problems in the teaching of language, in which great improvements have been made in re-

cent years. The spreading of literacy is a laudable enterprise, with results favorable to world cooperation. The professional pursuit of translating often shows applied linguistics at its best.

Another linguistic pursuit is the building of international languages, such as Esperanto, Ido, or Interlingua. Mountains of devoted effort have gone into such enterprises, but the results seem unpleasantly artificial when compared with natural languages.

Because of my personal background, I would make a plea for the importance of lexicography. The secrets of a culture can be laid bare by the careful study of its vocabulary and syntax. An examination of contexts may often show how misunderstandings arise -- on many levels: individual, community, and even international. Every context is different from every other context, and therefore every time a word is used there is at least a slight difference in meaning from every other time. This realization undercuts the absolutisms that bedevil so many people.

Each culture has its key terms; and words of high abstraction offer special difficulty. The remarkable range of the word democracy is an example. Thus more than a century ago, in 1836, a preacher, talking before a Church of England group, listed the "three evils which the church now has to contend with," and as one of them: ". . . there is Democracy, exalting the power of the people, and throwing off all restraint. Dissent has a tendency to foster this, and hence many of our dissenting brethren have become politicians, and lost their spirituality." [Reported by William B. Sprague, Visits to European Celebrities (Boston, 1855), p. 227.] Even in 1945, in a village near London, when it was proposed that a "ratepayers' society" should be described as a "non-political democratic body," one of the members objected, claiming that "democracy meant the rule of the mob, 'the persecution of anybody who has the temerity to wear a white collar and has a daily bath.'" [New Statesman and Nation, Feb. 17, 1945, p. 105, col. 3.] But the contextualization

of the word took a different course in America, and some of us remember a war that was supposed to "Make the World Safe for Democracy." We may also think that the word is sadly devaluated nowadays in many parts of the world.

I come now to a finding of sociolinguistics that I regard as of overwhelming importance for understanding and sanity, both in individuals and in international affairs. I refer to the awareness that the use of language determines the way in which we see the world. The anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer has said: "The thoughts we can have about the world are to a very great extent determined by the words our language possesses to express them."

This is often called the "Whorfian hypothesis," but it was clearly expressed by Alfred Korzybski years before Benjamin Lee Whorf's writings appeared. Korzybski's own words of 1933 were as follows: "We do not realize what tremendous power the structure of an habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of s[emantic] r[eactions] and that the structure which a language exhibits, and impresses upon us unconsciously, is automatically projected upon the world around us." [Science and Sanity, p. 90.]

This insight led him to create the formulations of "general semantics," which he described, in a summary written in 1948, as "an empirical natural science of non-elementalistic evaluation, a theory of values." [Selections, "Author's Note," p. vii.]

As Korzybski watched the international situation deteriorate in the 1930s, with the rise of Hitler, he became desperate, and his strident writing of 1941 reflects his concern. His pupil Irving J. Lee took up the battle and carried on in his excellent book, Language Habits in Human Affairs. In that same year, 1941, Lee wrote an independent memorandum in which he said:

War communiqués, manifestoes and resolutions for the new world, peace

treaties -- these come only when words are used. And if the language habits of those who write them are a compound of distortions, vague magical incantations, empty verbalism, and conscious or unconscious misrepresentation, we may find ourselves evermore facing new and more complex dilemmas from which escape becomes more and more difficult. [General Semantics Bulletin, No. 22 & 23 (1958), p. 59.]

To what extent can we depend on "manifestoes" and "resolutions" and "treaties"? My memories go back farther than those of most people in this audience, inasmuch as I was coming into young manhood in the 1920s; and so I witnessed one of the great disappointments of that time. The "outlawry of war" movement began about 1918 and flourished with the backing of such notable figures as Senator William E. Borah, Nicholas Murray Butler, John Dewey, and John Haynes Holmes, with the strong leadership of Frank Kellogg, who was Secretary of State under President Coolidge. The French statesman Aristide Briand proposed a bilateral treaty with the United States in 1927, outlawing war, and this grew into a multi-national treaty that was signed by 45 nations (including Germany), and proclaimed in an impressive ceremony on July 29, 1929. A report on it in the Encyclopedia Britannica, written in 1929, stated: ". . . the outlawry of war movement . . . has paved the way for one of the most extraordinary manifestations of the universal desire for peace that has ever been witnessed in the history of the world." [14th ed., Vol. 16, p. 972.]

I remember the jubilation that people felt at that time. Frank Kellogg was given the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. Nevertheless, we know what happened in the 1930s to that noble-sounding treaty. Why was the movement such a disappointment? Why did it fizzle out? Was it an example of the "empty verbalism" that Irving Lee spoke of? Must we always be at the mercy of empty verbalisms?

It is here that the teachings of Alfred Korzybski are so valuable and promising. He maintained that a drastic re-orienta-

tion is needed, both among individuals and in world society. We must leave behind the two-valued judgments and the absolutistic outlook, and enter into a new era in accord with a theory of sanity.

As he himself said in 1941, in the "Introduction" to the 2nd edition of Science and Sanity:

The prevalent and constantly increasing general deterioration of human values is an unavoidable consequence of the crippling misuse of neuro-linguistic and neuro-semantic mechanisms. In general semantics we are concerned with the sanity of the [human] race, including particularly methods of prevention; . . . building up for the first time a positive theory of sanity. . . .

The task ahead is gigantic if we are to avoid more personal, national, and even international tragedies based on unpredictability, insecurity, fears, anxieties, etc., which are steadily disorganizing the functioning of the human nervous system. Only when we face these facts fearlessly and intelligently may we save for future civilizations whatever there is left to save, and build from the ruins of a dying epoch a new and saner society. [Op. cit., p. xlix.]

Those words were written in 1941, exactly forty years ago. That clarion call still applies today.

"Saying the right thing" will not solve our problems. Whatever is said even at the national level, must be backed by a preponderance of individuals with a sound, responsible character structure. That is asking for utopia, I suppose, but as I see it, there is no other way. We do not have an obligation to be optimistic, but for our own good we must be clear-sighted.

The best solution, then, is found in neuro-linguistic re-training, as called for by Alfred Korzybski from 1933 on. For years and years his has been a voice crying in the wilderness. If we do not heed it, we are in grave peril.

BIOGRAPHY

Allen Walker Read continues his active writing and lecturing despite his 'retired' status. In 1982 he presented papers throughout the United States; many of these reflected his long-established linguistic interests, e.g., "The Onomastic Component of T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'." An increasing number deal with specifically general semantics issues: some of a bridge-building character, addressed as they are to 'non-general semantics' groups (e.g., "The Contributions of Alfred Korzybski to Linguistic Theory" presented to the United Nations Linguistic Club at UN Headquarters in New York City); others, addressed to co-workers in general semantics, have a strong, corrective thrust (e.g., "Is There a Place for 'Mysticism' and 'Occultism' in General Semantics? A Position Paper Proposing a Dozen Propositions").

1983 promises to be no less busy. Its climax will occur when Professor Read gives the Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture in November, an especially auspicious occasion as it marks the 50th Anniversary of the publication of Science and Sanity.

[For a more detailed biography of Professor Read, see General Semantics Bulletin 47, 1980, pp. 61-62.]



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