

Language and Languages

1.7 Each language has its own sounds

Much the same is true apropos of the sounds of language. The vowel of the English sound *bait* is not a French *é* pronounced with an English accent; nor is the vowel of *bit* a French *i* distorted for the same reasons. It must be understood that within the phonetic zone where French distinguishes between *i* and *é*, English makes a threefold distinction: the vocalic types exemplified respectively in the words *beat*, *bit* and *bait* which are irreducible to the *i* and *é* of French. The consonant represented in the Spanish spelling as *s* and which is pronounced in Castilian in a way which resembles to some extent the first sound of the English *ship*, is neither an *s* nor a *sh*. In fact, whereas in a certain articulatory zone English distinguishes two types, those of the initial sounds of *sip* and *ship*, Spanish uses only one which cannot be identified either with the first sound of *sip* or *ship*. What is called a foreign accent proceeds from the erroneous identification of the phonetic units of the two different languages. It is just as dangerous and mistaken to see variants of one and the same type in the initial sounds of French *tout*, English *tale*, German *Tat*, Russian *tuz*, as to consider French *prendre*, English *take*, German *nehmen*, Russian *brat'* all as corresponding to one and the same aspect of reality existing prior to these various designations.

1.8 The double articulation of language

We often hear it said that human language is articulate. Those who express themselves in this way would probably find it difficult to define exactly what they mean by it. But there is no doubt that this term corresponds to a feature which characterizes effectively all languages. It will be well, however, to give a closer definition of this concept, the articulation of language, and to note that this is manifested on two different planes. Each of the units which emerges from a first 'articulation' is in fact articulated in its turn into units of a different type.

The first articulation of language is that whereby every fact

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of experience to be communicated, every need that one wants to make known to another, is analysed into a succession of units each of which is endowed with a vocal form and a meaning. If I am suffering from pains in my head I can make this known simply by screams. This may be involuntary: in that case they are the concern of physiology. But they may be more or less willed and designed to make my disposition known to my environment. Still, this would not suffice to make my shouts and screams into a linguistic communication. Each of my cries is unanalysable and corresponds to the totality, likewise unanalysed, of my feelings of pain. The situation is quite different if I pronounce the sentence *j'ai mal à la tête*. Here none of the successive units *j'*, *ai*, *mal*, *à*, *la*, *tête* corresponds to any particular feature of my indisposition. Each of them may recur in quite different contexts in order to communicate other facts of experience. *Mal*, for instance, appears in *il fait le mal* and *tête* in *il s'est mis à leur tête*. It is easy to see how economical this first articulation is: we might imagine a system of communication in which a special cry would correspond to each given situation or fact of experience. But if we think of the infinite variety of such situations and these facts of experience, it will be clear that if such a system were to serve the same purposes as our languages, it would have to comprise so large a number of distinct signs that the memory of man would be incapable of storing it. A few thousands of such units as *tête*, *mal*, *ai*, *la*, freely combinable, enable us to communicate more things than could be done by millions of unarticulated cries. The first articulation is the way in which experience common to all the members of a given linguistic community is organized. It is only within the framework of this experience, necessarily limited to what is common to a considerable number of individuals, that linguistic communication is possible. Originality of thought can be manifested only in the form of an unexpected manipulation of the units. Personal experience, incommunicable in its uniqueness, is analysed into a succession of units, each of slight specificity and known to all the members of the community. A greater degree of specificity will be attained only by the addition of new units, such as

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attaching adjectives to a noun, adverbs to an adjective, or in general terms determinants to a determined.

Each of these units of the first articulation presents, as we have seen, a meaning and a vocal (or phonic) form. It cannot be analysed into smaller successive units endowed with meaning. The totality *tête* means 'head' and we cannot attribute to *tê* and to *te* a different meaning, the sum of which would be 'head'. But the vocal form itself is analysable into a series of units each of which makes its contribution to distinguishing *tête* from other units such as *bête*, *tante*, or *terre*. This is what we propose to call the second articulation of language. In the case of *tête*, these units are three in number. We may represent them by the letters *t e t* which it is customary to enclose in slants */tet/*. It is easy to see how great a degree of economy is achieved by this second articulation. If we had to match each minimum significant unit with a particular unanalysable vocal product, we should have to invent thousands of such distinct units, which would be incompatible with the articulatory capacity and the auditory sensibility of human beings. Thanks to the second articulation language can make do with a few dozen distinct phonic products which are combined to achieve the vocal form of the units of the first articulation. *Tête*, for example, uses in two places the phonic unit which we represent by means of */t/*, a second unit with the notation */e/* being inserted between the two occurrences of */t/*.

1.9 Basic linguistic units

A sentence such as *j'ai mal à la tête* or a part of such an utterance which makes sense, such as *j'ai mal* or *mal*, is called a linguistic sign. Every linguistic sign comprises a significatum, its meaning or value, which we place between quotation marks ('I have a headache', 'I am unwell', 'bad') and a significans through which the sign is made manifest. This we represent between slants (*/ž e mal a la tet/*, */ž e mal/*, */mal/*). In current usage the word sign is reserved for the significans. The units produced by the first articulation, with their significatum and their significans, are signs, and minimal signs, since none of them can be