Bertrand Russell

THE USES OF LANGUAGE

Language, like other things of mysterious importance, such as breath, blood, sex and lightning, has been viewed superstitiously ever since men were cap able of recording their thoughts. Savages fear to disclose their true name to an enemy, lest he should work evil magic by means of it. Origen assures us that pagan sorcerers could achieve more by using the sacred name Jehovah than by means of the names Zeus, Osiris or Brahma. Familiarity makes us blind to the linguistic emphasis in the Commandment: 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain.' The habit of viewing language superstitiously is not yet extinct. 'In the beginning was the Word', says our version of St John's Gospel, and in reading some logical positivists I am tempted to think that their view is represented by this mistranslated text.

Philosophers, being bookish and theoretical folk, have been interested in language chiefly as a means of making statements and conveying information, but this is only one of its purposes, and perhaps not the most primitive. What is the purpose of language to a sergeant-major? On the one hand there is the language of words of command, designed to cause identical simultaneous bodily movements in a number of hearers; on the other hand there is bad language, designed to cause humility in those in whom the expected bodily movements have not been caused. In neither case are words used, except incidentally, to state facts or convey information.

Language can be used to express emotions, or to influence the behaviour of others. Each of these functions can be performed, though with less adequacy, by pre-linguistic methods. Animals emit shrieks of pain, and infants, before they can speak, can express rage, discomfort, desire, delight, and a whole gamut of feelings, by cries and gurgles of different kinds. A sheep dog emits imperatives to his flock by means hardly distinguishable from those that the shepherd employs towards him. Between such noises and speech no sharp line can be drawn. When the dentist hurts you, you may emit an involuntary groan; this does not count as speech. But if he says 'let me know if I hurt you', and you then make the very same sound, it has become speech, and moreover speech of the sort intended to convey information. This example illustrates the fact that, in the matter of language as in other respects, there is a continuous gradation from animal behaviour to that of the most precise man of science, and from pre-linguistic noises to the polished diction of the lexicographer.

A sound expressive of emotion I shall call an 'interjection'. Imperatives and interjections can already be distinguished in the noises emitted by animals. When a hen clucks at her brood of chickens, she is uttering imperatives, but when she squawks in terror she is expressing emotion. But as appears from your groan at the dentist's, an interjection may convey information, and the outside observer cannot tell whether or not it is intended to do so. Gregarious animals emit distinctive noises when they find food, and other members of the herd are attracted when they hear these noises, but we cannot know whether the noises merely express pleasure or are also intended to state 'food here'.

Whenever an animal is so constructed that a certain kind of circumstance causes a certain kind of emotion, and a certain kind of emotion causes a certain kind of noise, the noise conveys to a suitable observer two pieces of information, first, that the animal has a certain kind of feeling, and second, that a certain kind of circumstance is present. The sound that the animal emits is public, and the circumstance may be public—e.g. the presence of a shoal of fish if the animal is a sea-gull. The animal's cry may act directly on the other members of its species, and we shall then say that they 'understand' its cry. But this is to suppose a 'mental' intermediary between the hearing of the cry and the bodily reaction to the sound, and

there is no real reason to suppose any such intermediary except when the response is delayed. Much of the importance of language is connected with delayed responses, but I will not yet deal with this topic.

Language has two primary purposes, expression and communication. In its most primitive forms, it differs little from some other forms of behaviour. A man may express sorrow by sighing, or by saying 'alas!' or 'woe is me!' He may communicate by pointing or by saying 'look'. Expression and communication are not necessarily separated; if you say 'look' because you see a ghost, you may say it in a tone that expresses horror. This applies not only to elementary forms of language; in poetry, and especially in songs, emotion and information are conveyed by the same means. Music may be considered as a form of language in which emotion is divorced from information, while the telephone book gives information without emotion. But in ordinary speech both elements are usually present.

Communication does not consist only of giving information; commands and questions must be included. Sometimes the two are scarcely separable: if you are walking with a child, and you say 'there's a puddle there', the command 'don't step in it' is implicit. Giving information may be due solely to the fact that the information interests you, or may be designed to influence behaviour. If you have just seen a street accident, you will wish to tell your friends about it because your mind is full of it; but if you tell a child that six times seven is forty-two you do so merely in the hope of influencing his (verbal) behaviour.

Language has two interconnected merits: first, that it is social, and second that it supplies public expression for 'thoughts' which would otherwise remain private. Without language, or some pre-linguistic analogue, our knowledge of the environment is confined to what our own senses have shown us, together with such inferences as our congenital constitution may prompt; but by the help of speech we are able to know what others can relate, and to relate what is no longer sensibly present but only remembered. When we see or hear something which a companion is not seeing or hearing, we can often make him aware of it by the one word 'look' or 'listen', or even by gestures. But if half an hour ago we saw a fox, it is not possible to make another person aware of this fact without language. This depends upon the fact that the word 'fox' applies equally to a fox seen or a fox remembered, so that our memories, which in themselves are private, are represented to others by uttered sounds, which are public. Without language, only that part of our life which consists of public sensations would be communicable, and that only to those so situated as to be able to share the sensations in question.

It will be seen that the utility of language depends upon the distinction between public and private experiences, which is important in considering the empirical basis of physics. This distinction, in turn, depends partly on physiology, partly on the persistence of sound-waves and light-quanta, which makes possible the two forms of language, speech and writing. Thus language depends upon physics, and could not exist without the approximately separable causal chains which, as we shall see, make physical know ledge possible, and since the publicity of sensible objects is only approximate, language applying to them, considered socially, must have a certain lack of precision. I need hardly say that I am not asserting that the existence of language requires a knowledge of physics. What I am saying is that language would be impossible if the physical world did not in fact have certain characteristics, and that the theory of language is at certain points dependent upon a knowledge of the physical world. Language is a means of externalizing and publicizing our own experiences. A dog cannot relate his autobiography; however eloquently he may bark, he cannot tell you that his parents were honest though poor. A man can do this, and he does it by correlating 'thoughts' with public sensations.

Language serves not only to express thoughts, but to make possible thoughts which could not exist without it. It is sometimes maintained that there can be no thought without language, but to this view I

cannot assent: I hold that there can be thought, and even true and false belief, without language. But however that may be, it cannot be denied that all fairly elaborate thoughts require words. I can know, in a sense, that I have five fingers, without knowing the word 'five', but I cannot know that the population of London is about eight million unless I have acquired the language of arithmetic, nor can I have any thought at all closely corresponding to what is asserted in the sentence: 'the ratio of the circumference of a circle to the diameter is approximately 3.14159'. Language, once evolved, acquires a kind of autonomy: we can know, especially in mathematics, that a sentence asserts something true, although what it asserts is too complex to be apprehended even by the best minds. Let us consider for a moment what happens psychologically in such cases.

In mathematics, we start from rather simple sentences which we believe ourselves capable of understanding, and proceed, by rules of inference which we also believe ourselves to understand, to build up more and more complicated symbolic statements, which, if our initial assumptions are true, must be true whatever they may mean. As a rule, it is unnecessary to know what they 'mean', if their 'meaning' is taken to be a thought which might occur in the mind of a superhuman mathematical genius. But there is another kind of 'meaning', which gives occasion for pragmatism and instrumentalism. According to those who adopt this view of 'meaning', what a complicated mathematical sentence does is to give a rule for practical procedure in certain kinds of cases. Take, for instance, the above statement about the ratio of the circumference of a circle to the diameter. Suppose you are a brewer, and you desire hoops of a given diameter for your beer barrels, then the sentence gives you a rule by which you can find out how much material you will need. This rule may consist of a fresh sentence for each decimal point, and there is therefore no need ever to grasp its significance as a whole. The autonomy of language enables you to forgo this tedious process of interpretation except at crucial moments.

There are two other uses of language that are of great importance; it enables us to conduct our transactions with the outer world by means of symbols that have (1) a certain degree of permanence in time, (2) a consider able degree of discreteness in space. Each of these merits is more marked in writing than in speech, but is by no means wholly absent in speech. Suppose you have a friend called Mr Jones. As a physical object his boundaries are somewhat vague, both because he is continually losing and acquiring the electrons, and because an electron, being a distribution of energy, does not cease abruptly at a certain distance from its centre. The surface of Mr. Jones, therefore, has a certain ghostly impalpable quality, which you do not like to associate with your solid-seeming friend. It is not necessary to go into the niceties of theoretical physics in order to show that Mr. Jones is sadly indeterminate. When he is cutting his toe nails, there is a finite time, though a short one, during which it is doubtful whether the parings are still part of him or not. When he eats a mutton chop, at what moment does it become part of him? When he breathes out carbon dioxide, is the carbon part of him until it passes his nostrils? Even if we answer in the affirmative, there is a finite time during which it is questionable whether certain molecules have or have not passed beyond his nostrils. In these and other ways, it is doubtful what is part of Mr. Jones and what is not. So much for spatial vagueness.

There is the same problem as regards time. To the question 'what are you looking at?' you may answer 'Mr. Jones', although at one time you see him full-face, at another in profile, and at another from behind, and although at one time he may be running a race and at another time dozing in an arm-chair. There is another question, namely, 'what are you thinking of?' to which you may also answer 'Mr. Jones', though what is actually in your mind may be very different on different occasions: it may be Mr. Jones as a baby, or Mr. Jones being cross because his breakfast is late, or Mr. Jones receiving the news that he is to be knighted. What you are experiencing is very different on these various occasions, but for many practical

purposes it is convenient to regard them as all having a common object, which we suppose to be the meaning of the name 'Mr Jones'. This name, especially when printed, though it cannot wholly escape the indefiniteness and transience of all physical objects, has much less of both than Mr Jones has. Two instances of the printed words 'Mr Jones' are much more alike than (for instance) the spectacle of Mr Jones running and the memory of Mr Jones as a baby. And each instance, if printed, changes much more slowly than Mr. Jones does: it does not eat or breathe or cut its toe nails. The name, accordingly, makes it much easier than it would otherwise be to think of Mr. Jones as a single quasi-permanent entity, which, though untrue, is convenient in daily life.

Language, as appears from the above discussion of Mr. Jones, though a useful and even indispensable tool, is a dangerous one, since it begins by suggesting a definiteness, discreteness, and quasi-permanence in objects which physics seems to show that they do not possess. The philosopher, therefore, is faced with the difficult task of using language to undo the false beliefs that it suggests. Some philosophers, who shrink from the problems and uncertainties and complications involved in such a task, prefer to treat language as autonomous, and try to forget that it is intended to have a relation to fact and to facilitate dealings with the environment. Up to a point.