

PROBLEMS
AND
PRINCIPLES

IN LANGUAGE
STUDY

David Abercrombie

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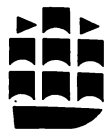
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PROBLEMS AND PRINCIPLES IN LANGUAGE STUDY

by

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First published..... 1956
Second edition..... 1963
New impression..... * 1965
New impression..... * 1967
New impression..... * April 1968
New impression..... * April 1970



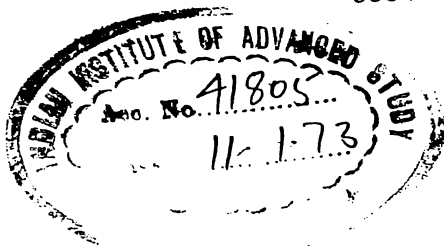
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PRINTED IN HONG KONG
BY PENINSULA PRESS LTD

PREFACE

THESE chapters originally appeared during the years 1948-54 in *English Language Teaching*, then published by the British Council, and I am grateful to the Editorial Board for permission to reprint them. They were first collected together and published in 1956 under the title *Problems and Principles*, with a note on the title-page to the effect that they were 'Studies in the Teaching of English as a Second Language'. In fact only Chapters IV and V deal specifically with English; the others are concerned with language study in general. I have taken the opportunity of this re-issue, therefore, to make the title rather more descriptive of the contents of the book. I have omitted a chapter on 'The Use of Recording' since, in these days of so-called Language Laboratories, it has become out of date.

An abridged version of Chapter IV was published in *Education To-day* in 1953, and it was also reprinted in full in *The Speech Teacher* (U.S.A.) in 1955.

I am indebted to Messrs. Peter Davies Ltd. for permission to reproduce material from *Greek Salad* by Kenneth Matthews.

Edinburgh, 1963

DAVID ABERCROMBIE

NOTE

Phonetic symbols, which are those of the International Phonetic Association, are printed in sans serif type

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1



LINGUISTICS AND THE TEACHER

DETAILED knowledge of particular languages is a necessity for the language teacher; he must have full command of the language he is teaching, and at least a descriptive acquaintance with the language of the pupils or students being taught. Knowledge of the nature of language in general, on the other hand, is not a necessity, but it is certainly a very useful adjunct to his equipment. Although general linguistics is a very theoretical study, important practical consequences for teaching can follow from its speculations.

General linguistics is partly concerned with the problem of *what language does*; that is, with the *functions* of any and every language. It is also concerned with *what languages are*, how they may best be analysed, described, compared, and classified; in other words, with the *form* of *different* languages. It is what language does, however, that the teacher would do well to consider first. An exhaustive survey would be well beyond the scope of the present work, but I should like to suggest five aspects from which language, in its relation to man, society, and the world, can be considered.

I

First, language makes it possible for individuals to live in a society. It is characteristic of, indeed fundamental to, the modern point of view in linguistics to regard language as a *social* activity rather than as a means of

individual self-expression. 'Speech is the instrument of society,' as Ben Jonson said; there is a very close connection between the two facts that man is a speaking animal, and that he is the social animal *par excellence*. The definition of language as 'a means of communicating thoughts' is nowadays commonly held to be, as a partial truth, more misleading than illuminating; a more fruitful definition is that language is *a means of social control*.

It is true, of course, that language does communicate thoughts, but many—perhaps most—of its uses cannot really be said to involve this. When an order is given to a squad of soldiers by an officer, no thought has first to be interpreted and then acted upon; the response is as automatic as the appearance of light when a switch is pressed. This is a simple example of a normally more complicated process: the use of language to co-ordinate activities. Any co-operative effort carried out by a number of people skilled in that operation depends entirely for its unity and success on language, though that language will not be communicating thoughts. Anybody who, with this aspect of language in mind, has watched a team of piano movers negotiating a tricky staircase with a grand piano, has received an object lesson on speech-in-action.

There are other uses of language which are not concerned with the communication of thoughts. The conversations which English people hold about the weather, for example, do not as a rule leave the participants any the wiser; only on rare occasions can information be said to have been exchanged. As far as communicating thought is concerned, they get nowhere; are they then quite pointless? No; a little reflection will show that this kind of use of language also has great social value.

Most peoples have a feeling that a silent man is a dangerous man. Even if there is nothing to say, one must

talk, and conversation puts people at their ease and in harmony with one another. This sociable use of language has been given the name *phatic communion*. The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski invented the term, 'actuated' he said, 'by the demon of terminological invention'; and although he was half in joke, the name has stuck. Malinowski defined it as 'a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.' It enters the everyday experience of everybody, from the most highly civilized to the most primitive, and, far from being useless, this small-talk is essential to human beings getting along together at all.

The actual sense of the words used in phatic communion matters little; it is facial expression and intonation that are probably the important things. It is said that Dorothy Parker, alone and rather bored at a party, was asked 'How are you? What have you been doing?' by a succession of distant acquaintances. To each she replied, 'I've just killed my husband with an axe, and I feel fine.' Her intonation and expression were appropriate to party small-talk, and with a smile and a nod each acquaintance, unastonished, drifted on.

Although the sense matters little, however, certain subjects only are reserved for use in phatic communion, and these chosen subjects differ widely among different peoples. Each of the following questions is, in some part of the world, good form when meeting a person:

How are you?

Where are you from?

How much money do you earn?

What is your name?

What do you know?

Some of them, however, would cause deep offence when used in other parts of the world, though in each

case the replies required, and expected, are purely formal.

A knowledge of the spoken form of any language must include knowledge of its conventions of phatic communion. Conversation is impossible unless one is equipped with meaningless phrases for use when there is nothing to say, and the teacher dealing with advanced students will take care to give them command of the necessary formulas and the rules governing their use.

Grace de Laguna, in her excellent book *Speech: Its Function and Development* (1927), said, 'men do not speak simply to relieve their feelings or to air their views, but to awaken a response in their fellows and to influence their attitudes and acts.' The profoundly social character of language should constantly be borne in mind by the language teacher.

II

But language has a very individual side also: 'language' (to quote Ben Jonson once again) 'most shows a man: speak, that I may see thee.'

When a person speaks, a listener interprets what he says as, simultaneously, two quite different and separate systems of signs. An utterance consists of *symbols* referring to whatever is being talked about; but it is also at the same time an *index* to various things about the speaker, particularly his personality. These two systems of signs are quite independent of each other. In a similar way things such as gait, or the wearing of clothes, can, in addition to their main function, reveal personality; but probably no aspect of human behaviour does this so constantly or so subtly as speech. It is especially the least conscious parts of talking—pronunciation, general handling of the voice, gesture—which are the vehicle of these

clues to personality. Almost everyone, when meeting a stranger, bases an immediate judgment on the way he or she talks; and we can often infer from their speech, when meeting people known to us, whether they are in a bad temper, or feeling well-disposed.

It is not always easy to say how present to consciousness these interpretations are. Sometimes it is only on careful reflection that an attitude taken up towards someone can be traced to his voice and pronunciation; at other times we are fully conscious of the effect of someone's voice on us. It is not always easy to say, either, to what extent the speaker intends that certain judgments should be made. There may be completely conscious control, as when an Egyptian hopes to arouse feelings of respect towards himself by introducing into his speech consonants such as *q*, *θ*, which do not normally occur in the spoken Arabic of Egypt. At the other extreme is the epileptic who betrays this fact to the skilled ear by his intonation, but is as unable to get rid of the features which give him away as the malingerer is to assume them.

Judgments concerning a person made on the basis of his speech may, or may not, of course, be correct. Wrong judgments are particularly apt to be made on foreigners. It is likely, for example, that English assertions concerning the excitability of Frenchmen are founded on the fact that certain features of the speech of normal Frenchmen are closely similar to features of excitable Englishmen's speech.¹ Americans, again, often accuse Englishmen of superciliousness: normal English intonation closely resembles the intonation adopted by supercilious Americans. However, speech is often an astonishingly sure guide to personality, and one, more-

¹ Differences in gesture habits may also influence this judgment (see p. 73).

over, which requires very remarkable delicacy of perception, of which most people seem to be capable.

Not only are certain features of speech an index to personality; they may sometimes be very strongly felt as a *part* of personality, and the language teacher should be prepared to encounter this. The inability of an intelligent pupil to acquire a reasonable pronunciation may not be due to a bad ear; the pupil may be resisting the attack on his personality which he (unconsciously) feels is involved in any attempt to change his pronunciation habits. The wise teacher will handle such a situation with care.

Possibly something similar lies behind the conviction in some countries that the presence of foreign words in the language is a menace to the national consciousness. Such a feeling has never, fortunately, been effective in this country, but elsewhere it has on more than one occasion given rise to legislation. There is little chance that the English will ever substitute 'folkwain' for 'omnibus,' but the Germans have been persuaded to say *Fernsprecher* for 'telephone'. 'Man lebt in seiner Sprache,' said a Nazi poet.

III

Thirdly, forms of speech delimit social groupings, or classes, within a language community. When people congregate in a group they tend to behave in a similar way, and this similarity in behaviour, in so far as it is different from the behaviour of others, then becomes one of the factors which characterise, and so preserve, the group. Speech behaviour is deeply affected in this way: 'one may wonder', wrote Edward Sapir, 'if there is any set of social habits that is more cohesive or more disrupting than language habits.'

Pronunciation is perhaps the most obvious point

where speech behaviour is influenced by social groupings, but any feature of language may be involved. We have probably all been misleadingly taught in school that the French word *tu* is distinguished from *vous* by being employed only when the person addressed is intimately known, or is decidedly inferior—a dog or child. *Tu* is, certainly, employed on these occasions; but that is not the real clue to its use, and does not explain how, for example, one Frenchman could say to another on being introduced ‘Enchanté de faire *ta* connaissance.’ The fact is that *tu* is regularly used, not as a sign of *personal* familiarity, but between members of certain social groups, political parties, and so on; and may often be used, therefore, between complete strangers.

The role of language in social differentiation helps to explain an otherwise puzzling phenomenon—the existence of slang. Slang is a matter almost entirely of vocabulary. It is to be distinguished from *jargon*, the technical terminology of occupations and sports: the cricketer’s *in-swinging*, *yorker*, *wrong ’un*, *late cut*; the radio engineer’s *mike*, *top*, *level*, *fade*. These are practically necessities, which it would be most awkward to do without. Slang is to be distinguished also from *cant*, concealed or secret language. Used mainly by the card-sharper, the confidence trickster, the pickpocket, to escape conflict with the law, cant too is a necessity. But slang is puzzling because it merely duplicates the conventional vocabulary, does not seem to be in any way necessary, and can cover almost any topic.

One powerful impulse to the creation of slang is boredom with outworn locutions, and the desire to be expressive and vivid; which is why it is nearly always picturesque and sometimes in doubtful taste. But its real explanation lies in the fact that it is always the property of a group; its use proclaims membership of that group

and distinction from other groups. As a versifier has put it:¹

The chief use of slang
Is to show that you're one of the gang.

Slang is fascinating to foreigners, and acquirement of it seems to promise admission to the real intimacies of communication. As a learner of languages I have felt the fascination myself, and have often observed it in my students. Learning how, or rather *when*, to use slang is, however, a tricky business. Foreign students have on several occasions confided to me that they have met with signs of discomfort—even hostility—when they have proudly introduced their carefully acquired slang into conversation with English students. The reaction seemed inexplicable to them. The probable explanation, however, is that they had unwittingly claimed a social intimacy to which they were not entitled, producing an effect like that of misplaced *tutoyage*; or possibly they had given the appearance of flaunting the slang of a hostile group. It may, moreover, be the case that no type of slang is compatible with a foreign accent.

A certain amount of slang usually appears in courses of 'colloquial' English, and some people have recommended teaching, even in the early stages of a language, a few chosen expressions. These are, of course, gratifying to learners—'they use them with roguish aptness' says one author—and therefore useful pedagogically. Nevertheless it is a dubious expedient. Not only are complex social problems involved, but there is another difficulty: slang is ephemeral. The very impulses which give rise to it ensure that it will be short-lived. The new vivid expression will itself become as worn-out and

¹ In a competition in *The New Statesman and Nation*; see the issue for 16 November 1946. The entry was signed "R.D.C."

boring as those it has replaced. It may also spread outside the group and cease therefore to be a badge of membership, particularly if the group has considerable prestige (a common fate of R.A.F. slang). A very few slang words attain respectability, as have English *mob*, *queer*, French *tête*, German *Kopf*, but most old slang is distasteful:

When it dates,
It grates,

as the above versifier continued. Nothing can be more embarrassing than roguish inaptness.

IV

Language not only brings human beings into relationship with each other, it also brings them into relationship with the external world. Language mediates between man and his environment.

The naïve, or common-sense, view is that language *reflects* the world and our thinking about it; that to the categories of language correspond categories of the real world. Modern linguistics, however, inclines to the view that language is not a passive reflection of, but rather an active practical approach to, the world—a sorting out of it for the purpose of acting on it. Experience is dissected, split up, along lines laid down by language, not necessarily along lines laid down by nature.

The way in which the vocabulary of a language is organized to deal with the outside world may conveniently be called its *semantic structure*. If it is not imposed by nature, there is no reason to expect that languages will be identical in semantic structure. We are all inclined to look on the categories of our own language as inevitable, but a comparison of even closely related

languages reveals surprising differences, and wide divergencies appear between languages of very distant families.

For example, the words of a language can be arranged at various *levels* of generality. The difference between *table, chair, cushion* is not the same as the difference between *table, furniture, object*: the first three are clearly at the same level, the second three at different levels.¹ Perhaps the most obvious variations in semantic structure occur here. An urban Englishman is content with the fairly general word *weed*; there are tribes of American Indians, however, for whom the medicinal properties of all plants are most important, who possess no such general term but will always refer to any specimen by its specific name. The English word *snow* does not seem to us very general, but it is more so than the several (unrelated) words which an Eskimo uses in its place, and by which he specifies snow in various states which are, to him, sensuously and operationally different.

It is often thought that the possession of words at the specific level enables a language to be more precise, but this is not necessarily so. Since we have in English the word *tail*, we gain nothing in precision from the word *scut*. *Scut* may be more *concise* than *tail of a rabbit*, but it is not more *precise*.

The distribution at different levels of the vocabulary of a given language has to some extent, probably, been governed by chance; it is difficult to think of any reason why the English *finger, thumb, toe* can all be called *δάκτυλος* in modern Greek. A considerable influence, however, is exercised by the practical interest of a people in the elements of their environment. The more necessary it is, for their way of life, to make distinctions within a range of phenomena, the less likely they are to possess

¹ See L. W. Lockhart, *Word Economy* (1931).

a general term covering the range as a whole; the more indifferent culturally the range, the more probable an all-embracing term. A highly developed language such as English, used all over the world by peoples of widely different cultural interests, can provide *if necessary* both general and specific terms on most subjects: if the urban Englishman wishes to be more specific than *weed*, he has only to look the appropriate word up. Similarly a Greek, if he must specify *thumb*, can resort to the literary ἀντίχειρ. Nevertheless, the semantic structure of the highly developed languages of the world is capricious in certain places. English lacks an equivalent for the German *Geschwister* (though the recently introduced *sibling* will now fill the gap when it is necessary to do so). We can talk about our *cousins* without specifying their sex, though the French cannot.

In addition to differences in the organization of vocabulary into levels, languages may vary in the isolation, or delimitation, of the elements of environment. Colour names provide a striking example of this. Every language, apparently, divides the spectrum differently, however close superficial correspondence may seem. There are dialects of English in which the word *foot* includes all of the leg below the knee. The Greek word χέρι covers the arm from elbow to fingertips, though it is usually translated "hand."

Language enables man to live in society, but the *kind* of society in which he lives will profoundly affect his language. Semantic structure and social structure are intimately connected, and it is here that the most serious difficulties for the language learner are probably to be found. A language is not only part of the cultural achievement of a people, it also transmits the rest of their culture system, and English words such as *gentleman*, *respectable*, *genteel*, *shy*, *whimsical*, *sophisticated*,

self-conscious, lowbrow are only intelligible in their social setting. They must be explained, if this is unfamiliar, by long and involved descriptions of social facts; apparent equivalents in other languages are almost always misleading.

Here again it may be noted that semantic structure does not merely *reflect* the psychological environment resulting from social structure. 'In acquiring the vocabulary of his day,' writes Grace de Laguna, 'each adolescent youth is being fitted with a set of variously coloured spectacles, through which he is to look at the world about him, and with whose tints it must inevitably be coloured.' Heinz Paechter, in his book *Nazi-Deutsch*,¹ points out how the new and extensive terminology introduced by the Nazis provided people with a stock of accepted ways of talking, and eventually transformed the categories of Nazi moral, social, and political thought into the folklore of the community.

The late B. L. Whorf, an American student of linguistics, coined the expression 'linguistic relativity' to express the view that the same physical evidence will not lead people to the same picture of the universe unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar. Investigation of American Indian languages has revealed that even the grand generalisations of the Western world—time, velocity, matter—are not essential to the construction of a consistent picture of the universe. This does not mean that the psychic experiences classed under these headings are destroyed, but that in certain languages categories derived from other kinds of experiences become the grand generalizations, and seem to function just as well. Hopi is an example of a language which lacks expression, grammatical or other, for concepts of time. Whorf has indulged in a fascinating

¹ New York, 1944.

speculation concerning how, within this linguistic structure, it would be possible to construct a science of Physics; he has demonstrated that, by using for example the concepts *intensity* and *variation* in place of *time*, such a feat could have been accomplished, supposing the Hopi had ever reached a stage of development where it became necessary.¹

The dependence of thought on language has not been generally recognized owing perhaps to exclusive pre-occupation of scholars with languages of the Indo-European and Semitic families. Growing knowledge of very different language families in Africa and America is now making clear how great this dependence is, and the popular 'semantics' is now being put forward by many people as the panacea for all the ills of the world.

v

Fifthly, language is the medium of literature, and its use in artistic creation is nearly always associated with a 'literary language,' more or less different from the language of everyday life. A literary language is not necessarily a written language, neither is it a prerogative of civilized peoples. It is reported that the Saramaccaner Bush Negroes of Dutch Guiana, descended from escaped slaves and normally speaking the *lingua franca* known as Talkee-Talkee, have a special noble language appropriately called Deepee-Talkee. This is reserved for their religious ceremonies and songs, and is unintelligible to other inhabitants of the country.²

A literary language, however, is usually a written

¹ See B. L. Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, New York and London (1956).

² See M. C. Kahn in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 31, p. 468 (1929).

forms of literature. Many writers, and most notably Ogden and Richards in *The Meaning of Meaning*, have drawn the distinction between the *referential* or *scientific*, and the *emotive* or *lyrical* uses of languages. The first is not, of course, confined to science, nor the second to poetry. Even though certain words are commoner in one than the other, the difference between them does not depend on vocabulary; the use of scientific terminology is no guarantee of a scientific use of language.

Language in its 'lyrical' use is characterized by the fact that it cannot be paraphrased, or translated into another language, without loss; it cannot be summarized; and phonetic features, particularly rhythm, are of the greatest importance to it. The opposite of each of these points is true of the scientific use (which, therefore, is all that an international auxiliary language can hope to cover).¹ Moreover, a phrase from the scientific use has one single fixed sense, which if not clear can be made so; that this is not true of the lyrical use has been well demonstrated by William Empson in his *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

Misunderstandings often arise through one use of language being taken for the other. When D. H. Lawrence insisted that 'whatever the sun may be, it is certainly not a ball of burning gas,' he was interpreting a scientific statement as if it was a lyrical one. H. L. Mencken, on the other hand, does the opposite when he maintains that all poetry consists in the flouting of what every reflective adult knows to be the truth. Shelley certainly said 'bird thou never wert'; but he was not denying that the skylark belongs to the class *aves*.

¹ See Pius Servien, *Le langage des sciences*, Paris (1931 and 1938).

SOME FIRST PRINCIPLES

PEOPLE decide to learn languages for all kinds of reasons—commercial, social, scientific, academic—and it is comparatively simple to design a course for the beginner who knows exactly what he wants to do with the language, and knows what is irrelevant to his purpose. It is a bigger problem to produce a satisfactory course for that great majority of beginners with no more clearly formulated aim than a vague conviction that knowledge of the language will somehow be ‘useful’ (which is doubtless true). People can learn, and have learnt, languages by every conceivable method; language teaching is an art and not a science, and a good teacher can get results whatever method he is using. It may nevertheless be assumed that it is best to have a method as sound as our present knowledge can make it. I want, in this chapter, to discuss some of the general principles which must be considered in designing a beginners’ course.

I

Knowing a language means being able to read it, write it, speak it, and understand it when spoken. These are four distinct and separable activities (they may be learnt independently; not every human being is capable of all of them; certain types of injury to the brain can cause complete loss of one without seriously damaging the others), though they are so closely interwoven for the normal individual that he finds it difficult to think or talk about any one of them without invoking the rest.

Two of these manifestations of language are concerned with a *spoken* form, and two with a *written* form; furthermore, two are *active*, and two are *passive*. What are the implications for the foreign language learner of this classification into two pairs of opposites—active and passive, spoken and written?

The terms *active* and *passive* are, of course, relative; they do not imply that reading, and listening to speech, are effortless. They may entail the expenditure of a great deal of energy, and certainly will when a new language is being learnt. 'Expressive' and 'receptive' are alternative, and perhaps preferable, terms.

The two relatively passive, or receptive, activities must come first. It is possible to learn to read, or to understand speech, without learning to write or to speak; but not vice versa. Young children, as is well known, understand a great deal of what is said around them before they start talking themselves. Reading and writing are nowadays taught simultaneously in school; at an earlier period in English education, however, reading was often taught a long time before writing, and a pupil might leave school before reaching the latter at all. The receptive activities must come first for the foreign language learner too. Some teachers may feel that their teaching is getting nowhere unless it results in expressive activities on the part of the pupil; but although passive learning may have effects hardly visible on the surface, it is a necessary preliminary to self-expression, and should not be hurried.

When a language, whether mother tongue or foreign, is fully known, some parts of it will remain relatively passive. Some words are 'known' in the sense that they are under full control and regularly used for self-expression, others are 'known' in the sense that they are recognised and understood (perhaps with the context

to remind) when met in reading or listening, but seldom or never uttered or written. This distinction between active and passive vocabulary is pedagogically a useful one, for it is too often believed that learning a word necessarily means adding it to the active vocabulary. 'It pays to increase your word-power' is the title of a regular feature of a popular magazine, but whenever the question of enlarging vocabulary arises, it should be borne in mind that it is more valuable to possess a relatively small active vocabulary which is under complete control, than a large disorganized one; if it is well chosen, an active vocabulary need not be very large to suffice for self-expression on a wide range of subjects. Since the words of an active vocabulary will of necessity all have been passive before becoming active, it follows that it is most economical to present to beginners, for passive acquisition, a small well-chosen vocabulary the *whole* of which is suitable for later active use.

This distinction might well be made clear to the learner, when a suitable opportunity offers; and the teacher dealing with more advanced pupils should remember, when setting exercises, that the distinction applies to syntax as well as vocabulary.

The other pair of opposites, *spoken* and *written*, require rather more space. It is a commonplace that the difference between them is primarily a difference of *medium*. Spoken language is conveyed by a medium which depends on sound, requires great skill to manipulate, and is evanescent and limited to present company. Written language is conveyed by a medium which depends on sight, is relatively simple to use, and is permanent. The infant acquires without much difficulty the skill needed for the medium of the spoken language, while the other medium has to be laboriously learnt. The foreign language student finds the reverse is the case; his skill

with the medium of his own spoken language is usually no help to him, whereas mastery of the medium of his own written language may be all he needs for a new one. This is why the spoken medium requires a special technique—phonetics—for dealing with it. The two media are not part of a language, but mastery of them is an essential preliminary to learning the language itself, and they should be got under control as early as possible in the learner's career, so that they may recede into the background and become automatic and unconscious.

The two media are very closely linked for most people, and study of one will almost certainly bring in the other in some way. It is difficult to remember sounds without written equivalents (phonetic transcription, which deals with the spoken medium, is itself in the written medium); and it is almost impossible to remember, or to use, written symbols without giving them spoken equivalents (though these may not be spoken aloud). Most—perhaps all—people, when they are reading silently, make very small movements of the vocal organs, movements which are reduced forms of the full ones required for pronouncing the words aloud; introspection reveals, moreover, that sound images are present in the mind. A language can be learnt in its written form alone, but not without giving sound values to the words. If the language is a dead language, it does not much matter what these values are. If, however, the language is ever going to be encountered in its spoken form, there are reasons for thinking that it is important to acquire an approximately correct pronunciation from the first moment of contact with the written form. These small, silent movements of the vocal organs—'sub-vocal talking'—will, if they are not automatic and spontaneous, interfere with silent reading or slow it down. It has been maintained that 'sub-vocal talking' during silent reading is in the

pronunciation *first learnt* for the language, and that if another pronunciation is learnt later, this will not be carried over into silent reading but will obtrude, irritatingly, into consciousness every now and then. The reader can experiment for himself to test the truth of this; my own experience in reading Latin, for example, which I first learnt with the old-fashioned pronunciation and later with the 'restored' pronunciation, certainly bears it out.

The language learner may have difficulties, not only with the media themselves, but with the relation between them. When a language, such as English, is said to have an 'unphonetic' spelling, what is meant is that the correspondence of sounds to letters is erratic. English people as well as foreigners have believed that there was a spoken word 'ɔ:ri corresponding to the written word *awry*, and that there was another spoken word ə'rai which somehow never got into writing. And I have heard of the word *spoonfed* being pronounced spu:nft, as if it was the past participle of a verb *to spoonf*.

Although the difference between spoken and written language is *primarily* a difference of medium, the medium has an inevitable influence on the use of the language it carries. The very evanescence of the one medium, and the permanence of the other, give them different functions in society. Spoken language is bound to be closely tied to the people present, and to the situation they find themselves in. Written language is much less tied to its immediate material surroundings; and since it remains to be pondered over as long as we like, it is capable of carrying more complicated thoughts and argument than most people can take in by ear. That the effects of the medium on grammatical construction and vocabulary are considerable, is quickly realized by anyone who tries to turn a lecture into an article for publication,

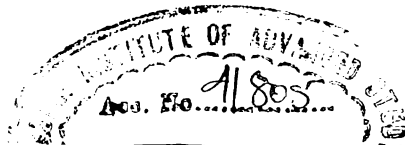
or to produce a radio script which must sound, when read aloud, as if it were a natural use of the spoken language.

It used to be taken for granted that the only true form of a language was its written form, of which the spoken language was considered to be a mere reflection. This seemed a self-evident fact, and argument was not thought necessary to support it. It is nowadays taken for granted that the only true form of a language is its spoken form, of which the written language is a reflection, and this now seems as self-evident as the earlier view.

The earlier view was not a beneficial influence on the learning of modern languages. No advance in the technique of teaching pronunciation could be made while it was held, and students often found that they could neither understand, nor be understood by, native speakers of the language they were learning. The modern point of view certainly tends to prevent this happening; but it is possible that, held uncritically, it also may not always be a beneficial influence. Is it really true that the spoken form is the real form of language?

Spoken language is primary in two senses: (1) it appeared, in the history of the human race, before written language¹; (2) it is acquired, in the history of the individual, before reading and writing. Foreign language teaching, however, is concerned almost entirely with literate members of literate communities; is the spoken language still primary for them? I doubt if there is any sense in which it could be said to be so. It is nevertheless widely believed that all language teaching should be based on the spoken language, and that the spoken language should be taught first. In support of this it is argued, first, that that is the 'natural' way of doing it—

¹ Or so it is believed; there is no real evidence to this effect.



that is what the infant does; and second, that learning the written language first makes it more difficult to learn to speak later, while learning the spoken language is the best introduction to the written language. As is suggested below, the word 'natural' is misleading in this context; and I have never seen adequate evidence for the second assertion, though a confusion between written and *literary* language often obscures this issue. There is a danger, it is said, that if pupils learn the written language first their conversation will become 'babu'-like, and they will use words like *steed* and *tome* in speaking. But if this should happen it will be due to confusion, not between written and spoken language, but between active and passive vocabulary. Words such as *steed* and *tome* belong to the vocabulary of the literary language, almost the whole of which should always remain passive for the foreigner unless he has the gifts of a Conrad.

It may be true that the spoken language plays quantitatively the more important part in the everyday life of the majority of us; it is not therefore qualitatively more important. Moreover, however great the use that a student makes of the spoken form of his mother tongue, in the language he is learning he may not need the spoken any more than the written—indeed, he is quite likely to need the latter more.

Strong emphasis on the spoken language is a natural result of complete neglect of it in the past, and this emphasis is so much a part of modern progressive linguistic pedagogy (British Council teachers, I read in a recent publication, 'are intransigent in their insistence on the importance of the spoken language') that to question it sounds reactionary. It is nevertheless an emphasis which is responsible, I believe, for one or two misleading ideas which are to be found in some modern text-books and courses. One of these ideas, that a perfect

pronunciation must always be aimed for, is discussed in the following chapter. Another is that beginners should learn sentences first, and not words. There is a possible case to be made out that the unit of written language is the word, but that of the spoken language is the sentence (though any arguments on the subject are likely to be mostly about terminology), but the best units for teaching purposes are not necessarily the same as the descriptive units of the student of linguistics.

It should, I think, be recognised that the spoken and the written languages are of equal importance, and any emphasis placed, in language teaching, on one rather than the other will be for pedagogical reasons rather than because of any 'natural' superiority.

II

There are three points concerning the language-learning process which will influence both the selection of material to be taught, and the method of teaching.

First, learning a foreign language is an *artificial* process; it can never be the same as the 'natural' process by which a child learns its mother tongue. The infant's acquisition of language is a unique event, though one that is at present far from being fully understood. The infant has little else to do, has the strongest social compulsion to learn, is continually surrounded by the language it is learning, and has no mental habits likely to interfere with what it is doing. And it is not just learning a language—it is learning the basis of all its future activities, the means by which it is going to learn almost everything else. In learning to speak it not only ceases to be *infans*, but becomes *sapiens*.

The conditions under which the infant learns to speak cannot be reproduced for the student of a foreign

language. Should we, then, try to get as close to these conditions as possible, and try to make the classroom resemble the infants' environment as nearly as we can? Methods of language teaching whose aim is to 'copy Mother Nature' assume that we should, and this assumption, in fact, influences many methods which do not make it their basis. It is an assumption which requires close scrutiny. The foreign-language learner, whether school-child or adult, is at a disadvantage compared with the infant in so far as he has many other things to do, has sometimes little urge to learn, encounters the language he is learning only at intervals, and finds his native language habits in continual conflict with those needed for the new language. But he is also at an advantage compared with the infant in so far as he possesses a developed intelligence, and is also literate. Methods by which the student emulates the infant can never compensate for the disadvantages, and may fail to avail themselves of the advantages.

Learning a foreign language is also artificial in the sense that the student does not set out to compete with the native speaker. It is not even remotely possible for the average learner to go through the whole course of development of the native acquiring his mother tongue, and to finish equally proficient. The language class is not for producing bilinguals, but for giving access to a new channel of thought and action. Failure to realize this is responsible for the belief that the right words to teach the beginner can be discovered by a statistical analysis of the words used by the native; and for the belief that vocabulary should be enlarged by succeeding chunks of a thousand words or so until eventually a vocabulary of the same size as the native's has been acquired.

Second, learning a foreign language is a *painful* process, more so perhaps than learning other things. It is at

least highly desirable, even if, when sufficiently drastic sanctions are available, it is not absolutely necessary, to retain the initial enthusiasm and interest of the learner through the considerable strain that will be put on him, whether he is adult or child. If the learner is made to feel that his work on a language is, unlike other subjects, something in which his intelligence plays little part, something that a parrot can do just as well with less pain, he is likely to be discouraged. Parrot-fashion teaching is apt to result from regarding reasoned explanation as 'unnatural'; there is bound to be, in any course, a good deal of mechanical, repetitive, boring work, but it should be set off by whatever appeals to the intelligence and powers of analysis of the learner are suited to his age.

The greatest incentive which the learner can have is the feeling that he is doing something with the language—reading a book, playing a game—which is worth doing for its own sake. It is most important, therefore, that he should acquire as soon as possible a body of knowledge of the language which can be used *as* language, as a medium of communication, and not as mere material for exercises. It is a fallacy that a simple vocabulary can handle only simple thoughts; matters of considerable complexity can be expressed in a small but well-chosen vocabulary consisting only of common words.

Third, learning a foreign language is a *process*. Some things must come before others, and what goes before should lead to, and provide a foundation for, what comes after. *Grading* is fundamental to all good modern teaching methods, and it should be applied to all aspects of language—vocabulary, morphology, syntax, pronunciation, idiom. It assures that as far as possible everything new is related to what has already been learnt (good grading would have avoided teaching, as one

text-book does, *looking-glass* before either *look* or *glass*); that conflicting patterns are not taught together (the constructions *I give it to him* and *I say it to him* must be well assimilated before *I give him it*, which is impossible with *say*, is introduced); that good use can be made of everything taught (*spout* and *knob*; to take actual examples again, are unsuitable for a first lesson); and that things which appear to the pupil, in the light of his own language, to be inexplicable irrationalities, are whenever possible kept back until he has gained enough confidence not to be discouraged by them. Although this last point must inevitably be neglected by courses which are designed for universal use, or use over large areas, local considerations are nevertheless of the greatest importance in grading. Many courses, for example, introduce (very naturally) the words *head* and *hand* in the same (usually the first) lesson; but if such a course is used in Greece the beginner is faced at once with an annoying difficulty: that the words sound to him identical—and his resentment is increased by discovering an unexpected problem of meaning in the word *hand*.¹

In conclusion I would suggest that, in view of the principles I have discussed, a beginner's course should consist in imparting a small, well-chosen, vocabulary of not more than a thousand words, which will eventually form the nucleus of the learner's active vocabulary, but which should first be thoroughly assimilated passively by wide and varied reading within its limits (without, of course, discouraging any attempts at self-expression). At the same time, and from the very beginning, the foundations of a good pronunciation should be laid. A great deal of the preliminary selection and arrangement of material for a beginner's course, for young or old, can be done without taking into account the nationality of

¹ See p. 11.

those who are going to learn from it; but a really satisfactory presentation of the material can be made only when it is related to the learner's mother tongue by experts thoroughly familiar with local conditions.

TEACHING PRONUNCIATION

THE corner occupied by Phonetics in the field of human knowledge is an odd one—intensively cultivated, but little visited. The ordinary person is usually unaware it is there. Perhaps, thanks to *Pygmalion*, the name will be familiar to him, but if so he has only a vague idea of what it stands for. The teacher of foreign languages, on the other hand, is very well aware of the existence of Phonetics—often resentfully so. He is always being told, in books on method and at training courses, that it is essential he should be a phonetician; and the injunction is apt to cause despondency and indignation. Some teachers will protest that it is not in their power, for various reasons, to become phoneticians; others will deny, often with heat, that it is necessary. These reactions may spring from the fact that knowledge of the existence of Phonetics is not always accompanied by knowledge of its bearing on the business of language teaching.

Is it, in fact, necessary for a language teacher to be a phonetician? I would reply that all language teachers, willy-nilly, *are* phoneticians. It is not possible, for practical purposes, to teach a foreign language to any type of learner, for any purpose, by any method, without giving *some* attention to pronunciation. And any attention to pronunciation *is* phonetics.

The language teacher may know nothing about, or may have decided to ignore, the body of experience and doctrine which constitutes the science of that name;

but whatever the age and stage of his pupils or students, he will time and again find himself tackling questions of pronunciation. He may do it well, or he may do it badly; he may be satisfied with his handling of it, or he may not; but there is no escaping it.

Since questions of pronunciation cannot be avoided, the simpler they are made for both teacher and pupil, the better; which is only another way of saying that since we must have phonetics, we may as well have good phonetics. As a scientific 'subject', Phonetics (which can be dignified with a capital letter) is nothing more than a systematized approach, embodying the past experience of hundreds of language teachers, to problems which must be tackled anyway, and which if not tackled systematically are necessarily tackled un-systematically. It is in fact misleading to ask whether Phonetics is necessary for language teachers; it is merely a question of how efficient their Phonetics is to be.

It is advisable at this point to clear up one common misconception. Phonetics is *not* identical with phonetic transcription. This must be stated as emphatically as possible, since there is a widespread and firmly-held opinion that the two terms are synonymous. The use of phonetic symbols is a very valuable part of the phonetician's technique, but it is perfectly possible to teach pronunciation without making use of them, and it is also possible, and alas! quite common, to use phonetic symbols without succeeding in teaching pronunciation. Phonetic transcription is merely a tool of which the foreign language teacher will avail himself if he thinks it useful to do so.

The language teacher, then, will inevitably be a phonetician. How much training will he or she need to be an effective one?

Clearly, it is not necessary to acquire the phonetic knowledge of the professional phonetician (whose training takes years). For effective pronunciation teaching in a general English language course, the teacher's requirements are briefly as follows. On the *theoretical* side he needs an understanding of how the vocal organs work, and of how spoken utterance may best be analysed and described for teaching purposes; and a knowledge of the phonetic structure of English and of his pupils' native language. On the *practical* side he needs an ear sufficiently trained to diagnose mistakes, and vocal organs sufficiently under control to produce isolated English sounds and imitations of pupils' mispronunciations; and some acquaintance with those tricks of the phonetic trade which provide short cuts in correcting mistakes. The theoretical side is admirably dealt with in several textbooks, and requires freedom from preconceived ideas, rather than time, for its assimilation. The practical sensory training, it is true, can be obtained only from a phonetician (a few, exceptionally gifted, individuals may manage without), but I know from experience that it can be imparted in a comparatively short time. The authorities concerned with provision of language teachers should make it their business to see that such sensory training is available to all who desire it.

This minimum of phonetic proficiency should be within the reach of every language teacher. The more he knows, the better, of course; but even a little knowledge and skill is not a dangerous thing in the hands (or rather the ears and tongue) of a teacher who knows what he is doing. There are, however, four points in the application of this knowledge which need consideration.

First of these is the danger of misplaced zeal. A language teacher who knows something of Phonetics should not be anxious to demonstrate that he is an

initiate into a mystery. Phonetics is a technique for the teacher, and not a subject to be taught. Some people would go so far as to say that the word 'Phonetics' should never be mentioned in class; in any case, it should not be forgotten that the teacher is teaching pronunciation, and not Phonetics. One might put it even more strongly and insist that he is teaching English, and not pronunciation. No words or sentences, for example, should be introduced merely to illustrate points of pronunciation (though a wisely graded vocabulary will avoid introducing phonetic difficulties too early), and the attainment of fluency should not be sacrificed to perfection of detail. The enthusiast may find himself, if he is not careful, with pupils who have a good pronunciation but nothing to pronounce.

The second point concerns the use of phonetic transcription. It must be recognized that there is no agreed procedure here, and indeed it is not possible, on the evidence available, to make definitive pronouncements. It seems fairly certain that the alphabet of the International Phonetic Association is more satisfactory than the many others unfortunately in use; and that the 'broadest' application of this alphabet to English, as in the works of Mr Scott, Mr MacCarthy, and Mr Tibbitts, is the best for general purposes. But even so, the teacher has four different courses open to him when starting to teach a language to a class of beginners: (*a*) he may give the traditional orthography only, leaving transcription to be introduced later; (*b*) he may give transcription as the only written form, leaving the orthography till later; (*c*) both transcription and orthography may be given from the start; (*d*) he may avoid any written form at the beginning, either orthography or transcription (or both) being brought in after a purely oral stage of teaching. All four of these procedures have been tried in practice,

and it is clear that each may be suitable in certain circumstances.

The late-nineteenth century advocates of language teaching reform attached great importance to the adoption of procedure (b), and either (b) or (c) are still the most favoured by advanced thought in linguistic pedagogy. There is, however, a good deal to be said for (a). The reformers concerned themselves first with what had been most neglected in the past—the spoken language, and in particular the handling of pronunciation; it is thus natural that the use of phonetic transcription should have been felt to be vital. But nowadays reform has spread to all aspects of the subject, and one important feature of modern method is that in the beginning stages a limited, selected, vocabulary is used. It is not difficult for the learner to master the pronunciation of every word, within this vocabulary, separately; and spelling anomalies are much less disturbing than when vocabulary is unrestricted. Indeed, as Mr C. K. Ogden has pointed out, such anomalies may even have a mnemonic value. Moreover it is often possible, especially with young pupils, to teach the pronunciation of each word as a whole, without splitting it up into the constituents to which transcription draws attention. This makes for fluency from the start, and there is some evidence that it also helps towards rapid silent reading. Later on, when the learner has begun to feel at home in the language, he should be taught phonetic transcription and so made able to use such things as pronouncing dictionaries. It is to be noted that procedure (a) has an added advantage for pupils whose mother tongue is not written in the Roman alphabet; procedure (c) would mean, for them, learning two Roman systems of writing simultaneously.

There are other ways besides phonetic transcription of

making clear the distribution of sounds in a word (which is all that a transcription does). Numbers can be printed over vowel letters to show to which particular sounds they refer, and silent consonants may be indicated by placing dots under them, or printing them in italics. Such methods are of respectable antiquity, and on occasion may be as useful as more orthodox phonetic symbols.

There is also what is called 'imitated pronunciation.' It has a bad reputation (though it is a time-honoured device, and has been employed in language textbooks for at least the last 400 years). 'Imitated pronunciation' gives approximate equivalents of the sounds of the language being learnt in the spelling conventions of the learner's mother tongue. Language manuals which promise the learner that he is not going to be bothered by 'phonetics' make use of it, and the following example from a certain *French Made Easy* shows it at its worst: 'lah root ay bel, mays el ay presk ahmprahtekahbl ohn eevair'. It is not always to be despised, however, and there are sometimes opportunities, for a teacher thoroughly familiar with the sound-system of his pupils' mother tongue, of putting it to good use. For example, Rumanians are more fortunately placed, when learning English, than many other people, because they not only possess in their own language a vowel of the same quality as the ubiquitous English 'neutral' vowel ə, but they have a recognised letter for it: ă. This gives an 'imitated pronunciation' of English for Rumanians a very good start; and a useful short cut to the pronunciation of, for instance, *an adventure*, is to ask a pupil to say aloud, as if it were Rumanian, 'ăn ădvență', especially if the pupil has not been told in advance what English phrase is going to result. In the same way, but departing slightly though intelligibly from Rumanian spelling conventions,

'bǎän' is the quickest way of teaching *burn*; and 'bǎun' (or better, perhaps, 'bǎäun') will produce a tolerable *bone* needing only a small adjustment. Naturally it would not be possible to work out a complete system on these lines, though one could go a great deal further than I have indicated here. This device is not, of course, put forward as a *substitute* for transcription, but as a possible teaching trick when course (a) above is adopted, and in many cases it will produce pronunciations which are only a starting point for further practice. Most languages offer at least a few opportunities for using it.

The third point to be considered is that people vary, to a surprising extent, in ability to learn the pronunciation of foreign languages. Every phonetician must have had the experience, at some time or other, of meeting a person to whom the imitation of the most exotic sounds at first hearing presented no difficulty at all. At the other extreme are a more numerous minority who are hopelessly recalcitrant, and for whom any deviation from the native sound system is apparently impossible. These two extremes are said to differ from each other in the matter of 'ear'; but what exactly this ear consists of is mysterious enough. A good ear for languages does not seem to be a manifestation of the same gift as a musical ear, nor to be correlated with it: a musical ear is mainly concerned with pitch differences, whereas the phonetic ear discriminates between complex noises. A fine musical ear, moreover, is not necessarily accompanied by any ability to perform, but a phonetically acute ear is usually detected only by great skill in manipulating the vocal apparatus. The poet's ear for language seems to be a different thing again, and poets have been guilty of as silly remarks on pronunciation as anyone else: a modern poet, with a deserved reputation for successful experiment in rhyme and verbal 'colour', has declared in

print that the last sound of the word *missed* is not the same as that of *mist*. Whatever a good ear may consist of, the teacher who finds a pupil so gifted is lucky: he has a useful stimulus for the rest of the class, and sometimes for himself in moments of despair.

A bad ear, on the other hand, is something more than the simple absence of a good one. The teacher of foreign languages will encounter many difficulties in imparting a good pronunciation which have no immediate connection with linguistic ability or the general intelligence of the pupil. The extreme reluctance of some people to attempt any unusual feats with their vocal organs, their embarrassment at demonstrations of tongue positions, their resentment at any objective analytic approach to speech problems, point to deep-seated troubles more safely dealt with by a psychiatrist than the teacher. When a case of this kind is noticed it is best left alone in public, or the lesson will end in tears.

Another curious type of resistance to learning pronunciation appears fairly commonly among language students; it arises from a feeling that accurate pronunciation of a language not one's own is not 'good form'. Somerset Maugham has said that experience has taught him to beware of Englishmen with perfect French accents: they usually turn out to be diplomats or card-sharper. A fear, not usually so explicit as of being taken for a diplomat or a card-sharper, but at least of making oneself suspect or ridiculous to one's fellow countrymen, can be found among many otherwise promising performers. The fear, it must be admitted, is not ungrounded, and the social pressure of others may be very powerful. Two bilingual daughters of one of my colleagues were educated in France until about the age of twelve, and were then put to school in England. A term or so later, their father was astonished to hear them

one evening speaking French together in the most English of accents. Their explanation was that they were doing their homework, and that life at school would be intolerable if they were to use in class the kind of French they used in France.

This kind of thing is by no means confined to the English, as one might at first suspect; I have come across it in many places, always with surprise. I remember successfully teaching the English vowels *æ*:, as in *bird*, and *ou*, as in *go*, to a class of Egyptians, all of them fluent in English, and at the end of the hour expressing the hope that they would introduce the sounds they had just learnt into their English conversation. They were surprised at the suggestion, and protested that they could not possibly do so; it would not be 'natural', they said, and they would feel extremely uncomfortable if overheard talking in that 'affected' way (their own expression) by their friends.

The teacher must be on the look out for manifestations of such feelings, and deal with them tactfully, for these resistances will seldom yield to rational argument.

My fourth point can be only briefly touched on. It concerns the *purpose*, in a general language course, of pronunciation teaching. What standard of performance is this expected to produce in the pupil? The obvious answer would seem to be that it should if possible produce perfection, and most planned pronunciation teaching tacitly assumes this end. Even if, under normal class conditions, perfection may be a goal which is seldom attained, it is nevertheless the goal which is set. But although this seems the obvious answer, and is certainly the usual practice, I am not sure that it is right; and I believe, moreover, that a different answer will imply different planning of the pronunciation side of the course.

Is it really necessary for most language learners to acquire a perfect pronunciation? Intending secret agents and intending teachers have to, of course, but most other language learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation (and by 'comfortably' intelligible, I mean a pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener). I believe that pronunciation teaching should have, not a goal which must of necessity be normally an unrealized ideal, but a *limited* purpose which will be completely fulfilled: the attainment of intelligibility. The learner, instead of being taken systematically through each English vowel and each consonant, and later, if there is time, through the complexities of intonation and rhythm, would have presented to him certain carefully chosen features on which to concentrate, the rest of his pronunciation being left to no more than a general supervision.

It must incidentally be pointed out that the problem hardly arises where young children are concerned. They possess a remarkable facility for acquiring strange sounds, and under favourable circumstances there is little difficulty in teaching a near-perfect pronunciation to them in class. But there comes a time—perhaps at puberty—when the faculty for easy imitation is lost. If language learning starts after this time, systematic (and painful) instruction in pronunciation is necessary—though Dr. Johnson put it, perhaps, too strongly when he said 'after a certain age we *cannot* learn to pronounce a new language' (but then he did not believe in phoneticians). Johnson thought a change took place in 'the pliability of the organs'; but whatever the cause, and whenever exactly the change occurs, most language teaching takes place after the dividing line has been passed, and my suggestion of a limited goal in

pronunciation teaching is for those whose organs, as Johnson said, have 'become stiff'.

For this limited goal, then, it must first be decided which features of English pronunciation are important for intelligibility (this will depend on the phonetic structure of English); secondly it must be decided which of these features will require the learner's attention (this will depend on the phonetic structure of the learner's mother tongue). It is important for intelligibility, for example, that the vowel sounds in the words *law* and *low*, or *bad* and *bud*, should be distinguished; but whether these are among the distinctions which will concern the learner is essentially a local problem, and one which must be worked out by local experts. It is not important for intelligibility, on the other hand, to differentiate the *l* sounds in the words *leaf* and *feel*, and this would therefore be a distinction with which the learner need not be bothered. It should be noted, however, that the goal is a *comfortably* intelligible pronunciation, and the use of a 'dark' *l* in the word *feel* is one of those points which, though not essential, make for greater ease of listening. If points such as these can be taught at little cost to the learner, they should find a place in the programme of pronunciation teaching; for a Frenchman the labour of learning a 'dark' *l* would be considerable, but speakers of Arabic, once they realize that they have one themselves in the word *Allah*, can adopt it with much less trouble.

The *order* of points, as well as their selection, is important; they will require to be graded rather carefully, since it is not possible to teach them all at the same time. A completely random ordering of points would be unwise, because teaching pronunciation means inculcating a series of muscular *habits*, which, if the teaching is successful, must be performed unconsciously (awareness

of the process of articulation interferes with the whole of the rest of speech). Habits once made are not easily broken, and while pupils may be forming, under the teacher's direction, good habits on some points, they may at the same time be forming, on their own, bad habits on other points with which the teacher intends to deal later. It is therefore necessary that the points dealt with first should be those which are likely to give the greatest trouble, those on which good habits are vital from the outset—even if this means going from a particular vowel to a consonant and back to another vowel.

A programme of teaching based on this limited, 'intelligibility', goal may very possibly give prominence to unexpected features. Thus questions of *rhythm* will, for many learners, be quite as important as the articulate sounds. Rhythm need not concern, for example, a German, but very possibly speakers of French should give attention to it before they tackle anything else.

Except for the selected points, the learner may use his own native sounds; and even on the selected points it will very often be *distinctions* that are important rather than the quality of the sounds themselves. Although the vowels in *bad* and *bud* must be kept apart, it is not essential to make the former the very 'front' variety represented by the phonetic symbol æ; and in this connection it is perhaps opportune to reconsider a basic assumption. It is commonly taken for granted that foreigners should be taught to speak the style of English, usually called 'Received Pronunciation', which has been so fully (and dispassionately) described by Daniel Jones. This assumption has been questioned occasionally in the past, and I shall do so again in the following chapter. It is true that Received Pronunciation is socially the most advantageous of the dialects of England when used in that country; but outside England, in the rest of

the English-speaking world (including Scotland), it carries with it no special privileges, though it is, of course, widely understood. There are, moreover, other forms of English which in England itself rank socially equal with Received Pronunciation—Scottish, Irish, and American, for example. For the foreigner the great drawback to Received Pronunciation is that it is equipped with a peculiarly difficult set of vowel sounds; and in view of the fact that many foreigners who learn English intend to use it elsewhere than in England, and that numbers of English teachers abroad do not use Received Pronunciation (for it is not by any means the accent of all educated Englishmen), I believe there is a case to be made out against basing a 'limited goal' programme of pronunciation teaching on this particular style. There is certainly room for experiment both in teaching other accents, and in exploring the potentialities of a 'synthetic' style of speech as a basis.

A great deal of English is taught abroad, in all parts of the world. This teaching meets with conspicuous lack of success in the realm of pronunciation. I would like to suggest that a limited goal, such as I have briefly described, might do something towards remedying this regrettable state of affairs by providing an efficient and economical programme, capable of inclusion in the most crowded syllabus. I certainly do not wish to suggest that this procedure will mean that the teacher need know any the less Phonetics.

ENGLISH ACCENTS

AN ACCENT, for most people, is something which they would prefer to speak without. This is the case both in speaking the mother tongue and in speaking a foreign language—although the term *accent* has not quite the same connotation in the former connection as the latter. It is a derogatory term, as popularly used, in both, but when someone is considered to speak a foreign language ‘with an accent’ the implication is that he has failed to learn part of the language properly; whereas if a person speaks his mother tongue ‘with an accent’ there is no implied failure to learn something—the implication, rather, is of learning the wrong thing.

The foreign language teacher hopes that, if he is successful, his pupils will not speak ‘with an accent’ in either sense. He hopes, naturally, that they will copy accurately the model of pronunciation which is put before them: that they will have as little ‘foreign accent’ as possible. But it is important, also, that a wise choice of model should have been made in the first place, so that the learners do not copy a pronunciation that is said to be ‘with an accent’ even when a native is talking. It is this matter of choice of model, with particular reference to English, that I want to discuss here, and I want to indicate not so much what the choice ought to be, but rather the variety from which it can be made. The purpose of this chapter, in other words, is to draw attention to the different ways in which native speakers of English pronounce their mother tongue, and the status that these

varieties of pronunciation possess. It will appear that this is a topic which is unfortunately encumbered with misconceptions and confusions.

We are faced with confusions at the very outset, for the two words used in the title of the chapter, *English* and *accent*, are both ambiguous. *Accent*, as we have seen, is a word which, in its popular use, carries a stigma: speaking *without* an accent is considered preferable to speaking *with* an accent. But in addition to the popular use of the term, there is another use which is found among language specialists. In this technical sense the word is quite neutral, and simply means 'manner of pronouncing', not 'undesirable manner of pronouncing'. Thus everybody has an accent in this sense. The popular, pejorative, use of the word begs an important question by its assumption that an accent is something which is added to, or in some other way distorts, an accepted norm. Consequently it is in the technical, neutral sense that I intend the word to be understood in my title, and that is how it will be used throughout the chapter.

The word *English* needs clarification as well. One of its meanings, when it is used as an adjective, is 'of England', but it may also be an adjective meaning 'of the English language', and the English language is spoken in many places in the world outside England. Either sense could be understood in the title, but it is the second which is intended: by *English accents* I mean, not the accents to be heard in England, but the accents of native English speakers all over the world—of New Zealanders, South Africans, Americans, Scotsmen, Australians, Irishmen, and, of course, among many others, of Englishmen too. There is still, however, room for misunderstanding, and before the title can become entirely clear a digression is necessary. The *dialects* of the English language are not really part of my subject,

but a few words about them will help to make clearer what exactly my subject is.

There are many dialects of English, and although they are enough alike, basically, for them all to be looked on as different forms of the same language, the divergences between them are considerable. They differ from each other in all possible respects—in morphology, in syntax, in vocabulary, in sound system in accent. Every dialect is a *local* dialect: it is rooted in a particular region of the English-speaking world. Widely separated ones may be mutually unintelligible, or intelligible only with difficulty. Here are some brief specimens of dialects of English:

It's a vera stiff brae, an ere we wan up to the kirk,
it was gyaun upon eleyven o'clock.

I com heaam yester neet, an I thout I wud tae see
yee first spot ea went tea.

She's a fate mawther, but ollas in dibles wi the
knacker and thackster.

I run, en theer I sid Frank ad pecked i the bruck
an douked under an wuz drowndin.¹

It can be seen from these specimens that characteristics of the dialects are quite apparent in their written form (though, as a matter of fact, not many English dialects have an accepted orthography): a dialect is never a matter of the *sounds* of speech only, of accent in the technical sense, but of other features of language also, which show just as clearly in writing as in talking. Accent and dialect are far from being the same thing, though they are often confused. A difference of dialect involves a difference of accent, but the converse is not

¹ These specimens are all from Britain; they are, respectively, from Aberdeen, Westmorland, Norfolk, and Shropshire. The reader may care to try his skill at making out their meaning.

necessarily the case. The different accents of English dialects are not part of my present subject.

Another kind of English exists, however, which is better not classified as a dialect. It stands in striking contrast to all other varieties. Not only is it different from the dialects linguistically, that is to say in the same ways that they are different from each other, but—and this is the important point—it differs from them socially and politically also. Unlike the dialects, it is not tied to any particular region or country, but is a *universal* form of English: it is the kind used everywhere by educated people. It is, moreover, the *official* form of English, the only kind which is used for public information and administration. It thus has quite a different standing in the English-speaking world from the dialects, and this *non-dialectal* kind of English is best called *Standard English* (an expression which is used with a different meaning by many present-day writers. I shall discuss their use of the term presently. I believe the sense given to it here is both the original, and the least confusing).

Standard English is easy enough to identify—you are reading it now, for example. In its written form, it appears in all public documents put out in countries whose official language is English; and in its spoken form, it is heard in announcements from all radio stations which broadcast in English. Its origins, and the history of its diffusion over the world, are not relevant to our present purpose, but we should note that although it is called 'English' it no longer has any necessary connection with England. It is not enforced by any authority, but is maintained as a standard, without effort, by the needs of commercial, literary, and scientific communication. It is the mother tongue of many educated people, and the only form of English they possess; others are

bilingual in that they have command both of Standard English and of one of the dialects.

Some readers may consider all this perfectly obvious. Nevertheless, the fact that such an international standard of English exists is often not realized, and is sometimes even explicitly denied. It would be misleading, of course, to claim that Standard English is *exactly* the same wherever in the world it may be spoken or written. There are undoubtedly differences—characteristic uses of words or turns of phrase—between different English-speaking countries. For example, the use of *gotten* as past participle of the verb *to get* is peculiar to the United States. *Outwith* meaning 'outside', in an expression such as *outwith all previous experience*, is found only in Scotland. In England a subtle distinction between *shall* and *will* is often made which is seldom observed—is even considered over-subtle—elsewhere. National differences of this sort are sometimes given an exaggerated importance,¹ but they are really trivial and insignificant beside the astonishing homogeneity of Standard English the world over. A Bradford business man, an Australian stockfarmer, a Californian fruitgrower, a London school-teacher, a Wall-street banker, an Edinburgh lawyer—all use substantially the same words (apart from their technical vocabularies) in the same grammatical constructions, spell these words in more or less the same way, and are intelligible, with perhaps very occasional hold-ups, when they talk to each other. And there can be little doubt, moreover, that such differences between them as can be found are steadily diminishing.

Even so, there are people, especially in Scotland and America, who feel that it verges on the unpatriotic to

¹ H. L. Mencken's *The American Language* and S. J. Baker's *The Australian Language* both deal largely with Standard English, in spite of their titles.

admit these things. An act was recently brought before the Massachusetts state legislature, for example, the object of which was 'to Create a Thorough Appreciation for the American Way of Life'. It proposed, among other things, to further this cause by banning any school textbook which used the word 'English' to refer to the language spoken in America. Such feelings are possibly connected with a fear, irrational but understandable, that if people allow their language to be called Standard *English*, they will have to give linguistic deference to *England*. It must be admitted that some people in England have an equally irrational conviction that it is only right for such deference to be given. It must be emphasized, however, that it is not possible nowadays for any one country to be arbiter in matters of language for the rest of the English-speaking world.

The existence of this world-wide Standard English is sometimes not perceived for another reason (and this leads me out of my digression again): no acknowledged standard of pronunciation goes with its spoken use. People talk it, in fact, with a great number of different accents; these accents are regional, and several are to be found among the educated of each English-speaking country. These are much more subtle local variations than the national differences of grammar and vocabulary discussed above, and they show only in the spoken form of the language. Nevertheless, native English-speakers are very conscious of them, and because they find them so noticeable they tend to magnify their linguistic importance. It is not uncommon to hear it said that Standard English spoken with an accent of, for instance, Australia, is a different *dialect* from Standard English spoken with an accent of England. This is to make the confusion between accent and dialect referred to above, and is misleading in serious discussion. The absence of a

standard accent for Standard English is no disadvantage, and is the consequence of its wide dispersion over the world; but the superficial differences of accent which are inevitable in such an international language tend to obscure its underlying linguistic unity.

We have seen, then, that the language we call English is made up of a number of dialects, on the one hand, and Standard English, on the other. Standard English contrasts with the dialects in its wide intelligibility, and in the official recognition universally accorded it. Each region where it is spoken, however, has its own particular accent, and it is to these regional accents of Standard English that the title of this chapter refers. Every foreigner who learns to speak English must make a choice between them, and every English-speaking country has several to offer.

Let us consider first the accents of Standard English which are native to England (it is occasionally necessary to remind people that this does not include Scotland or Wales). There are many of these, and all except one are tied to well-defined districts of the country. The single exception is also a local accent, but one of an unusual kind—unusual in the very large size of the locality to which it is attached. It belongs, in fact, to the entire country, and not, as is the case with the other accents, to one particular region of it. The consequence is that it gives the impression, as far as English people are concerned, of not being a local accent at all, and of thus being in strong contrast to all the other accents of England. It is only when it is placed in the context of the English-speaking world as a whole that this accent, since it belongs specifically to England and to nowhere else, is revealed as a local one.

There is no popular name for this exceptional accent, and, as we shall see in a moment, a number of misleading

names have been given to it in writings about the English language. Probably the best name to use for it is the one adopted by Daniel Jones (whose books have made this accent one of the most exhaustively described forms of speech in the world): *Received Pronunciation*, or *R.P.* for short. The initials make a convenient neutral label, which is useful since this accent is surrounded by a good deal of prejudice. They have been used by phoneticians for almost a century.

RP, as a matter of fact, is an accent which is more than unusual: it is, I believe, of a kind which cannot be found anywhere else. In all other countries, whether English-speaking or not, all educated people have command of the standard form of the language, but when they talk it they have an accent which shows the part of the country from which they come. One of the accents of the country, perhaps, is popularly regarded as the 'best' accent, but this is always an accent which belongs to one locality or another—it is often, for instance, the accent of the capital. In England, RP is looked on as the 'best' accent, but it is not the accent of the capital or of any other part of the country. Every town, and almost every village, contains speakers of RP whose families have lived there for generations. It is significant that the question 'where is the best English spoken?' is never debated by the English. Those who speak RP are set apart from other educated people by the fact that when they talk, one cannot tell where they come from.

The division between 'RP-speakers', as we may call them, on the one hand, and educated English people who speak Standard English with some different accent, on the other, is a social one. It is a sharp division, for no compromise is possible. One either speaks RP, or one does not, and if the opportunity to learn it in youth has not arisen, it is almost impossible to acquire it in later

life. It is an accent of privilege and prestige, conferring considerable advantages on those who speak it. In brief, RP is a 'status symbol', an indication of social standing. Its non-regional character, which is a necessary condition of being able to serve as such a status symbol, arises from, and is largely maintained by, the great English Public Schools. These, as is well known, are not at all 'public', and children are sent to live in them from all parts of the country, by parents who can afford to do so, at the age when accent is at its most plastic. RP is not, of course, actively taught at these schools; it is absorbed automatically by the pupils, whatever may be the accent of their parents. The Public Schools are a unique institution, and RP is a unique accent. It is intimately bound up with the social life of the country, and accent plays a more important part in English society than it does in any other.

The existence of this peculiar accent situation is scarcely suspected either by the rest of the English-speaking world, or by foreign students of English. There are several reasons for this. English people, though themselves aware of the situation, seldom refer to it other than obliquely; even English phoneticians usually refrain from discussing it (though the late Henry Cecil Wyld was a notable exception). It is not easy, moreover, for any ears other than the socially sharpened ones of the English, to distinguish RP from other educated accents of England. Finally, the true nature of the situation is disguised by the names which many writers have given to this accent.

RP has been called, for instance, '*educated English*', which is misleading because it implies that RP is the accent of *all* educated English people. This was true fifty years ago, but RP-speakers now form only a minority of the well-educated classes of England. RP has today

no right to such an apparently exclusive title; it is a sign of the type, not of the degree, of education which its speakers have received.

For another of its names there is some historical justification, though it is nevertheless equally misleading. In origin, some centuries ago, RP was an accent of the south-east midlands. Because of this it is sometimes called '*Southern English*', which makes it seem like a local accent of unusual prestige such as is found in many other countries. There is, however, no district today to which RP is native, in the South or anywhere else, and the term is quite inapplicable now that RP-speakers are found all over the country. '*London English*' is a still more misleading name, since a recognizable accent exists which is characteristic of educated Londoners, but which is distinct from RP. A similar expression, but confusing in a different way, is '*Southern British*', which is widely used in America as a name for RP, and is beginning to be adopted in England. 'South Britain' ought to be merely a synonym for England, since 'North Britain' has always meant Scotland; the term would thus appear to be quite non-committal, and therefore harmless. It is only too clear, however, from the way many writers use it, that they take 'British' and 'English' to be synonyms. They are thus led, inexcusably, to refer to, say, a Yorkshire accent as 'Northern British'.

'*British Standard*' is another unfortunate term. RP is undoubtedly a standard accent for England (a social standard, not an educational or linguistic one), but it most certainly is not a standard accent for all of the British Isles.

The most misleading and unfortunate name of all, however, is one which came into use not very long ago, and is fast gaining wide currency. This name is '*Standard English*', and it is doubly unfortunate. It implies

that RP is a standard accent for the whole English-speaking world, which is even more untrue than that it is one for the British Isles. It appropriates, moreover, the obvious and traditional name for the universal, official kind of English which I have described above. I should here like to make a strong plea for the discontinuance of the use of 'Standard English' in this misleading sense, for it is a source of confusion in what is already a difficult subject. It seems a pity, for example, that an influential work such as Jespersen's *English Phonetics* (new edition 1950) should abuse the term in this way (in 1889 Jespersen preferred the expression 'received English pronunciation').

Two other expressions are worth mentioning in passing. The first of these, 'the Queen's (or King's) English', is occasionally used to mean RP, but it originally was a synonym of Standard English (in the sense adopted here). The meaning of the second term, 'the Oxford accent (or voice)', is very vague. It seems most often to be applied either to RP-speakers whose speech is thought to show marked individual eccentricities, or to those who, unsuccessfully attempting to imitate RP, are considered to be 'affected'. There is, in reality, no such thing as an accent characteristic of Oxford University.

Certain virtues have been claimed for RP, probably because of its great social prestige, to which it has a doubtful right. It is sometimes said, for instance, that it is the most agreeable accent of English to listen to. Another claim is that it is the most widely intelligible of English accents. So little is known about the aesthetics of speech that the subject must at present continue to be one of those matters of taste about which serious argument is fruitless. Although RP is much admired, it arouses considerable hostility in some quarters; many

harsh things have been said and written about the sound of it, by Americans and Scots in particular, but also by the English. It is almost impossible to get reliable evidence concerning the second claim. It is very likely the case that RP is the most widely intelligible accent within England. There is no obvious reason, however, why this should be true outside England, and there are certainly other accents which would seem to have as good a *prima facie* claim.

There is no need to say very much here concerning the other educated accents of England. They can be grouped into various types—Northern, Western, Midland, Southern—but they nearly all resemble RP, more or less, to any except English ears, and sound fairly different from the various American, Scots, or Irish types of accent. There would be little point in a foreigner learning any accent of England except RP: its great prestige within the country, and the social disadvantages of the others, make it an obvious choice. Those, however, who wish to form an idea of the variety of educated non-RP accents that may be heard in England should listen to the authoritative talks, on a wide range of subjects, that are put out by the BBC on its Third Programme. These, by some of the most learned men and women in the country, are as often as not in some other accent than RP.

It is now necessary to make clear two very important points which arise out of the relations between RP and the educated accents of the rest of the English-speaking world. Within England, RP is a 'status symbol' dividing the population into those who speak it and those who do not, and placing the former in a privileged social category. (The word 'received', in the expression 'Received Pronunciation', means 'accepted in the best society'—a sense which it commonly had in the Nineteenth Century,

but which is practically extinct today in other contexts than this.) This privileged category, however, is not exclusively occupied by RP-speakers. There are other accents of Standard English which are considered to rank equal, socially, with RP; but none of these accents are accents of England. Any foreign accent, oddly enough, is socially acceptable (it ought first, of course, to be intelligible), which is not true of some other countries. Equally acceptable are any of the types of Scottish, Irish, and American accents which go with Standard English (and also Canadian accents, which the English find difficult to distinguish from American). The accents of the English-speaking British Dominions—South Africa, New Zealand, Australia—are also accepted, though it sometimes happens that they are confused with regional accents of England when heard for the first time. Thus the acute social discrimination made in England on the basis of accents applies only to natives of the country; foreigners are exempt.

The second important point is that, in spite of its very great prestige in England, RP does not occupy any exceptional position outside that country. For many people abroad it is just one of the accents of England, and is usually not recognized as being anything out of the way. If it is recognized, it is as likely to arouse hostility as admiration. In all English-speaking countries people can be found who speak RP (because they have been to school in England), but there is no evidence that their accent is any advantage to them. There are indications, in fact, that in certain circumstances it may be a disadvantage—politicians in both America and Australia have at times been attacked for talking with it.

Outside England, in the other countries of the English-speaking world, many accents are to be heard accompanying the use of Standard English by educated

people. The differences between these accents lie very largely in vowel sounds, rhythm, and intonation, but there would be no point, for present purposes, in describing them in detail, or even in enumerating all of them. None of them occupy a place, in their respective countries, at all comparable to RP. Indeed in some countries there is hardly any class distinction by accent, in which only regional differences are found. Class differences are revealed by grammar and vocabulary. 'The phonetic uniformity in cultivated and uncultivated speech in much of the United States is, in truth, one of the most striking aspects of American English.'¹ It is worth noting that, among accents outside England, Scots and American, of each of which there are several educated types, enjoy exceptional prestige everywhere in the English-speaking world.

If a foreigner wishes to learn English he will, of course, learn Standard English. But how is he to pronounce it?—for however foreign his accent may remain, it must always be an attempt at some English accent or other.

It is clear that, if a learner intends to visit England, or is going to mix largely with English people, RP is the accent which he should adopt. If he chooses RP he will, moreover, be exceptionally well provided for in the matter of textbooks, readers, dictionaries, and grammars. No other accent of Standard English can offer such a wealth of material (though it is to be hoped it will not be long before this is remedied).

Even if he has no particular intentions of spending his time with English people, RP might be thought the most suitable accent for a European learner, just as an accent of the United States is the obvious one for learners in Central and South America. Nevertheless, RP is not

¹ A. F. Hubbell, *The Pronunciation of English in New York City* (1950).

such an obvious choice as it might seem, even for Europe; it is certainly not an obvious choice for the rest of the world.

'I take the view' Professor Daniel Jones has written, 'that foreigners learning English should be free to choose whatever pronunciation they prefer.' But in order to form a preference, they must first be aware that there is a legitimate choice to be made, and it has been the main purpose of this chapter to make this clear. Indeed, foreigners learning English should not only be aware of the existence of alternatives to RP, but they should perhaps consider whether the alternatives are not in some respects to be preferred. C. G. Jung, the famous Swiss analytic psychologist, is reported to prefer speaking English with an American accent because it is 'more emotional and directly influenced by the unconscious mind than the English of England.' There are more convincing reasons, however, why RP is not an obvious choice from among all the accents of the English-speaking world. Its peculiar social position, which makes many people hostile to it, should not be forgotten, particularly by learners outside Europe, where this hostility is likely to be strong. It is phonetically a difficult accent, moreover, and other accents—Scots, for instance—are undoubtedly easier for most foreigners.

The freedom of choice advocated by Daniel Jones also requires that learners should be offered the opportunity of acquiring other accents, or at least should not be actively discouraged from learning them by the education authorities of their country. In Europe, and in many other parts of the world also, no such opportunity exists, and only RP has official recognition for educational purposes. I am not here advocating the wide-scale teaching of other accents than RP, however (though I believe there is a case to be made for this), but I am

protesting against the common conviction that learners of English will be contaminated by the sound of all other accents, and must be protected from them. The idea that American, for example, is an unsuitable accent for Standard English is an anachronism, a relic of a peculiarly silly snobbery which is almost extinct in England itself (where it originated), but which lingers abroad. I often hear American types of accent disparaged by foreign teachers of English, and, as an Englishman, I am always ashamed when I do so, since it is an attitude which must at one time have been adopted from us. It is an attitude which is sometimes carried to absurd lengths. I have heard a teacher from Europe, just back after spending a year in the United States, confess that her stay there had been spoilt by the strain of constant effort to avoid picking up an American accent. A teacher from another European country once told me that her pupils mixed a great deal with Americans and never with English people, and yet she was instructed to insist on their using RP in class. A similar attitude towards Scots is equally misguided. There are certain countries where people with Scots accents are never employed in the schools and universities—as if Scots was a provincial accent of England. The authorities responsible for these attitudes and decisions are entirely mistaken concerning the status of the different accents of Standard English. For practical reasons RP must continue for a time to be the accent mainly taught, especially in Europe, but other types of accent should be treated with the respect due to them.

MAKING CONVERSATION

IN NORMAL friendly conversation, it is most important to avoid silence. If somebody volunteers a piece of information or some exciting news, or puts forward an opinion, or exclaims with surprise at something, an answer is just as necessary as when a question is asked. The answer may be purely formal and may convey little or no information, but it keeps the conversation going, and prevents the discomfort of a pause. For someone who is still a learner of the language in which the conversation is being conducted, however, it is not easy to know what exactly ought to be said under these circumstances. The appropriate words and phrases which every language reserves for these occasions have to be specially learnt, for they can hardly ever be arrived at by literally translating the corresponding phrases of one's own language; but these conversational lubricants seldom find a place in language courses. The frustrating effect of not knowing what to say in order to commit oneself to nothing more than politeness, must be very familiar to all who have participated in the social life of a country whose language they do not know well.

A reply made to a statement or an exclamation, as distinct from one made to a question, may be called a *comment*. Comments of many kinds are habitually used in English conversation; I want here to examine one type only, a type which is simply constructed and yet which will meet most conversational situations. Comments of this type, with their flexibility and versatility, are very

useful, but I have rarely heard them from foreigners, even from those with an extensive knowledge of English; moreover they often misunderstand these comments when addressed to them.

The analysis and description which is given here of this type of comment takes a rather abstract form. It could hardly be presented in this way to beginners', or even intermediate, classes in English. I have used it for many years with advanced adult classes, however, in spite of the somewhat forbidding algebraic appearance, and have found it particularly useful in discussions with foreign teachers, who, when familiar with the scheme, can use it as a framework for the elaboration of exercises to suit their own classes.

The basis of this type of comment is simply the repetition of the verb and subject of the original sentence. The subject is repeated in the form of a pronoun, and the verb in the form of whatever anomalous finite was used in the original sentence, or, if no anomalous finite occurred there, in the appropriate form of the verb *to do*. Thus:

Statement:

'This is a good book.'

'What nasty weather we're having.'

'Rain seems unlikely.'

Comment:

'It is.'

'We are.'

'It does.'

The subject may come first, as in the preceding examples, or there may be verb-subject inversion:

Statement:

'This is a good book.'

'The shops close early today.'

Comment:

'Is it?'

'Do they?'

The negative *not* may be inserted in the comment:

Statement:

'This is a good book.'

'I speak English very badly.'

Comment:

'It isn't.'

'You don't.'

The intonation may be a falling one:

Statement:

'This is a good book.'

'You can't drive without a licence.'

Comment:

'It is.'

'Can't you.'

Or there may be a rising intonation:

Statement:

'This is a good book.'

'The government will never
allow it.'

Comment:

'It is?'

'Won't they?'

It can be seen at once that a good many varieties are possible, and they must be classified and tabulated before it can be shown how they are used. The simplest way to classify them is to employ a special notation, which at first looks somewhat complicated. By its means, however, the underlying structure of the comments, which otherwise might not be apparent beneath the many forms that they can take, can be clearly shown.

In this notation the symbol S will be used for the pronoun *subject* of the comment, and the symbol V for its anomalous finite *verb*. When the anomalous finite is made negative by addition of the word *not* (which is usually in its weak form *n't*), this could be symbolized by writing, for instance, Vn't. If this were done, however, it would obscure certain important points about the use of these comments. It is more convenient and useful to ignore whether a comment is negative or positive, and to indicate instead whether it agrees with or contradicts the original sentence on which it is made. (The agreement or the contradiction may, of course, be only apparent.) If a comment is negative when the original sentence is negative, therefore, it is taken to agree, and so if both are positive; but if *not* appears in one and is absent in the other, the comment disagrees. (For the use of *never*, *hardly*, *scarcely*, in making sentences negative, see H. E. Palmer's *Grammar of Spoken English*, Heffers, which

should also be referred to in connexion with various points concerning the use of anomalous finites, a knowledge of which will be taken for granted here.)

When the comment agrees, this will be indicated in the notation by a plus sign before the symbol for the verb: +V. When it disagrees, a minus sign will be used: -V. Thus:

'This is a good book.'

'It is' = S + V (subject—verb, agreeing)

'It isn't' = S - V (subject—verb, disagreeing).

'This isn't a good book.'

'It isn't' = S + V (subject—verb, agreeing)

'It is' = S - V (subject—verb, disagreeing).

To these two types, S + V and S - V, can be added two more with verb-subject inversion:

'This is a good book.'

'Is it' = +V S (verb—subject, agreeing)

'Isn't it' = -V S (verb—subject, disagreeing).

'This isn't a good book.'

'Isn't it' = +V S (verb—subject, agreeing)

'Is it' = -VS (verb—subject, disagreeing).

(This last comment, as will appear below, is not in fact a possible one in this context.)

Each of these four types may be used with either a rising or falling intonation, which can be indicated by appropriate signs placed before the symbol V. There are thus eight different comments of this type which can be constructed. They are as follows:

(A) S ↘ + V

(B) S ↗ + V

(C) S ↘ - V

(D) S ↗ - V

(E) ↘ + V S

(F) ↗ + V S

(G) ↘ - V S

(H) ↗ - V S

Some of the forms that these eight different possibilities may take can be illustrated by comments on the four following specimen sentences: (1) This is a good book;

(2) You needn't worry about that; (3) I got there too late to see the start; (4) He never answered my letter:

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(A)	It \downarrow is	I \downarrow needn't	You \downarrow did	He \downarrow didn't
(B)	It \uparrow is	I \uparrow needn't	You \uparrow did	He \uparrow didn't
(C)	It \downarrow isn't	I \downarrow need	You \downarrow didn't	He \downarrow did
(D)	It \uparrow isn't	I \uparrow need	You \uparrow didn't	He \uparrow did
(E)	\downarrow Is it	\downarrow Needn't I	\downarrow Did you	\downarrow Didn't he
(F)	\uparrow Is it	\uparrow Needn't I	\uparrow Did you	\uparrow Didn't he
(G)	\downarrow Isn't it	\downarrow Need I	\downarrow Didn't you	\downarrow Did he
(H)	\uparrow Isn't it	\uparrow Need I	\uparrow Didn't you	\uparrow Did he

It must be pointed out at once that these do not all occur as isolated comments. The last one, *H*, $\uparrow - V S$, may very occasionally be heard in reply to a positive sentence, but it is so rare that it is best disregarded for the purposes of a simplified exposition such as the present. It is nevertheless included in the list because, as will be seen below, it does occur in combination with other comments. Of the remaining seven, *G*, $\downarrow - V S$, is always equal to $\downarrow V n't S$; that is to say, it can only be made in reply to a positive sentence. Thus the comments 'Need I' and 'Did he' shown among the examples above are not really possible alone; they occur however, combined with others. It can be seen, therefore, that if the original sentence is negative, only six of the eight comments of this type can be made on it, though seven can be used as replies to a positive sentence. There are, of course, other obvious limitations on the use of these comments arising at times from the nature of the subject under discussion, and from the situation.

We must now consider how these comments are used in conversation, and what their meaning is, as far as they can be said to have one. It is not possible, in the space of a short chapter, to give an exhaustive account of them; they are capable of endless subtleties, familiarity with

which can only come after extensive conversational experience. Here an attempt will be made simply to give a selection, covering the most typical, and the least complex, situations, from the many possible ways in which they can be used. Even a limited acquaintance with these comments can help foreign learners considerably to attain conversational ease.

Some sentences on which comments may be made are personal judgments on the quality of something, that is to say they convey an *opinion*; such are 'He doesn't speak English very well', or 'What a beautiful day it is!' Some sentences convey *information*, either in the form of news ('The Government has resigned'), or of an explanation, perhaps unsolicited ('This is my first visit to England'). It helps at times to clarify the use of comments if these two sorts of sentence are distinguished. It should be noted, in passing, that the same sentence may sometimes be an expression of opinion, and at other times may convey information, depending on who is speaking and who is being addressed. 'This is a good book', when said during casual party conversation, is an expression of opinion; but when said by a professor to a student it probably conveys information. In some situations the person addressed may choose how he will take the sentence, and make his comment accordingly.

This distinction is least important for those comments which mean practically nothing, but merely show interest, in varying degrees, in what has been said. (The interest may, of course, be genuine, politely feigned, or ironic.) *B*, *E*, and *F* are used in this way as comments on both sorts of sentence, and *C* also is used as a comment on information. This is probably the hardest kind of comment for which to find equivalents in a language other than one's own.

These comments do not reveal anything of the speaker's own opinion on, or knowledge of, the subject (they imply, indeed, that he has not got any). The remaining comments are not non-committal in this way: they may roughly be described as expressing either agreement or disagreement, and for these the distinction between opinion and information is rather more important. *A* and *G*, for instance, are comments which, when made on an expression of opinion, show that the speaker shares it, while *C* and *D* show that he does not. *A*, *C* and *D* may also be used in a similar way (though *G* may not) on sentences conveying information. Here, however, the conversational effect is somewhat different, and they can be disconcerting: *A* may indicate that a piece of exciting news is not news after all, and *C* or *D* may be as good as saying that a person is either misinformed or is not telling the truth.

The distribution of the type of comments we are dealing with among the three groups, indicating (i) interest, (ii) agreement, and (iii) disagreement, may be summed up as follows:

	<i>opinion</i>	<i>information</i>
(i)	<i>B E F</i>	<i>B C E F</i>
(ii)	<i>A G</i>	<i>A</i>
(iii)	<i>C D</i>	<i>C D</i>

The full range of these comments must now be examined in more detail.

(*A*) $S \downarrow + V$. This agrees with an opinion, or recognizes the correctness of information; it is more commonly used for the former than the latter. Its use supposes previous knowledge of the subject: it can only be used in reply to 'This is a good book', for example, when the speaker has read the book. Hence it is not likely to occur in reply to statements such as 'My feet hurt' ('They do'), 'This is my first visit to England'

('It is'), or others where previous knowledge would be difficult to come by.

(B) $S\uparrow + V$. The function of this comment is, so to speak, to 'acknowledge receipt' of an utterance, and it is equally useful for replying to expressions of opinion or to pieces of information. The speaker is able to indicate the degree of his interest by the range of intonation with which he pronounces the comment. If the rise is a small one, the comment indicates little desire to pursue the subject; but if there is a high rise, the comment means 'please continue: tell me more.'

(C) $S\downarrow - V$. This, if taken literally, is a straightforward disagreement with what has been said. It is seldom so used, however, and only on those occasions when a flat contradiction is, in fact, polite—in reply, for example, to 'I'm afraid I'm being a bore' ('You aren't').

This comment, however, has two other uses, in which its meaning is not the superficial literal one. Foreign learners will often hear these other uses, but they ought themselves to try them with great caution, for they are not at all easy to manage successfully. In the first of these uses, which does not occur in reply to expressions of opinion, the comment does not indicate previous knowledge, but is an expression of great astonishment and interest at a really startling piece of news: 'The Government has fallen' ('It hasn't!'), 'The pipes burst last night' ('They didn't!'). In this use the range of intonation is unusually narrow, and there is great intensity of voice. It is customarily written with an exclamation mark after it.

The second use is confined to positive utterances, that is to say the comment is always negative ($S\downarrow Vn't$). In intention it is ironical (which can sometimes only be detected by facial expression, or from knowledge of the character of the person using it). Used in this way in

reply, for example, to 'My English is rather weak' ('It isn't!'), it is the equivalent of the colloquial 'You don't say so!', or the slangy 'Go on!', i.e. it implies that the weakness of the English is so obvious that it does not need attention drawn to it. The range of intonation is much wider than in the preceding use. It is customary to write this one too with an exclamation mark.

(D) $S\uparrow - V$. This comment also expresses disagreement, but it is less abrupt than *C* because of its rising intonation, and it is therefore used more commonly than *C* in this sense. To dissent from an opinion is less likely to be rude in conversation than to contradict a statement of fact, and so this comment is more often heard for the former purpose. It is also used, as *C* is, for flattering contradictions: 'Our climate is terrible' ('It isn't').

(E) $\downarrow + VS$. The effect of this comment is very similar to that of *B*: it acknowledges receipt of an utterance, and the degree of interest it expresses depends on whether the intonation is a high fall or a low fall. On the whole, however, it is a less warm response than *B*, and it often has a feeling about it of 'that is interesting, but it is not my business.'

(F) $\uparrow + VS$. The rising intonation of this comment frequently leads foreign learners to mistake it for a request to repeat the preceding sentence, which disrupts the conversation until the misunderstanding is cleared up. In fact its meaning is much the same as *B* and *E*, and it is equally affected by variations in the range of intonation. There are doubtless many small, subtle differences between *B*, *E* and *F* which could be specified after careful research, but the foreign learner can safely take them as equivalent, perhaps increasing slightly in 'warmth' from *E*, through *B*, to *F*.

(G) $\downarrow - VS$. This is, for many foreigners, another deceptive comment. It looks as if it were a negative

question, but in fact it is a strong affirmative, an expression of hearty agreement, and it is usually written with an exclamation mark rather than a question mark, in spite of the verb-subject inversion: 'This is a good book' ('Isn't it!'). This comment, like *A*, can of course only be made if the speaker has read the book. There are two important limitations on its use: first, the comment itself is always negative, so that the sentence on which it is made must be positive; secondly, it is confined to expressions of opinion, since its meaning, which could be paraphrased as 'Yes indeed, to a very great extent', would make nonsense in reply to a piece of news or information: 'Queen Anne is dead' ('Isn't she!').

(*H*) † -VS. This comment can be ignored for practical purposes. It never occurs in reply to a statement conveying information. It may be heard, very occasionally, in reply to a positive sentence which is an expression of opinion, with the same meaning as *G*, but many people would feel this use to be an affectation.

* * *

The most useful comments for everyday conversational employment—those covering the widest range of situations—are probably *A*, *E*, *F*, *G*. They are the easiest to learn to use, and foreign learners should try them out before they embark on the others. If they are able to take part in conversations with English people, they would do well to spend some time, after familiarizing themselves with the above analysis and classification, in observing how the various comments occur before they start using them themselves.

It often happens that two of these comments are combined with each other; in this case, the first is always *A*, *B*, *C*, or *D*, and the second *E*, *F*, *G*, or *H*. The following are some of these compound comments:

A, E. 'This is a good book.' 'It\is, is it.' It should be noted that in this combination, there is no separate fall of intonation on the second comment. The meaning is that of *E* by itself, rather than of *A*, i.e. it shows interest but not previous knowledge. It has rather an effect of condescension; it possibly also indicates that the speaker would prefer to continue the subject than have his interlocutor do so.

A, F. 'This is a good book.' 'It\is, \is it?' Similar to the preceding, but more affable and less condescending.

A, G. 'This is a good book.' 'It\is,\isn't it.' The effect of this is the same as that of *A* alone; it is less strong than *G* alone.

Other combinations are possible, but they cannot all be examined in detail here. They illustrate an important point: in normal conversational circumstances, the longer the comment, the better. Comments of the type we have been considering may effectively be combined with other types, particularly words such as 'Yes', 'No', 'Oh', 'Really'. For example:

'It's going to rain.' '\No, \is it, not \really.'

'This isn't a good book.' '\Isn't it, \oh, \really.'

'It's\not, \no, \is it.'

'It's a lovely day.' 'It\is, \isn't it, \yes.'

The native English speaker is able to produce, immediately and automatically, the correct pronoun and the correct anomalous finite each time he wishes to make one of these comments. The same facility must be acquired by the foreign learner of English, if he wishes to turn theoretical knowledge of these comments to practical use. This is a considerable difficulty, but exercises to develop this ability can very profitably form part of the work done in 'conversation classes'. (The

class must, of course, already be acquainted with a sufficient amount of the theory.) The eight formulas (or a selection from them, perhaps in a simplified form) should be put on the blackboard, and identified by letters or numbers. The procedure is for the teacher to say a typical conversational sentence, followed by the letter or number of one of the comments; the form of the comment appropriate to the given sentence must then be produced by the class. Progress will be slow at first; but it is an exercise which provides, in addition to facility in making comments, excellent practice in intonation, and also in the handling of anomalous finites, which are so important in all spoken uses of English. Here, using the reference letters for comments given above, are some examples:

Teacher:

It's a cold day. (A).

I hardly saw anything. (F).

You ought to practise your

English more. (B).

He didn't pass his exam. (D).

The French can cook wonderfully. (G).

It may rain before we get back. (A).

I'm hungry. (C).

That's not the way to pronounce it. (E).

Children used to be better-behaved. (G).

I don't think he's very intelligent. (B).

I couldn't find him yesterday. (F).

You're very lucky to have finished already. (E).

Answer:

It \is.

\Didn't you?

I \ought?

He \did.

\Can't they!

It \may.

You \aren't!

\Isn't it.

\Usen't they!

You \don't?

\Couldn't you?

\Am I.

I can never sing in tune. (C). You \can.

They daren't risk an election. (E). \Daren't they.

You couldn't do that. (D). I \could.

Exercises in the use of these comments can lead on to study of similar forms in other functions. Answers to questions, for instance, may have the same structure, sometimes with unexpected variations in meaning; compare:

'Isn't he a fool?' '\Isn't he!' (E).

'Isn't he a fool?' '\Is he!' (G).

'Disjunctive' questions consist of the statement and the comment in the same utterance. Compare:

'This is the place, isn't it?'

'This is the place, is it?'

'This isn't the place, is it?'

There are comments in which the pronoun refers to a new subject:

'I can talk French.' 'So can I.'

'He couldn't manage it.' 'Nor could she.'

Some of the explanations I have given of the uses and meanings of comments must inevitably seem unjustifiably dogmatic to English-speaking readers. A true description of the function of any comment in natural conversation would be qualified by endless restrictions and exceptions, and would be far too complex for my present purpose. I have tried to do no more than to produce a guide, necessarily incomplete, to the use of these comments for foreign learners, and to illustrate how conversation can be analysed for language-teaching purposes.

GESTURE

HUMAN conversation consists of much more than a simple exchange of words and sentences, and although our vocal organs are enough for the mere production of speech sounds, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that we need our entire bodies when we converse. There is a whole range of bodily behaviour which forms an essential 'background' to talking, whatever the language may be. It is surprising that this has up to now been the object of so little study, in spite of the continually increasing interest taken in spoken language over the last hundred years. Sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have at times called attention to its importance, but only scattered, incidental remarks on the subject are to be found in the literature of linguistics. Nobody seems ever to have attempted a detailed, systematic, comparative survey which could be put to use by (among others) language teachers.

The various 'non-verbal' elements which are backgrounds to conversation may be regarded for convenience as falling under three heads: interjections, facial expression, and gesture, although it is not always easy to distinguish the last two. Of these three, interjections have received a certain amount of attention, mostly from phoneticians; however, though a number have been recorded and described, not much has been done about them on a comparative basis. Facial expression is almost entirely neglected, but its investigation would be such a formidably complex task that reluctance to embark on it

is very understandable; the research moreover would be very expensive, for sound films are probably the only means of dealing with it adequately.

It is harder to understand the remarkable neglect of gesture as a subject for comparative study, in spite of the obvious difficulties. Most writers on the subject have confined themselves either to *rhetorical gesture*, the kind that actors and orators employ, the kind that used to be known technically as 'action' (as in Hamlet's advice to the players: 'suit the action to the word'); or to the *sign-languages* of Red Indians and of deaf-mutes. These are very interesting topics, of course, but it is *conversational gesture* that is of real linguistic importance, and on which the study of other aspects of gesture should be based. The everyday gestures of the man in the street, however, are precisely those about which we know least. (There is no entry for *gesture* in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* index, it is interesting to note.) There is here a fascinating, but almost untouched, subject, and one which should interest teachers of languages as much as any other students of linguistics. It is a subject, incidentally, which is so far without a recognized name. I shall not attempt here to start on the comparative survey which is so much needed; all I wish to do is to indicate briefly what seem to be some of the reasons why gesture has been neglected, and to suggest some of the preliminary work necessary to a full-scale study.

The neglect of gesture may partly be due to conceiving it too literally as 'background' to speech. The role it plays in ordinary conversation is of course a subordinate one most of the time, but it is nevertheless a more active role than it may at first seem to be. This is well illustrated by broadcasting: when a speaker is cut off from the eyes of his listeners, and his voice is therefore completely isolated, the loss of what is contributed by

gesture (and by facial expression too) to talking is revealed in various ways. I have often thought that one reason why radio announcers in all countries are continually under attack for the way they pronounce (and this seems to be the case everywhere), is that their voices are the subject of *all* our attention, whereas when listening to people in the flesh we give only a part of our attention to the voice, reserving some for gesture and expression. This makes us hypercritical of announcers, and fancied deficiencies are detected in their speech which would probably pass unnoticed if the speaker could be seen. The effect of this isolation of the voice, so that we are prevented from 'listening with our eyes', is even more apparent in attempts to reproduce ordinary conversation over the air than in formal announcements and talks. Here lies one of the problems of radio drama, for even animated speech is apt to sound expressionless, dull, and insipid when it is presented to the ear alone, and the actor in radio plays usually has to use a much wider range of intonation than he normally would when visible to his audience, in order to compensate for the loss of what is contributed through the eye to the total effect. Gesture may be background in one sense, but it is not *passive* background—it contributes actively to communication.

Another reason why gesture is neglected may be the assumption that it is practically the same in all human beings. It is widely believed that, although a few local peculiarities can be found, and although a few 'excitable' races may be more addicted to its use than others, gesture is a thing which comes naturally to everyone. This point of view was first expressed, as far as I know, by a seventeenth-century writer called John Bulwer, in a book called *Chirologia: or the Natural Language of the Hand*, which was published in 1644. Gesture, he said,

being 'the only speech that is natural to man', may be called 'the general language of human nature', and he points out that our merchants are able, by using signs, to drive 'a rich and silent trade' with savage nations whose languages they do not know, and to make 'many a dumb bargain'. The great scientist Charles Darwin suggested that gestures arise out of natural, instinctive movements, which originally had no communicative purpose. Thus nodding and shaking the head, as signs of affirmation and negation, have their origin, respectively, in the infant inclining its head forwards to accept food or withdrawing its head sideways to refuse it.

If gesture were natural and instinctive in this way, and therefore universal, there would be little point in detailed investigation of it among all the peoples of the world. In spite of Bulwer, Darwin, and many other writers, however, the assumption that it is 'natural to man' is, I suggest, far from true. Languages, in fact, differ gesturally in many ways, particularly in the *extent* to which gesture is used to accompany speech; and in the actual *movements* which constitute gestures of similar meaning. A few examples will make these differences clearer.

It is certainly popularly recognized that different nationalities vary in the amount of gesture they introduce into their conversation. The English, for instance, are sparing in their use of it; in few other nations could men sustain a conversation for so long with their hands in their pockets. Consequently the French, who make a great deal more use of gesture, appear to the English, until the latter learn to know them better, to be always in a state of excitement. (It is interesting, by the way, to note how not only gesture but all kinds of linguistic behaviour may give rise to misleading judgments on national character, although they enable people speaking

the same language to make fairly reliable judgments on each others' personalities.) It is often possible to tell simply by watching them which of their languages bilingual people are talking when they are out of ear-shot. A good illustration of how closely the whole of bodily 'background behaviour' is tied to particular languages is the following description of Red Indians in the North West of America, changing over in conversation from their own language to the famous 'Chinook Jargon', the trade language which they used to use in the nineteenth century for business with strangers: 'The countenances which had before been grave, stolid, and inexpressive, were instantly lighted up with animation; every feature was active; the head, the arms, and the whole body were in motion, and every look and gesture became instinct with meaning.' (The description is by Horatio Hale, *A Manual of the Oregon Trade Language*, published in 1890.)

The existence in different languages of widely differing gestures with the same meaning is less generally realized, but very striking when attention is drawn to it. Shaking the head as a gesture of negation, however 'natural' Darwin's explanation may make it in origin, is not by any means natural in the sense of being universal. A very different kind of head movement is used for negation by the Greeks, for example. Their gesture (which would probably not be intelligible to people used to the head-shaking one), consists of a slight throwing back of the head, often with the eyes shut. It is of interest that this gesture could equally well be explained as deriving from an avoiding movement on the part of the child. In fact most, if not all, gestures could be explained, without trying credulity too hard, as originating in natural instinctive movements. But it remains to be explained why one movement rather than another becomes institutionalized in a particular country as a part of

language behaviour. Until a great deal more is known, gestures must be regarded as being as conventional as the words we use.

Here are a few more examples of gesture differences. An angler in Britain will demonstrate the size of a fish he has caught by holding his two hands, palms facing each other, the appropriate distance apart in front of him, but an angler from certain parts of Africa will measure off the size along his left arm with his right hand. In Britain the gesture to indicate the numeral 'one' is made by holding up the index finger, but in Switzerland it is the thumb which is held up. Some peoples point at objects with the finger, others by protruding the lips. The gesture for 'come here' is made in Britain with the index finger, which is held, pointing upwards, at eye level and flexed towards the body; in Greece, the hand and forearm describe an arc away from the body towards the ground; in Egypt the hand is held at arm's length, palm downwards, and the fingers are then flexed. (It is difficult, as these examples show, to describe gestures clearly in words.) In this last case the difference between the movements is very considerable, and the meaning of the Greek or the Egyptian gesture may be taken to be precisely the opposite to that intended, by those unfamiliar with it. In fact the very natural misinterpretation of such a gesture had disastrous consequences on one occasion. Several years ago, some European sailors were swimming, some distance from their ship, near a fortified coastal area in the Eastern Mediterranean. Soldiers on guard, seeing unidentified people in a prohibited part of the sea and wishing to interrogate them, shouted to them to come nearer, and made at the same time their usual 'come here' gesture. The sailors did not understand the language but took the gesture to mean 'go away', and, realizing they might be

near coastal defences, swam off. The result was that the guards, now highly suspicious, opened fire with tragic effects.

Many other examples of different gestural expression for the same idea could be given. It is also possible to find examples of the same gestural expression being used for different ideas, and this too may produce awkward failures of communication. For instance, an Englishman speaking in public would find it very natural, if he wished to request his audience to be silent, to hold up both his hands on a level with his head, with the palms facing outwards. If he were to do this in Greece, however, it would cause deep offence to his audience, for this same gesture in that country is a most insulting one.

These are differences in *quantity* and in *quality* of gesture. There are other gestural differences between languages which are more difficult to identify, differences which might be said to be in the *range* of gesture, and in the *contexts* in which one might expect to find it. For instance, not only may the same idea have different gestural expression in different languages, but some languages have gestures to which nothing corresponds in others. Thus the French have a gesture by which they express approval of food (performed by pointing the thumb at the midriff; not used in the best society); the English, understandably perhaps, have no equivalent. There are in English few abusive gestures (there is one notable exception, with an unfortunately close resemblance to the Churchillian 'V' sign, which was used most effectively by Charles Laughton in a well-known pre-war film called *If I Had a Million*, which readers may remember); but many other nations would find it hard to quarrel without their gestures of insult. By range of gesture, in other words, is meant the topics which it is used to cover.

The contexts in which gesture is found also vary. It may be mainly an emotional running commentary on what is spoken, or it may be used to supply highly important items of meaning; it may be a continuous flow of movements, all merging into each other, or the speaker may have recourse to it only when at a loss for words. The English, when emotionally aroused, are likely to use more gesture; Egyptians, on the other hand, have been observed, when very excited, to use less.

It is clear that some kind of functional classification of gesture is an essential preliminary to any real investigation of these differences between languages. The following two quotations put very well a distinction which may not be fundamental, but which is at least very useful in the present state of our knowledge. They are taken from *Greek Salad*, by Kenneth Matthews (London, 1935; pp. 100, 101):

- (1) 'If I close my eyes and invoke my visual memory, the picture is invariably of two Greeks talking at a street corner. The first, *A*, by a transition as brief as the tropical twilight, bursts into abuse. The second, *B*, is stirred simultaneously by an even more demoniac fury. *A*, placing his first two fingers against his thumb in the manner of one who is about to unscrew a screw, impels them vigorously past the ear of *B*, enforcing his argument. *B*, similarly pursing up his fingers, shoots them out within an inch of his opponent's nose (let us reserve the term *poko* for this most representative gesture).'
- (2) 'The eyes narrow, a leer is apparent on the face, and the fingers are turned upward and rubbed against the thumb, not, as before, in the manner of one *about* to unscrew a screw, but with the veritable motions of screwing. This gesture always

indicates an interest in, or a desire for, money, and will hereafter be referred to in this book by the arbitrary but convenient term *stroko*.'

This distinction between *poko* and *stroko* may be said, in more popular terminology, to be between *gesticulation* and *sign-language*. The latter has meaning by itself, and can be completely independent of speech. It can exist in the form of fully developed codes which are languages in themselves, such as those of the deaf and dumb, and may then even be accompanied by subsidiary gesticulation. But sign-language is only of interest to us at the moment in so far as it enters into ordinary conversation. It is much the easiest type of gesture to observe, describe, and relate to speech. Authors frequently bring it into reported speech: "Nobody in this country would have thought of punishment for him!" replied the spokesman of the murderers, with a rueful smile. "But his brother was the servant of a foreign merchant who put the business into his consul's hands, and so ——" The speaker clicked his thumbnail on his white front teeth, to signify finality.' (From *Oriental Encounters*, by Marmaduke Pickthall.)

Gestures such as that one are independent of spoken words. They may or may not be accompanied by their verbal equivalents (it may be that they have no exact verbal equivalents); in any case they convey their meaning unequivocally. Sign-language forming a part of conversation like this may be called *independent* gesture (it is not, of course, independent of the language-habits of the community).

These independent gestures—a nod of the head, a shrug of the shoulders, *stroko*—stand in a different sort of relation to speech from the *poko* gesture. The latter is an example of *dependent* gesture. Its value in conversation is emotive rather than referential. It is always

accompanied by spoken words. It cannot be translated directly into verbal equivalents, though it seems to be sometimes interchangeable with certain intonation patterns (intonation, incidentally, has been described as 'vocal gesture'). Its implications are often very subtle, and can be expressed in words only with difficulty and at some length. Here, as an illustration, is what a good writer can do in the way of describing dependent gesture: 'I once saw an Italian explaining something to another and tapping his nose a great deal. He became more and more confidential, and the more confidential he became, the more he tapped, till his finger seemed to become glued to, and almost grew into his nose. At last the supreme moment came. He drew the finger down, pressing it closely against his lower lip, so as to drag it all down and show his gums and the roots of his teeth. "There," he seemed to say, "you now know all: consider me as turned inside out: my mucous membrane is before you."' (Samuel Butler, *Alps and Sanctuaries*.)

With dependent gestures, the speaker is probably more or less unconscious of the movements he is making, just as he is unconscious of his intonation. Independent gestures are more conscious: they are dropped when telephoning, for instance, though dependent gestures are likely to be retained, even though they are invisible. Independent gestures are often adopted surprisingly quickly by travellers abroad, but dependent gestures are liable to be carried over into a foreign language, which may be otherwise perfectly learnt. The investigation of dependent gestures involves difficulties of analysis, for with some peoples they form a continuous series of movements, with no apparent breaks, from one end of a spoken sentence to another. (A comparable difficulty, which we know not to be insurmountable, is involved in the analysis of speech, which equally consists of an

unbroken flow of movements of the vocal organs.)

Dependent gestures which are *idiosyncratic*, or peculiar to the individual, must be distinguished from those common to a whole speech community. Idiosyncratic gestures are adopted by nearly every lecturer or preacher, but they are common enough also in the ordinary conversation of many people. For example: 'He had two half-conscious tricks by which people who only met him once remembered him. One was a trick of closing his eyes when he wished to be particularly polite; the other was one of lifting his joined thumb and fore-finger in the air as if holding a pinch of snuff, when he was hesitating or hovering over a word.' (G. K. Chesterton, *Manalive*.) Idiosyncratic gestures are not of very great linguistic interest, but it is worth noting that it is only possible to tell how far they are peculiar to the individual by considering them in the light of the social norm, i.e. the *linguistic* gestures, of the given community.

Idiosyncratic gestures apart, languages differ from each other, preliminary observation seems to show, both in their dependent and in their independent gestures, and, further, in the relative proportion of the two kinds to each other and to the spoken words. What should be the attitude of the language teacher towards these gestural differences? It is clear, from what has been said so far, that our knowledge is still much too limited for anything like definite programmes to be put forward; but it is equally clear that even in the present state of our knowledge gesture should not be ignored. The teacher who is dealing primarily with spoken language must at least ensure that misunderstandings and awkward situations, resulting from lack of gestural knowledge, do not embarrass his pupils when they are mixing with native speakers of the language they are learning. Thus

Greeks learning English must be told to inhibit their gesture of negation, since it will not be comprehensible; and Englishmen learning Greek must be told to inhibit their 'silence' gesture, since it will be insulting.

We need, however, much more information before we can say in detail how gesture should be brought into the teaching of spoken language. One necessary preliminary to further research, for example, would be an international catalogue of independent gestures. But this itself would hardly be possible without some sort of solution, however rough-and-ready, to the problem of physiological, as distinct from functional, classification of gestures: i.e. a classification based on what parts of the body are used to produce them and what movements or postures are involved, as distinct from a classification based on their role in communication. It might turn out to be possible to group gestures in some way analogous to the usual grouping of consonants, which are classified by place and by manner of articulation, though a large number of gestures would have to be isolated for comparison before it became possible to predict the lines such a classification could best follow. At all events, in the absence of established categories of classification, descriptions in words are bound to be laborious and difficult to interpret. In a few cases, perhaps, photographs might give all the information needed, but nearly all gestures contain some element of movement as an essential feature.

This brings us to another necessary preliminary to the comparative study of gesture: the provision of an adequate notation. There are names for a few gestures in many languages, such as, in English, *nod*, *shrug*, *beckon*, *cock a snook*, but these never cover more than a few of the independent gestures, and some other way must be found of referring to them conveniently and

compactly. There are various schemes in existence which might provide a basis for a scientific notation of linguistic gesture. One of the early works of the phonetician Alexander Melville Bell (*Exercises in Expressive Reading*, 1852) contains a 'General Notation of Gesture', designed, however, for the needs of public reciters, and probably not detailed enough for conversational gesture. (Bell took over his notation from one published in 1806 by the Reverend Gilbert Austin, who claimed to be the first to undertake 'to describe gesture by symbols', a claim in which he may very well be justified.) *The Notation of Movement* (1928), by Margaret Morris, was designed for dancing, but has undoubted possibilities for our purposes. A rather different sort of notation was invented by Frank G. Gilbreth, famous as the hero of *Cheaper by the Dozen*. He analysed industrial operations into a limited number of units of movement, which he called 'therbligs'. Each therblig has a symbol allotted to it, and by their means industrial operations can be accurately described and timed. There is a number of other notations in existence in different countries which might provide fruitful suggestions.¹

There are many other points of interest connected with gesture which I have not mentioned. There is, for instance, the speculation that gesture is the original form of language, and that speech, at its inception, was based on it. Henry Sweet, the great English philologist, put this theory forward in 1888. The hand-gestures of primitive man, he thought, were accompanied by 'sympathetic tongue-gestures'. When a cry for attention was added, the tongue-gesture would become audible and the hand-gesture would eventually be dropped as

¹ I had not, when this was written, succeeded in seeing a copy of Ray L. Birdwhistell's *Introduction to Kinesics* (University of Louisville, 1952); it gives a very complete notation for bodily movements.

superfluous, thus giving rise to spoken words. The theory has been developed at great length by Sir Richard Paget and Professor Alexander Johannesson, whose works have made it widely known. It will be noticed that the theory seems to depend on the assumption that gesture is natural. It will be interesting to see if future research brings to light any gesture which is in universal use, and may therefore be presumed to be 'natural'. At present such a discovery looks unlikely.

Future research will also throw light on another interesting point: whether gesture-areas are co-extensive with language-areas. Doubtless they correspond roughly, but there are reasons for thinking that gesture 'dialect' areas may be found within national languages, and also that neighbouring peoples, speaking very different languages, may have a great deal of gesture in common.

It may be said in conclusion that the elaboration of schemes of description and notation, in conjunction with a wide survey of the nature and role of gesture in everyday conversation, needs to be well advanced before the gestural descriptions of individual languages, which are what the language teacher badly needs, can be begun.

