LANGUAGE AND HUMAN NATURE

I

Language is a central area of concern in the twentieth century. This is evident on all sides. First, our century has seen the birth and explosive growth of the science of linguistics. And in a sense 'explosive' is the right word, because like the other sciences of man, linguistics is pursued in a number of mutually irreducible ways, according to mutually contradictory approaches, defended by warring schools. There are structuralists in the Bloomfieldian sense, there are proponents of transformational theories, there are formalists.

These schools and others have made a big impact. They are not just collections of obscure scholars working far from the public gaze. Names like Jakobson and Chomsky are known far outside the bounds of their discipline.

But what is even more striking is the partial hegemony, if one can put it this way, that linguistics has won over other disciplines. From Saussure and the formalists there has developed the whole formidable array of structuralisms, of which Lévi-Strauss is the pathfinder, which seek to explain a whole range of other things: kinship systems, mythologies, fashion (Barthes), the operations of the unconscious (Lacan), with theories drawn in the first place from the study of language. We find terms like 'paradigm', 'syntagm', 'metaphor', 'metonymy', used well beyond their original domain.

And then we have to add that some of the most influential philosophical movements of the century have given language a central place; they have not only been concerned with language as one of the *problems* of philosophy, but have also been *linguistic*, in that philosophical understanding is essentially bound up with the understanding of the medium of language. This is true not only of logical positivism and what is often called 'linguistic analysis' in the Anglo-Saxon world, but also of the philosophy of Heidegger, for instance, in a very different way, as well as

of the philosophies which have arisen out of structuralism, for example those of Derrida and Lacan.

The concern for language as a medium links up with the twentieth-century concern with meaning. What is it that makes speech meaningful, or indeed that makes meaningful any of the things that have meaning? For this question has been raised not just in connection with language, which is what philosophical theories of meaning have been concerned with. It has also been raised acutely for the arts, for instance music and painting. It is necessarily posed by the rise of non-representational painting, and of music which stepped outside the seemingly fixed code of the eight-tone scale. The revolutions of the beginning of the century, for instance, of Schönberg and cubism, put these questions on the agenda; and they have been kept on it by all the revolutions we have seen since. They have taught us to ask the question, What is meaning?, in a broader context than simply that of language. They induce us to see language as one segment of that range of meaningful media that men can deploy. And this range comes to seem all the more problematic.

On top of this, the range of the meaningful has been further extended dramatically by Freudian psychoanalysis. Now not just speech and art objects, but also slips of the tongue, symptoms, affinities and tastes, can be 'analysed', that is, interpreted.

And 'interpretation' itself has become a key term. 'Hermeneutical' approaches have a wide audience in a number of fields, most strikingly in history and social science.

What emerges from this, I believe, is that the twentieth-century concern for language is a concern about meaning. And I believe that this concern reflects a largely inarticulate sense of ourselves which is very widespread in our century, and which I shall try to formulate in two related propositions: (1) that the question of language is somehow strategic for the question of human nature, that man is above all the language animal; (2) that language is very puzzling, even enigmatic – and all the more so, if we take it in a wide sense to include the whole range of meaningful media; something we seem bound to do once we see language as the defining character of man, for man is also characterized by the creation of music, art, dance, by the whole range of 'symbolic forms', to use Cassirer's phrase. The paradox involved in this is that in an age of great scientific advance, and after spectacular progress in so many fields, human language appears to us much more enigmatic than it did to the men of the Enlightenment. But I recognize that this is a controversial point, and that my thumbnail sketch of our sense of our situation will be strongly resisted by

all those who believe or who want to believe in the competence of the methods of natural science to explain human behaviour. Indeed, the trouble with the above sketch is that it is not neutral in one of the big debates of our civilization; so that some will find it banal and others tendentious.

What I ought to attempt now, therefore, is to make it less sketchy for the first group, and less implausible for the second. But this is something I find hard to encompass by a direct assault. What I want to do instead is trace the origins and hence the growing shape of our intellectual landscape. In doing this, I hope to cast enough light on it to achieve my ends by indirection – to allay at least some doubts, and fill in at least some contour.

This will involve weaving together two themes: first, how did we get here? How did we come to see language as central and meaning as puzzling? This is the historical, diachronic theme. The second theme is problematic: what is the problem of meaning, and why is it puzzling?

A word about each to start.

On the first: our traditional view of man was of a rational animal. That is the definition according to the major philosophical tradition of our civilization, going back to the Greeks. How did we slide to the sense that the secret of human nature was to be found in man as a 'language animal' (to use George Steiner's phrase)?

The answer is that the slide was not all that great. If we go back to the original formula in Aristotle, for instance, that man is a rational animal, we find that it reads 'zôon logon echon', which means 'animal possessing logos'. This 'logos' is a word we are already familiar with because it has entered our language in so many ways. It straddles speech and thought, because it means, inter alia, 'word', 'thought', 'reasoning', 'reasoned account', as well as being used for the words deployed in such an account. It incorporates in its range of meanings a sense of the relation of speech and thought.

If we wanted to translate Aristotle's formula directly from the Greek, instead of via the Latin 'animal rationale', and render it 'animal possessing logos', which means in fact leaving it partly untranslated in all its rich polysemy, then we do not have such a leap to make between the traditional formulation of the nature of man and the one that I want to claim underlies much twentieth-century thought and sensibility. There is a shift, but it is one within the complex thought/language, the displacement of its centre of gravity. A shift of this kind in our understanding of thought/language would explain the change from the old formula to the

new. And in fact, I want to claim, there has been such a shift. This is my historical theme.

On the second, problematic theme: what is the problem about meaning? And what is it to find it puzzling – or for that matter, unpuzzling? What questions are we asking, when we are asking about meaning?

We are not asking about meaning in the sense that we may ask about the meaning of life, or in the sense of 'meaning' where we speak of a love or a job being meaningful. This is a related sense, but here we are talking about the significance things have for us in virtue of our goals, aspirations, purposes.

The question I am talking about here is the radical question: how is it that these segments of a medium that we deploy, when we talk, make music, paint, make signals, build symbolic objects, *how is it that these say something*? How is it that we can complete sentences of the form: 'What this means (to say) is ...?' whereas we cannot say this of sticks, stones, stars, mountains, forests – in short, of the things we just find in the world?

Or if we object to this way of putting it, because it seems to rule out one of the great traditional ways of understanding the world, as signs made by God, or embodiments of the Ideas – a view we will look at in a minute – we could equally ask: what is it that we see in things when we understand them as signs which we do not when we fail to apprehend them as such, but just as the furniture of a non-expressive universe?

There are two sides or dimensions of meaningful objects, which can each be taken up as the guiding thread of the answer. The first is what we could call the designative: we could explain a sign or word having meaning by pointing to what it designates, in a broad sense, that is, what it can be used to refer to in the world, and what it can be used to say about that thing. I say 'The book is on the table'; this is meaningful speech, and it is so because 'book' designates a particular kind of object and 'table' another, 'the' can be used to pick out a particular object in some context of reference, and the whole phrase puts together the two referring expressions in such a way as to assert that the designatum of one is placed on the designatum of the other. On this view, we give the meaning of a sign or a word by pointing to the things or relations that they can be used to refer to or talk about.

The second dimension we could call the expressive. The sentence 'The book is on the table' designates a book and a table in a certain relation; but it can be said to express my thought, or my perception, or my belief that the book is on the table. In a wider sense, it might be said to express

my anxiety, if there is something particularly fateful about the book's being on table, or perhaps my relief, if the book were lost.

What is meant by 'expression' here? I think it means roughly this: something is expressed, when it is embodied in such a way as to be made manifest. And 'manifest' must be taken here in a strong sense. Something is manifest when it is directly available for all to see. It is not manifest when there are just signs of its presence, from which we can infer that it is there, such as when I 'see' that you are in your office because of your car being parked outside. In this kind of case, there is an implied contrast with another kind of situation, in which I could see you directly.

Now we consider things expressions when they make things manifest in the stronger sense, one which cannot be contrasted with a more direct manner of presentation, one where things would be there before us 'in person', as it were.

Take the example of facial expressions. If you have an expressive face, I can see your joy and sorrow in your face. There is no inference here; I see your moods and feelings, they are manifest, in the only way they can be manifest in public space. Contrast this with your neighbour, who is very good at hiding his feelings; he has a 'poker face'. But I happen to know of him (because his mother told me) that whenever he feels very angry a muscle twitches just beside his ear. I observe the muscle, and I see that he is angry.

But the muscle twitching does not amount to an angry expression. That is because it is like the case above where I see you are in your office from your car's being outside. In these cases, I infer to something that I am *not* seeing directly. Expressions, by contrast, make our feelings manifest; they put us in the presence of people's feelings.

Expression makes something manifest in embodying it. Of course, a given expression may reveal what it conveys in a partial, or enigmatic, or fragmentary fashion. But these are all manifestations in the above sense, that however imperfect we cannot contrast them with another, more direct, but non-expressive mode of presentation. What expression manifests can *only* be manifested in expression.

Now we can see much of what we say in both the designative and the expressive dimension, as we did with the sentence above. In each dimension we relate the sentence to something different: to the objects it is about, in one; and to the thought it expresses, in the other.

Each may seem to offer the more natural approach to the question of meaning in different contexts. In discussing the meaning of a sentence like 'The book is on the table', we are more naturally inclined to give an

account in designative terms. When we are thinking about a poem, or a piece of music, on the other hand, we more naturally think of its meaning in the expressive dimension. Indeed, with a symphony or a sonata, it is hard to speak of designating. This dimension seems to disappear altogether.

But although each is more natural in a certain context, there seems no reason to see the expressive and the designative as rival modes of explanation wherever they both apply, as in ordinary speech. Rather they seem to answer different questions.

But there is an important dispute in the history of thought over the issue of which of these dimensions is more fundamental in the order of explanation. If 'The book is on the table' expresses my thought to this effect, is this because the words concerned have the designative meanings that they have? If this is so, then the fundamental phenomenon is that of designative meaning. This is what we need to understand in order to get to the root of things. The expressive function of words will be dependent on this.

Or is there something about the expressive function which cannot be so understood? Is there a dimension of expressive meaning which is not simply determined by designative meaning? Are the tables even to be turned, and is expressive meaning in some way primary, providing the foundation or framework in which words can have designative meaning in the first place? If this is true, then the fundamental thing in language is expressive meaning.

These two approaches define very different ways of understanding the question, What is meaning? A long struggle between the two has led up to our present understanding of language. Before turning to look at this history, I would like to say something about the metaphysical motivations of the two types of theory.

Designative theories, those which make designation fundamental, make meaning something relatively unpuzzling, unmysterious. That is a great part of their appeal. The meaning of words or sentences is explained by their relation to things or states of affairs in the world. There need be nothing more mysterious about meaning than there is about these things or states of affairs themselves. Of course, there is the relation of meaning itself, between word and thing, whereby one signifies or points to the other. But this can be made to seem unmysterious enough. At the limit, if talk about signifying makes us nervous, we can just think of this as a set of correlations which have been set up between noises we utter and certain world events or states. At the end of this road, we have behaviourist theories, like that of Skinner (followed by Quine, who has in turn been influential for Davidson).

But if we are not all that metaphysically fastidious, we can simply take the designating relation as primitive and hope to illuminate meaning by tracing the corrrelations between words and things – or, in more contemporary guise, between sentences and their truth conditions.

By contrast, expressive theories maintain some of the mystery surrounding language. Expressive meaning cannot be fully separated from the medium, because it is only manifest in it. The meaning of an expression cannot be explained by its being related to something else, but only by another expression. Consequently, the method of isolating terms and tracing correlations cannot work for expressive meaning. Moreover, our paradigm-expressive objects function as wholes. Take a face or a work of art. We cannot break either down into parts, and show the whole to be simply a function of the parts, if we want to show how it is expressive.

The sense that expression is mysterious can be formulated more exactly. The point is that expressive theories run counter to what is considered one of the fundamental features of scientific thought in the modern age, where designative theories do not. Scientific thought is meant to be objective; and this means it must give an account of the universe not in terms of what we could call subject-related properties, that is, properties that things have in the experience of subjects, and which would not exist if subjects of experience did not exist. The most notorious example of these in seventeenth-century discussion were the secondary properties, and it was an integral part of the great scientific revolution of that time that these were expelled from physics.

Now an expressive account of meaning cannot avoid subject-related properties. Expression is the power of a subject; and expressions *manifest* things, and hence essentially refer us to subjects for whom these things can be manifest. And as I said above, what expression manifests can only be made manifest in expression, so that expressive meaning cannot be accounted for independently of expression. If we make expression fundamental, it seems impossible to explain it in terms of something else; but it is itself a subject-related phenomenon, and hence does not allow of an objective science.

By contrast, a designative theory accounts for meaning by correlating signs to bits of the world, and these can in principle be identified objectively. It offers the promise of a theory of language which can fit within the canons of modern natural science. It is in this sense that they promise to make language unpuzzling and unmysterious.

On this terrain, expressive theories cannot follow.

II

I turn now to the historical account. If we trace the development of these rival theories of meaning, we can see that the pre-occupation with *language* is a modern one. The actual doctrines about language, about words, were rather unimportant and marginal among the ancients. They were not that concerned about speech, they were concerned about thought.

But then how about the insight implicit in the many-meaninged word *logos*? *Logos* meant 'word'; and the root it came from, *legein*, meant 'to say'. What underpinned this connection between saying, words and reason was what one could call a discourse-modelled notion of thought. Thought was seen as like discourse; it revealed things as discourse can do. When we take something which is puzzling and we give an account of it in speech, we lay it out, articulate its different aspects, identify them and relate them. Because thinking was like discourse, we could use the same word, *logos*, for both. Plato says that you do not really know something unless you can give an account of it. Otherwise you have just opinion (*doxa*) and not real knowledge (*epistêmê*). *But* 'give an account' translates *logon didonai*.

The striking fact about the preponderant outlook of the ancients, which was bequeathed to the European Middle Ages, was their view about reality. It too was modelled on discourse-thought. In Plato's version, underlying reality, are the Ideas. Of course, it is we moderns who are tempted to put this by saying that reality was modelled on discourse-thought. For Plato this was no false projection, and we should better say that our discourse and thought ought to be modelled on reality. Reality itself, the ultimate reality of which empirical things are in a sense copies, was Idea; it articulated itself in its aspects which necessarily connected together according to its inner logic. It should be the aim of our thought to limp along after this and try to match it.

Now beside this powerful line-up of an ontic *logos*, or discourse-thought, which was followed by a *logos* in the thinking subject, words did not seem very important. They were the mere external clothing of thought. They could not aspire to more, not human words, for clearly they were not necessary to the ontic *logos*. So language plays a small and marginal role in the theories of the ancients.

But a powerful theory of meaning is in embryo here. The ancient view develops through several stages, notably through neo-Platonism, and then through the thought of the early Fathers, which owes so much to neo-Platonism: St Augustine in the West, and the Greek Fathers in the East.

In this amalgam of Christian theology and Greek philosophy, a notion is

developed that Plato first adumbrated in the *Timaeus*. God in creating the world gives embodiment to his ideas. The Platonic Ideas are the thoughts of God.

And so we get an obvious analogy, which St Augustine makes explicit. Just as our thought is clothed externally in our words, so is the thought of God, the *Logos* – the *Verbum*, for Augustine – deployed externally in the creation. This is, as it were, God's speech. That is why everything is a sign, if we can see it properly.

So the paradigm and model of our deploying signs is God's creation. But now God's creation is to be understood expressively. His creatures manifest his *logos* in embodying it; and they manifest the *logos* as fully as it can be manifest in the creaturely medium. There can be no more fundamental designative relation, precisely because everything is a sign. This notion is nonsense on a designative view. For words can only have designative meaning if there is something else, other than words or signs, which they designate. The notion that everything is a sign only makes sense on an expressive view.

So what we have in Augustine and his successors is an expressive theory of meaning embedded in their ontology. The originator of meaning, God, is an expressivist. This sets the framework for the theories of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, what one could call the semiological ontologies, which pictured the world as a meaningful order, or a text. This kind of view of the world is dominant right up to the seventeenth century, when it was pulverized in the scientific revolution.

It was a view of this kind which understood the universe in terms of a series of correspondences, linking for instance the lion in the kingdom of animals, the eagle among birds, and the king in his realm, or linking the stars in the heavens to the shape of the human frame, or linking certain beasts and plants to certain planets. In all these cases, what is at stake is an expressive relation. These terms are linked because they embody/manifest the same ideas. To view the universe as a meaningful order is to see the world as shaped in each of its domains and levels in order to embody the ideas.

We have here a very powerful expressive theory of meaning, a theory of the divine language. But all this is compatible with the relative unimportance of human words. Indeed, it rather requires their taking marginal status; because the real thought, that of God or the Ideas, is quite independent of human expression. The theory of language is still in its infancy.

It was the rebellion against this semiological view of the universe, in nominalism, which began to make *language* important.

Medieval nominalism rejected the discourse-thought model of the real. It denied that there are real essences of things, or universals. True, we think in general terms. But this is not because the world exists in general terms, as it were; on the contrary, everything that is is a particular. The universal is not a feature of the world, but an effect of our language. We apply words to classes of objects, which we thus gather into units; that is what makes general terms.

Now this theory gives language a crucial role. The word is that whereby we group things into classes. It is the new home of the universal, which has been chased out of the real. But in giving language a role this view propounds a purely designative theory of what this role amounts to. It generates a thoroughly designative theory of meaning.

It does so, first, in rejecting the expressive theory of the cosmos, in refusing to see the things which surround us as embodiments of the Ideas; and secondly, in seeing words as acquiring meaning only in being used as names for things. Words mean because they designate something. So we cease to see everything which exists as a sign. The only signs are those which are recognized as such, and they are signs because they signify something.

This theory of language came into its own in the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, which we associate with such names as Descartes, Bacon and Hobbes. This revolution involved a polemical rejection of the vision of the world as meaningful order, and its replacement by a conception of the world as objective process, in the sense of 'objective' described above. The thoroughly designative theory of meaning was one of its main pillars.

The philosophies of the seventeenth century remade our conceptions of man, thought and knowledge to fit the new dispensation. The very notion of what thought is changes. Once we no longer think of discourse-thought as part of the furniture of the real, then we focus on our subjective thinking as a process in its own right.

It is the process by which we are aware of things. How can this be? Once discourse has lost its ontic status, it is not so much the discursive dimension in thought which seems to account for this, but rather its representative dimension. Once we focus on thought as a process going on only in our minds, and we ask how can we know about things in thought, the obvious answer seems to be that thought in some way mirrors or represents things.

And so we get the new conception of thought as made up of ideas, of little units of representation, rather like inner ghostly snapshots. This is

the famous 'way of ideas', inaugurated by Descartes and taken up by his successors both rationalist and empiricist, and which dominates psychology and epistemology for the next two centuries. As the writers of the Port Royal *Logique* put it: 'nous ne pouvons avoir aucune connoissance de ce qui est hors de nous que par l'entremise des idées qui sont en nous'.[1] And they conclude from this that these ideas themselves must be the focus of our study. Thought as a kind of inner incorporeal medium becomes of central interest.

But it is through our ideas that we know what is outside. How do we do this? No longer by grasping the forms of the real, for there are none such. Rather knowing things outside means grasping how things are put together. And this means that we put them together in idea as they are in reality.

So the method of thought becomes the famous resolutive-compositive one. We break things in our ideas down into their component elements, and then we put them together in idea as they are in reality. That is what understanding is, for Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes. As Hobbes puts it in *De Cive* (II.14):

for everything is best understood by its constitutive causes. For as in a watch, or some such small engine, the matter, figure and motion of the wheels cannot be well known, except it be taken insunder and viewed in its parts; so as to make a more curious search into the rights of states and duties of subjects, it is necessary, I say, not to take them insunder, but yet that they be so considered as if they were dissolved ...

This means, of course, that our thought too must be broken down into its component bits. These bits are the ideas of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistemology.

So what is thinking? It is assembling ideas, properly the assembling of clear and distinct ideas, and according to the way components of the world are assembled. Thinking is mental discourse, to use Hobbes' term; where this is no longer the articulating and making evident of the ancients, but a kind of inner disassembly and reassembly.

But if thinking is mental discourse, what is the role of language? Sometimes it seems, in reading the writings of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers, that its role is as much negative as positive, that words can mislead us and take our attention away from the ideas. Language is seen by them as the great seducer, tempting us to be satisfied with mere words, instead of focussing on the ideas they designate.

[1] Antoine Arnaud and Pierre Nicole, *La Logique ou l'art de penser* (Paris, 1970), p. 63.

But no one held the view that we should try to do without language altogether. This was evidently impossible. For any relatively complex or long drawn-out thought we plainly need words; all thinkers concur in this. And indeed, this is not only intuitively evident, it is implicit in their nominalistic starting point. It is through words that we marshal our ideas, that we group them in one way rather than another. Words allow us to deal with things in generalities, and not one by one.

And this is the role which this age assigns to language. It is through words that we marshal our ideas, not painstakingly, one by one, in which case we would not get very far in constructing an understanding of the world, and would lose through forgetfulness as fast as we gained through insight; rather we marshal them in groups and classes. This is Hobbes' doctrine when he likens reasoning to reckoning; where we get our global result by casting up a number of partial sums, and not simply counting one by one. Condillac in the next century has basically the same idea when he says that language gives us 'empire sur notre imagination'.

From this role of language we can see why words are so dangerous. If we use them to marshal ideas, they must be transparent. We must be able to see clearly what the word designates. Otherwise where we think we are assembling our ideas to match the real, we will in fact be building castles of illusion, or composing absurdities. Our instruments will have taken over, and instead of controlling we shall be controlled.

Language for the theory of these centuries is an instrument of *control* in the assemblage of ideas which is thought or mental discourse. It is an instrument of control in gaining knowledge of the world as objective process. And so it must itself be perfectly transparent; it cannot itself be the locus of mystery, that is, of anything which might be irreducible to objectivity. The meanings of words can only consist in the ideas (or things) they designate. The setting up of a designative connection is what gives a word meaning. We set these up in definitions, and that is why thinkers of this period constantly, almost obsessionally, stress the importance of recurring to definitions, of checking always to see that our words are well-defined, that we use them consistently.

The alternative is to lose control, to slip into a kind of slavery; where it is no longer I who make my lexicon, by definitional fiat, but rather it takes shape independently and in doing this shapes my thought. It is an alienation of my freedom as well as the great source of illusion; and that is why the men of this age combated the cosmos of meaningful order with such determination.

As Locke puts it, 'every man has so inviolable a liberty to make words

stand for what ideas he pleases'.[2] Even the great Augustus has no power over my lexicon.

III

The seventeenth-century revolution which in a way did so much to establish our modern modes of thought gave us a thoroughly, polemically, designative theory of meaning. This was challenged in the late eighteenth century by a climate of thought and feeling which is loosely called Romanticism. This term is certainly loose, because it is stretched to include many people, Goethe for instance, who did not define themselves as Romantics and who were not Romantics in any exact sense. But it is a handy label, and I want to go on using it here.

One of the founding texts of this expressivist reaction is Herder's *On the Origin of Language* (1772). (Herder himself was not properly speaking a Romantic; but one of the originators of the *Sturm und Drang*.) In an important passage of this work, Herder turns to consider one of the typical origin stories of eighteenth-century designative theory, that of Condillac in his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*.[3] It is a fable of two children in the desert, who come to invent language. We assume certain cries and gestures as natural expressions of feeling. Condillac argues that each, seeing the other, say, cry out in distress, would come to see the cry as a sign of something (e.g., what causes distress), and would come to use it to refer. The children would thus have their first word. Their lexicon would then increase slowly, item by item.

Herder rebels against this whole conception. For, as he says, it presupposes just what we want to explain. It takes the relation of signifying for granted, as something the children already grasp, or that can unproblematically occur to them ('ils parvinrent insensiblement à faire, avec réflexion, ce qu'ils n'avoient fait que par instinct' (para. 3)). Condillac, says Herder, presupposes 'das ganze Ding Sprache schon vor der ersten Seite seines Buches erfunden'. His explanation amounts to saying, 'es enstanden Worte, weil Worte da waren, ehe sie da waren'.[4]

The problem is that Condillac presupposes that his children already understand what it is for a word to stand for something, what it is therefore to talk about something with a word. But *that* is just the mysterious thing. Anyone can be taught the meaning of a word, or even guess at

[2] *Essay* III. ii. 8.   [3] Part II, sect. I, chap. I.

[4] *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in J. G. Herder, *Sprachphilosophie* (Hamburg, 1960), pp. 12, 13.

it, or even invent one, once they have language. But what is this capacity which we have and animals do not to endow sounds with meaning, to grasp them as referring to, as used to talk about things?

Let us look at this. I have the word 'triangle' in my lexicon. This means that I can recognize things as triangles, identify them, pick them out as such. I can say, for example, 'This is a triangle.' But what does this capacity amount to? Let us see by comparing it with an analogous animal capacity. I might train an animal (a rat), to react differentially, say, to go through a door which had a triangle painted on it, as against one which had a circle. So my rat would be in a sense recognizing a triangle.

But there is a crucial difference: the rat in a sense recognizes the triangle, because he reacts to it. But the human language-user recognizes that this is a triangle, he recognizes that 'triangle' is the right word to use here; that this is the right description. This capacity to recognize that X is the right description is essentially invoked in our capacity to use language. Of course, we are not usually reflecting as we talk that the words we use are the appropriate ones; but the implicit claim in speaking language is that they are appropriate; and we can all understand the challenge that someone might make at any point: 'Is X the right word?', or 'Do you really mean X?' And we would all be able to give some kind of reply.

So only beings who can describe things as triangles can be said to recognize them as triangles, at least in the strong sense. They do not just react to triangles, but recognize them as such. Beings who can do this are conscious of the things they experience in a fuller way. They are more reflectively aware, we might say.

And this is Herder's point. To learn a word, to grasp that 'triangle' stands for triangles, is to be capable of this reflective awareness. That is what needs to be explained. To account for language by saying that we learn that the word 'a' stands for a's, the word 'b' for b's, is to explain nothing. How do we learn what 'standing for' involves, what it is to describe things, briefly, to acquire the reflective awareness of the language user?

Herder uses the term 'reflection' (*Besonnenheit*) for this awareness. And his point against Condillac is that this kind of reflection is inseparable from language. It cannot precede our learning our first word, which is what Condillac implicitly assumes. This is because only someone capable of using language to describe is capable of picking things out as — or recognizing things as —, in the strong sense.

But this means that language is not just a set of words which designate

things; it is the vehicle of this kind of reflective awareness. This reflection is a capacity we only realize in speech. Speaking is not only the expression of this capacity, but also its realization.

But then the expressive dimension of language becomes fundamental again. In order for given words to mean something, to designate their respective objects, we have to be able to speak, that is, give expression to this reflective awareness, because it is only through this expression, through speech, that this reflective awareness comes about. A being who cannot speak cannot have it. We only have it, in contrast to animals, in that we talk about things. Expression realizes, and is therefore fundamental.

This is once again an expressive theory. But this time it is an expressive theory of language, rather than an expressive theory of the cosmos. On the traditional view, creation expresses the ideas of God; but these exist before/outside creation. The new expressive theory of human language that we find in Herder is, by contrast, constitutive; that is, reflective consciousness only comes to exist in its expression. The expressive dimension is fundamental to language, because it is only in expression that language comes to be.

The theorists of the Romantic period were, of course, very influenced by the earlier expressivism of the cosmos, as we might call it. We could say that in a sense they transposed what belongs to God on this older theory on to man. For man like God embodies his ideas and makes them manifest. But unlike God, man needs his expression in order to make his ideas manifest to himself. Which is another way of saying that his ideas do not properly exist before their expression in language or some other of the range of media men deploy. That is what is meant by saying that language, or expression in general, is constitutive of thought.

In this connection, it is no accident that the Romantic period sees a revolution in our conception of art. The traditional view understood art in terms of mimesis. Art imitates the real. It may select, imitate only the best, or what conforms to the ideas, but basically what it attempts to do is hold the mirror up to nature. The Romantics gave us a quite different conception, by which, in one formulation, the artist strives to imitate not nature, but the author of nature. Art is now seen not as imitation, but as creative expression. The work of art does not refer beyond itself to what it imitates; rather it manifests something; it is itself the locus in which the meaning becomes manifest. It should be a symbol, rather than an allegory, to recur to the distinction which the men of that generation often invoked.

As Herder put it: 'the artist is become a creator God'.[5] The artist creates in his work, as it were, a miniature universe, a whole which has its goal in itself, and does not refer beyond to anything else. Novalis makes the comparison with the divine creation in these terms: 'artistic creation is thus as much an end in itself as the divine creation of the universe, and one is as original and as grounded on itself as the other: because the two are one, and God reveals himself in the poet as he gives himself corporeal form in the visible universe'.

But to return to the theory of language. We see that language is no longer an assemblage of words, but the capacity to speak (express/realize) the reflective awareness implicit in using words to say something. Learning to use any single word presupposes this general capacity as background. But to have the general capacity is to possess a language. So that it seems that we need the whole of language as the background for the introduction of any of its parts, that is, individual words.

This may seem to pose insuperable obstacles for any account of the acquisition of language; and indeed, Herder in spite of the title of his work (*Ueber den Ursprung der Sprache*) ducks the issue altogether. But it does point to a feature of language which seems undeniable, its holism. One might say that language as a whole is presupposed in any one of its parts.

Herder again is the one who formulated this insight. It is ultimately implicit in the point above, that to use a word to describe is to identify something as —. When I say 'This is a triangle', I recognize it as a triangle. But to be able to recognize something as a triangle is to be able to recognize other things as non-triangles. For the notion 'triangle' to have a sense for me, there must be something(s) with which it contrasts; I must have some notion of other kinds of figures, that is, be able to recognize other kinds of figure for the kinds they are. 'Triangle' has to contrast in my lexicon with other figure terms. Indeed, a word only has the meaning it does in our lexicon because of what it contrasts with. What would 'red' mean if we had no other colour terms? How would our colour terms change if some of our present ones dropped out?

But in addition, to recognize something as a triangle is to focus on this property; it is to pick it out by its shape, and not by its size, colour, what it is made of, its smell, aesthetic properties, and so on. Here again some kind of contrast is necessary, a contrast of property dimensions. For to say of

[5] Quoted in T. Todorov, *Théories du symbole* (Paris, 1977), p. 185.

something 'This is a triangle' is to apply this word as the *right* word, the appropriate descriptive term. But someone could not be applying a word as the right word and have no sense whatever of what made it the right word, did not even grasp for instance that something was a triangle in virtue of its shape, and not its size or colour.

So it appears that a word like 'triangle' could not figure in our lexicon alone. It has to be surrounded by a skein of other terms, some which contrast with it, and some which situate it, as it were, give its property dimension, not to speak of the wider matrix of language in which the various activities are situated in which our talk of triangles figures: measurement, geometry, design-creation, and so on.

The word only makes sense in this skein, in what Humboldt (who followed and developed Herder's thoughts on language) called the web (*Gewebe*) of language. In touching one part of language (a word), the whole is present.[6]

This expressive doctrine thus presents us with a very different picture of language from the empiricist one. Language is not an assemblage of separable instruments, which lie as it were transparently to hand, and which can be used to marshal ideas, this use being something we can fully control and oversee. Rather it is something in the nature of a web, and to complicate the image, is present as a whole in any one of its parts. To speak is to touch a bit of the web, and this is to make the whole resonate. Because the words we use now only have sense through their place in the whole web, we can never in principle have a clear oversight of the implications of what we say at any moment. Our language is always more than we can encompass; it is in a sense inexhaustible. The aspiration to be in no degree at all a prisoner of language, so dear to Hobbes and Locke, is in principle unrealizable.

But at the same time, we need to connect this with another feature of language on this scheme which Humboldt also brought to the fore. What is crucial to language is what is realized in speech, the expression/realization of reflection. Language is not, once again, a set of instruments: words which have been attached to meanings; what is essential to it is the activity in which by speaking words we pick things out as — (among other

[6] Another very persuasive argument is the famous one in Wittgenstein's *Investigations* i.258ff, dealing with sensation E. If you try to give the name 'E' to an inner sensation, and avoid saying anything else about it, not even that it is a sensation, then you find yourself just wanting to make an inarticulate noise. For in saying nothing else, you deprive 'E' of the status of a word. You cannot know what you are saying. Cf. also his arguments against private ostensive definition; *Investigations* i.29.

things, as we shall see). The capacity which language represents is realized in speech.

As Humboldt puts it, we have to think of language as speech, and this as activity, not realized work; as *energeia*, not *ergon*.

But if the language capacity comes to be in speech, then it is open to being continuously recreated in speech, continually extended, altered, reshaped. And this is what is constantly happening. Men are constantly shaping language, straining the limits of expression, minting new terms, displacing old ones, giving language a changed gamut of meanings.

But this activity has to be seen against the background of the earlier point about language as a whole. The new coinages are never quite autonomous, quite uncontrolled by the rest of language. They can only be introduced and make sense because they already have a place within the web, which must at any moment be taken as given over by far the greater part of its extent. Human speakers resemble the sailors in Neurath's image of the philosopher, who have to remake their ship in the open sea, and cannot build it from the base in a dry-dock.

What then does language come to be on this view? A pattern of activity, by which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world, that of reflective awareness, but a pattern which can only be deployed against a background which we can never fully dominate; and yet a background that we are never fully dominated by, because we are constantly reshaping it. Reshaping it without dominating it, or being able to oversee it, means that we never fully know what we are doing to it; we develop language without knowing fully what we are making it into.

From another angle: the background web is only there in that we speak. But because we cannot oversee it, let alone shape it all, our activity in speaking is never entirely under our conscious control. Conscious speech is like the tip of an iceberg. Much of what is going on in shaping our activity is not in our purview. Our deployment of language reposes on much that is preconscious and unconcious.

So the expressive view yields us a much broader and deeper conception of language. It is an utterly different phenomenon than the assemblage of designative terms which empiricism gave us. But the implicit extensions go further. The designative theory sees language as a set of designators, words we use to talk about things. There is an implicit restriction of the activities of language. Language primarily serves to describe the world (although designative terms can also be given extended uses for questioning and giving commands).

The expressive theory opens a new dimension. If language serves to

express/realize a new kind of awareness; then it may not only make possible a new awareness of things, an ability to describe them; but also new ways of feeling, of responding to things. If in expressing our thoughts about things, we can come to have new thoughts; then in expressing our feelings, we can come to have transformed feelings.

This quite transforms the eighteenth-century view of the expressive function of language. Condillac and others conjectured that at the origin of language was the expressive cry, the expression of anger, fear, or some emotion; this later could acquire designative meaning and serve as a word. But the notion here was that expression was of already existing feelings, which were unaltered in being expressed.

The revolutionary idea of expressivism was that the development of new modes of expression enables us to have new feelings, more powerful or more refined, and certainly more self-aware. In being able to express our feelings, we give them a reflective dimension which transforms them. The language user can feel not only anger but indignation, not only love but admiration.

Seen from this angle, language cannot be confined to the activity of talking about things. We transform our emotions into human ones not primarily in talking about them, but in expressing them. Language also serves to express/realize ways of feeling without talking about them. We often give expression to our feelings in talking about something else. (For example, indignation is expressed in condemnation of the unjust actions, admiration in praise of the remarkable traits.)

From this perspective, we cannot draw a boundary around the language of prose in the narrow sense, and divide it off from those other symbolic-expressive creations of man: poetry, music, art, dance, etc. If we think of language as essentially used to say something *about* something, then prose is indeed in a category of its own. But once one takes language as being expressive in this way, that is, where the expression constitutes what it expresses, then talking *about* is just one of the provinces constituted by language; the constitution of human emotion is another, and in this some uses of prose are akin to some uses of poetry, music and art.

In the Romantic period, there was a tendency to see this constituting of the human emotions as the most important function of language in a broad sense. Language realizes man's humanity. Man completes himself in expression. It was natural in such a context to exalt art above other forms of expression, above the development of merely descriptive language; or at least to give it equal weight and dignity. It was then that art

began to replace religion for many as the centrally important dimension of human life – which it remains for many today.

But the expressive view not only transformed and extended the conception of the uses of language. It also transformed the conception of the subject of language. If language must be primarily seen as an activity – it is what is constantly created and recreated in speech – then it becomes relevant to note that the primary locus of speech is in conversation. Men speak together, to each other. Language is fashioned and grows not principally in monologue, but in dialogue, or better, in the life of the speech community.

Hence Herder's notion that the primary locus of a language was the *Volk* which carried it. Humboldt takes up the same insight. Language is shaped by speech, and so can only grow up in a speech community. The language I speak, the web which I can never fully dominate and oversee, can never be just *my* language, it is always largely *our* language.

This opens up another field of the constitutive functions of language. Speech also serves to express/constitute different relations in which we may stand to each other: intimate, formal, official, casual, joking, serious, and so on. From this point of view, we can see that it is not just the speech community which shapes and creates language, but language which constitutes and sustains the speech community.

IV

If we attempt to gather all this together, we can see that the expressive conception gives a view of language as a range of activities in which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world. And this way of being has many facets. It is not just the reflective awareness by which we recognize things as —, and describe our surroundings; but also that by which we come to have the properly human emotions, and constitute our human relations, including those of the language community within which language grows. The range of activity is not confined to language in the narrow sense, but rather encompasses the whole gamut of symbolic expressive capacities in which language, narrowly construed, is seen to take its place. This activity, even as regards the production of normal prose about the world, is one which we can never bring under conscious control or oversight in its entirety; even less can we aspire to such oversight of the whole range.

If we now look back over the route we have been travelling, we see how language has become central to our understanding of man. For if we hold

on to the intuition that man is the rational animal, the animal possessing logos or discourse-thought, at least in that we concur that this has something to do with what distinguishes us from other animals, then the effect of the expressive doctrine is to make us see the locus of our humanity in the power of expression by which we constitute language in the broadest sense, that is, the range of symbolic forms. For it is these which make thought possible. It is this range of expressions which constitute what we know as logos.

The whole development, through the seventeenth-century designative theory and the Romantic expressive view, has brought language more and more to centre stage in our understanding of man; first as an instrument of the typically human capacity of thinking, and then as the indispensable medium without which our typically human capacities, emotions, relations would not be.

If we follow the expressive view, then we have to come to understand this medium, and the extraordinary range of activities which constitute it, if we are ever to hope to understand ourselves. What I want to suggest is that we have all in fact become followers of the expressive view; not that we accept the detail of the various Romantic theories, but in that we have all been profoundly marked by this way of understanding thought and language, which has had a major impact on our civilization. I would venture to claim that even those who would want to reject expressive theories as metaphysical rubbish and obfuscatory mystification are nevertheless deeply affected by this outlook.

I want to make at least a feeble attempt briefly to defend this outrageous claim. My point now is that the profound influence of the expressive view in modern culture is what underlies our fascination for language, our making it such a central question of twentieth-century thought and study.

This would also explain why language is more enigmatic to us than to previous ages – admittedly another highly controversial claim. For on the expressive view, language is no longer merely the external clothing of thought, nor a simple instrument which ought in principle to be fully in our control and oversight. It is more like a medium in which we are plunged, and which we cannot fully plumb. The difficulty is compounded in that it is not just the medium in virtue of which we can describe the world, but also that in virtue of which we are capable of the human emotions and of standing in specifically human relations to each other. And flowing from this the capacity we want to understand is not just that by which we produce prose about the things which surround us, but also

those by which we make poetry, music, art, dance, and so on, even in the end those by which we have such a thing as personal style.

This means that the phenomenon of language becomes much broader as well as deeper when we move from a designative to an expressive perspective. We are tempted to ask what this range of capacities have in common. And even if we have been taught by Wittgenstein to resist this temptation, the question cannot but arise of how they hold together as a 'package'. For this they seem to do. It is not an accident that the only speaking animal is also the one who dances, makes music, paints, and so on. Finding the centre of gravity of this range is a much more difficult and baffling question than tracing how words designate, that is, until we come to see that the latter question leads us back to the former.

But this is what the expressive understanding of language puts on our agenda; that we find this centre of gravity, or, in other terms, come to some insight about this extraordinary capacity we have for expression.

Or we can get to the heart of the same issues in another way, if we ask what is the characteristic excellence of expression. On the designative view, this was clear. Language was an instrument. It was at its best when it best served its purpose, when the terms designated clearly distinct ideas, and we maintained their definitions clearly before us in our reasoning. On this understanding language was an all-purpose tool of thought. But for the expressivist, it is an activity which constitutes a specific way of being in the world, which Herder referred to as 'reflection', but which it is hard to find a word for just because we are so baffled to define what I called its centre of gravity.

Another way of asking what this centre of gravity is is to ask when this way of being is at its best, its fullest, in other words, what constitutes its excellence. When are our expressive powers most fully realized? We can no longer assume that just attaining maximum clarity about the things we describe and explain constitutes perfection.

But to know what it is to realize our expressive powers to the fullest must be to know something about the characteristic perfection of man, on the premises of the expressive understanding; and so this question must come on our agenda.

Again, the question of what expression is can arise in another way, We try to understand how expression can *arise*, how a new medium of thought or understanding can come to be through expression. And since we cannot study the genesis of language in human life, our question takes the form of asking when we come close now to forging new modes of

expression; what happens when we extend our capacity for expression? How does this come about?

For a variety of reasons, many contemporaries have thought it plausible that it is in artistic creation that we come closest to understanding this, to understand the mystery of original expression; and this is one of the reasons why art is so central to our self-understanding.

But the baffling nature of language extends to more than the nature of expression. It also touches the question, who expresses? We saw above that language for the Romantics could not be seen as the creation of the individual. And indeed, it is hard to fault them on this. We are all inducted into language by an existing language community. We learn to talk not only in that the words are given to us by our parents and others, but also in that they talk to us, and hence give us the status of interlocutors. This is what is involved in the centrally important fact that we are given a name. In being given a name we are made into beings that one addresses, and we are inducted into the community whose speaking continually remakes the language. As interlocutors, we learn to say 'I' of ourselves, one of the key stages in our becoming language users.

Language originally comes to us from others, from a community. But how much does it remain an activity essentially bound to a community? Once I learn language can I just continue to use it, even extend it, quite monologically, talking and writing only for myself? Once again, the designative view tends to make us see this as perfectly possible. My lexicon is under *my* control. And common sense tends to side here at first sight with the designative view. Surely, I very often do talk to myself, I can even invent private names for people, and why not also private terms for objects which surround me?

Of course, I can invent private terms. But the question is whether my speech does not always remain that of an interlocutor in a speech community in an essential way. We might ask whether my conception of what it makes sense to say, of how things may be perspicuously described, of how things can be illuminatingly classified, of how my feelings can be adequately expressed, whether all these are not profoundly shaped by a potential terrain of intersubjective agreement and full communication. I may break away now from my interlocutors, and adopt quite another mode of expression, but is it not always in view of a fuller, more profound and authentic communication, which provides the criterion for what I now recognize as an adequate expression?

So the question remains open as to whether the subject of speech is not always in some sense, and on some level, a speech community.

Another related question concerns the place of the subject in expression. It is in a sense the question, What is expressed? or, What comes to expression? Of course, our developing language, in so far as it is descriptive language, responds to the shape of things around us. But we have seen that there is another dimension to language, that by which its development shapes our emotions and relations. Expression shapes our human lives. The question is, what is it that, in coming to expression, so shapes our lives as human?

For the expressivists of the late eighteenth century and the Romantic period, the answer was quite unproblematical. Expression was self-expression. What comes to full expression are my desires, my aspirations, my moral sentiments. What comes to light in the full development of expressive power is precisely that what was striving for expression all along was the self. This may not have been so in the earlier ages of human history, when men were prone to see themselves simply as immersed in a larger cosmos and not also as centres of autonomous will and desire. But as it comes to greater self-clarity expression comes to be recognized as self-expression.

But the basic expressivist insights might also suggest another account. What comes about through the development of language in the broadest sense is the coming to be of expressive power, the power to make things manifest. It is not unambiguously clear that this ought to be considered as a self-expression/realization. What is made manifest is not exclusively, not even mainly, the self, but a world. Why think here primarily in terms of self-expression?

Now the expressivists of the Romantic period did not really need to pose this question, because in a sense they could accept both answers at once. They could do so, because of the notion, common in the Romantic period, of God as a kind of cosmic subject, of which we finite subjects are in a sense emanations. This view, which hovers on the brink of pantheism, allows us to see what we make manifest in our language both as our own and as God's, since God lives in us. We express both ourselves, and a larger reality of which we are a part.

With the receding of this too indulgent pantheism (as it must appear to us), we are left with the choice. Is the expression which makes us human essentially a self-expression, in that we are mainly responding to our way of feeling/experiencing the world, and bringing this to expression? Or are we responding to the reality in which we are set, in which we are included of course, but which is not reducible to our experience of it?

The common sense of our society takes perhaps too easily the position

of the Romantics, without even the excuse of their pantheistic justification. It assumes that in our paradigm-expressive activities, for instance, in artistic creation, we are expressing ourselves, our feelings and reactions. But this answer is also challenged. Some contemporaries would argue that our most expressive creations, hence those where we are closest to deploying our expressive power at the fullest, are not self-expressions; that they rather have the power to move us because they manifest our expressive power itself and its relation to our world. In this kind of expression, we are responding to the way things are, rather than just exteriorizing our feelings.

Heidegger springs to mind in this connection. Something like this view may lie behind this passage, quoted from *Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch*:

Man behaves as if he were the creator and master of language, whereas on the contrary, it is language which is and remains his sovereign ... For in the proper sense of these terms, it is language which speaks. Man speaks insofar as he replies to language by listening to what it says to him. Language makes us a sign and it is language which first and last conducts us in this way towards the being of a thing.[7]

On this view what we strive to bring to expression is not primarily the self. Expressivism here becomes radically anti-subjectivist. And of course, this issue raises from another angle the one mentioned above, about the characteristic excellence of expression, and hence of man.

These questions are all difficult and deep. I mean by that latter term not only that they touch fundamental questions about ourselves, but that they are baffling and very difficult to formulate, let alone find a clear strategy to investigate. But they are among the questions which the expressive view puts on our agenda. My hypothesis is that we are fascinated and baffled by language in part because we are heirs of this outlook.

But I must face the objection which must have been urging itself forward all this time: surely I cannot be claiming that we all accept the main doctrines of the expressive view of language, that there are no more designativists, or even more implausibly, that there are no more proponents of objectifying science? Of course, I agree, that would be absurd. The stock of objectifying science is as high as ever. The virtually inarticulate belief that only an objective account is a truly satisfactory one has invaded the sciences of man, has shaped the procedures of widely practised academic disciplines, like psychology, sociology, political science, much of linguistics. Moreover one of the underlying motives of

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[7] *Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch*, in Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, part II (Pfullingen, n.d.), p. 64.

an objective account that we saw with the seventeenth-century designative theory, that it seems to promise control over the domain under study, is as forcefully operative today as then; indeed, more so.

But in spite of this, I want to maintain my claim that the expressivist reasons for bafflement are to some extent shared by all of us. I should like to offer two grounds for this.

The first is that much of the Romantic view of language has come to be generally accepted by both metaphysical camps, objectivists and their opponents. We now see language capacity as residing in the possession of an interconnected lexicon, only one part of which is used at any time. We see that the individual term is defined in relation to the others. Ferdinand de Saussure made this point at the beginning of the century, and it is now common property.

At the same time we recognize the central importance of speech activity for language. Language as a code (Saussure's *langue*) can be seen as a kind of precipitate of speech (Saussure's *parole*). Speech activity itself is complex: the declarative sentence is not just the result of concatenating words with their attached meanings. It involves doing different things, picking out an object of reference, and saying something about this object. These different functions and their combination in the declarative utterance determine to a significant degree the kind of language we have. But on top of this we also recognize that speech activity goes well beyond the declarative utterance, and includes questions, orders, prayers, etc.

We are also ready to recognize that this activity involves mechanisms of which we are not fully aware and which we do not fully control. We do not find strange a thesis like Chomsky's, that our grasp of grammaticality involves the application of transformations of which we are not consciously aware, relating a depth structure to a surface structure. We accept without too much demur that there may well be a 'depth structure' to our language activity.

And we are perhaps even ready to agree that the language which is evolved through this speech activity is the language of a community and not just of an individual, in other words, that the crucial speech activities are those of the community. We may not be entirely sure what this means, but we have a sense that in some meaning it contains an important truth.

Of course, this does not mean that everyone has become an expressivist. We are not in any sense forced to abandon the metaphysical stance in favour of objective accounts. But what we now have to do is apply them in a new way. We see language as a whole, as an activity with – potentially at least – a depth structure. The task is now to give an objective account of

this depth structure and its operation, which underlies the activity of language we observe. This is now the agenda.

In this the science of language is simply one example of a global shift in the objectivistic sciences of man since the eighteenth century. The shift is away from a set of theories in terms of 'surface' or observable realities, principally the contents of the mind available to introspection, in favour of theories in terms of 'deep' or unobservable mechanisms or structures. The shift is one aspect of the virtually total disappearance of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century 'way of ideas', the attempt to understand the mind in terms of its introspectable contents, the science that came to be called 'ideology' at the moment when it had passed its peak.

This was grounded in the view, common to Descartes and his empiricist critics, that the contents of the mind were in principle open to transparent inspection by the subject himself. Thinking was, as we saw, 'mental discourse', which ought to be entirely self-possessed and self-transparent. This view seems very implausible today, where the importance of unconscious structures and processes in thought seems very plausible, indeed, close to undeniable.

But the scientific goals and norms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries easily survived the demise of the 'way of ideas'. In place of the 'surface' psychologies of the past, we now have explanation by-passing consciousness; in some cases by ignoring the psychological altogether, and explaining behaviour in terms of stimulus and response; or else in terms of a depth theory which is physiological; in others by what remains a 'psychological' theory but one drawing heavily on mechanisms unavailable to consciousness, such as Freudian psychoanalysis, or computer-modelled theories of our intelligent performances. In place of 'surface' sociologies, based on the adjustment of conscious interests, or the existence or absence of individual habits of mind, we have theories of social structure, in which individuals are caught up in a dynamic which they do not and perhaps cannot understand; where the explanation is at the level of the social whole, and of properties of this whole which are not evident to the participants. These follow the laws or obey the constraints of historical materialism or structural-functionalism.

Now in many of these cases, for example, Freud, Marx, structural-functionalism, the depth structures elaborated obviously owe a lot to earlier Romantic theorizing. But the fact remains that the intent of these theories is to give an objectivistic explanation.

And in this, of course, they are following a lead set by the 'hard' sciences of nature, which also have had recourse more and more to unobservable

depth structures, even including some which violate our ordinary macro-scopic understanding of things.

If we were to try to explain this shift which has gradually taken place over the last two centuries, away from the way of ideas, then undoubtedly the example of the hard sciences, always the paradigms of objectivistic science, is an important factor. But it cannot be the only one. Something would have to be said about the change in our condition. Perhaps it is that in modern mass societies we feel less of a sense that the factors which are decisive for our behaviour are under our purview – that what society claims of us is something we give knowingly even if not willingly – than did the educated classes of the earlier epoch. I think something like this is true, but even so, a great deal remains to be explained. Why do we under-stand ourselves so readily in depth-psychological terms? Something very important about the whole development of modern society is waiting here to be uncovered.

But in any case, the science of language has followed this pattern. We are no longer satisfied with surface accounts of the application of words to ideas. We want an account in terms of depth structure. But many want the same scientific goals to be paramount.

But although the metaphysical goals survive unscathed into the new sciences of depth structure, the fact that so much has been taken on board from the Romantic conception makes it inevitable that something like the same questions arise as those expressivism puts on the agenda. For instance, there is a continuing issue about how to understand the notion of depth structure, as the philosophical debates around Chomsky's work attest. Is depth structure to be understood as the operation of an uncon-scious capacity, for instance, do we know how to make transformations, even though we are unaware of doing so? This seems to many unbearably paradoxical. Or should we see depth structures in terms of underlying operations, analogous to those in machines? But then what is their rela-tion to the intelligent and conscious uses of language? From either direc-tion, some mystery surrounds the status of the language capacity as a whole which plainly underlies our ability to say specific things on specific occasions. The baffling questions the expressive view gives rise to will not disappear just because we stick to our objectivist metaphysic. Some seem to arise inescapably with the intuition that language involves some global underlying capacity, and not just a set of particulate dispositions to utter certain words in certain circumstances.

This threatens to create something of a dilemma for objectivistic thought, and leads to the characteristic gamut of modern would-be

scientific theories. At one extreme are those who are highly sensitive to the metaphysical dangers of allowing depth explanations. They would like ideally to develop a behaviourist theory, in which the utterance of certain words is made a function of environmental stimulation. Skinner is the most spectacular protagonist of this view.

But the weakness of this strategy is that the explanatory power of such a theory is very poor, and it even comes close to absurdity at times. And so we gain greatly in plausibility by moving along the spectrum, to what we might call 'neo-designative' theories of meaning, like that, for example, of Donald Davidson. This theory can be called 'neo-designative' because it attempts to give an account of meaning in terms of the truth conditions of sentences. These truth conditions are observable states of affairs in the world; hence once again we have the basic *démarche* of a theory which tries to explain the meaning of language in terms of the relation of linguis-tic elements to extra-linguistic reality. Only here, the modern theory has profited from our understanding of language as a structured reality; so that the elements so related are not words, but declarative sentences.

These theories – another example might be explanations of the func-tioning of language on the model of information-processing mechanisms – are more plausible than behaviourism, but they still give no recognition to the expressive dimension. But it is possible to move further along the spectrum, to give some recognition to this, while trying to explain it in objectivistic terms.

Two examples spring to mind, which however are not concerned with theories of language in the narrow sense, but with – in different ways – symbolic expression. These are the views of Marx and Freud.

Freud recognizes symbolic expression, in our symptoms as well as in what he calls symbols. But these are explained in terms of desires, which are not themselves desires for symbolic expression, nor do they involve such expression in their proper fulfilment. On the contrary, the symbolic proliferation results from their blocking or inhibition. The symptom gives my object of desire in symbolic form, because I cannot (will not allow myself to) go after it in reality. Moreover these desires should ultimately be explicable physiologically; hence Freud's electrical and hydraulic languages.

With Marx, we also have a recognition of symbolic expression in ideological consciousness: religion, for instance, gives us a distorted ex-pression of the human social condition of its age. With the liberation of classless society, and the victory of scientific over ideological conscious-ness, such symbolic forms of awareness are swept aside. And from the

standpoint of scientific consciousness, the ideological symbolism is fully explicable, again in terms which have nothing to do with a motivation directed to symbolic expression. This rather is seen as a distortion of the reality, and hence of the underlying motives, which come to clear self-recognition in scientific consciousness.

This account may be somewhat unfair to Marxism, as it may also be to Freud, in giving an unduly reductive cast to their explanations. But whether we have here portrayed true or vulgar Marxism and Freudianism, the theories obviously have their weaknesses, in that they have trouble dealing with the place of expression, of symbolism in normal, undistorted or non-pathological life. When they try to say something in the domain of aesthetics, for instance, Marxism and Freudianism must develop more refined interpretations on pain of sounding philistine and implausibly reductive.

We have examples of such developed – and semiologically sensitive – Marxism and Freudianism in contemporary French structuralism (e.g., in different ways, Lacan, Barthes, Althusser). But this structuralism has taken a step further along the spectrum. It allows expression a central place in human life. It understands that man is the language animal, in that language is more than a tool for man, but somehow constitutes a way of being which is specifically human. We have to understand the growth of language as bound up with the development of a form of life which it makes possible. So that the question can arise of the characteristic excellence of language, of when expression is at its best.

As a matter of fact, modern structuralism owes quite a bit to the reflections of expressivist philosophers. For instance, Lévi-Strauss read Merleau-Ponty with interest. Lacan has been very influenced by Hegel and Heidegger (his Hegel being mediated through Kojève, who picked Heideggerian themes out of Hegel).

But the intent remains 'scientific', that is objectivist. In Lévi-Strauss' case, for instance, drawing from the work of Marcel Mauss, the basic idea – at least of his early theory – seems to be that language arises in a drive to classify, which in turn must be understood as ultimately aimed at social/moral order. We order our lives through classifications, of things forbidden and allowed, enjoined or neutral. The classificatory scheme, of our totems, of segments of the universe, is ordered to a classification of partners and actions, which alone makes possible social integration.

This theory sees the expressive function as central; sees it as necessary indeed to the very existence of human society. But it lays claim too to objectivity, presumably in that its account of language is functional and

reductive. For the function which explains language is not the manifestation of anything, but the maintenance of a social order. (In this it shows the Durkheimian roots of so much French social thought.) Once more language is to be explained in terms of something else.

But as we come to this end of the spectrum, the questions which the expressive view brings forward become harder and harder to avoid. With contemporary structuralism, great mysteries surround the status of the underlying structures, for example their relation to the uses of language in everyday life, and their relation to the individual subject. These are comparable to the questions that arise from the expressive view; indeed, in some cases the questions are the same.

I ran through this gamut in order to illustrate the dilemma of modern objectivist theories of language. They can avoid the intrusion of the baffling questions concerning the nature of expression only by espousing narrower and more primitive theories which are either implausible, or which fail to explain an important range of the phenomena of language, or both. Or they can win plausibility and explanatory range, but at the cost of opening themselves to these questions.

This is the first ground I would put forward for my claim that we are all affected to some degree by the expressivist reasons for bafflement about language. It concerns the predicament of scientific theorizing about language. My second ground can be put much more tersely. Regardless of scientific considerations, modern students of language remain children of our age, and immersed in its culture. And this has been so massively affected by the Romantic-expressivist rebellion, that no one can remain untouched by it. This effect is particularly visible in our understanding of art, its nature and its place in human life. One of the most obtrusive effects is the concern of much contemporary art with the process of its own creation, with the properties of its own medium, with the experimental creation of new media. Expression itself becomes its theme; how it is possible, just what it consists in, and what point it can give to human life. The artist becomes his own subject, and/or the process of creation his theme.

It is very difficult to live in this civilization and not have the problem of expression obtrude on us, with all its enigmatic force. And that is the reason, I want to maintain, why we are all so concerned and fascinated with language, so that even the most tough-minded and empiricist philosophies, like logical empiricism, are 'linguistic' in cast.

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I hope that this historical odyssey has cast light on our contemporary fascination with language. I hope that it has also shown why we find it baffling, and has done something to explain the paradox that, with all the advance of science, this central human function seems more mysterious to us than to our eighteenth-century predecessors.

In fact, seen from this historical perspective, the development towards our present understanding of language as both central and enigmatic seems irreversible. We cannot recapture the earlier perspectives from which language could appear more marginal or less problematic. The view of the universe as an order of signs is lost for ever, at least in its original form, after the coming of modern science and the modern notion of freedom; and the view of language as a set of designative signs, fully in our control and purview, is lost forever with the seventeenth-century view of the punctual subject, perfectly transparent to himself, whose soul contained nothing that he could not observe. From where we stand, we are constantly forced to the conception of man as a language animal, one who is constituted by language.

But I do not hope for agreement on this. Because in our bafflement, we naturally split into two camps. This reflects the pull on us of the contradictory metaphysical demands: for the clarity and control offered by an objective account of ourselves and our world, on one hand, and towards a recognition of the intrinsic, irreducible nature of expression, on the other. There are very few of us who do not feel the force of both these demands. And perhaps just for this reason we divide with polemical fervour into opposing parties, expressors and designators.

The battle between expressors and designators is one front in the global war between the heirs of the Enlightenment and the Romantics; such as we see in the struggle between technocracy and the sense of history or community, instrumental reason versus the intrinsic value of certain forms of life, the domination of nature versus the need for the reconciliation with nature. This general war rages over the battlefronts of language as well. Heidegger is one of the prophets of the stance of 'letting things be', one of the great critics of modern technological consciousness; the neo-designators defend a notion of reason as instrumental reason. All this is no accident. It shows only how much rides on this issue.

The issue concerns the nature of man, or what it is to be human. And since so much of this turns on what it is to think, to reason, to create; and since all of these point us towards language, we can expect that the study of language will become even more a central concern of our intellectual life. It is in a sense the crucial locus of the theoretical battle we are having with ourselves.

As a civilization, we live with a compromise. In our scientific understanding, we tend to be men of the Enlightenment, and we accept the predominance of Enlightenment – one might say, utilitarian – values in setting the parameters of public policy. Growth, productivity, welfare are of fundamental importance. But it is recognized that, without prejudice to the perhaps ultimately available scientific explanation which will be reductive, people experience things in expressive terms: something is 'more me'; or I feel fulfilled by this, not by that; or that prospect really 'speaks to me'. Along with this tolerance of experience goes a parallel in the public domain. The main limits of public policy are set by the requirements of production within the constraints of distribution, and these are meant to be established by scientific means, and in a utilitarian spirit. But private experience must be given its expressive fulfilment. There is a 'Romantik' of private life, which is meant to fit into a smoothly running consumer society.

However effective this compromise may be politically, it is a rotten one intellectually; it combines the crassest scientism (objectivism) with the most subjectivist forms of expressivism. But I suppose I say it is rotten mainly because I think that both of these are wrong; and that they leave out the really fruitful line of enquiry, a contemporary expressivism which tries to go beyond subjectivism in discovering and articulating what is expressed.

But even leaving aside my commitments, it is certain that in the absence of a strong expressivist critique, scientism remains smugly satisfied with its half-baked explanations, and the subjectivist conception of experience veers towards formless sentimentalism. The issue of language goes by default; which means the issue of what it is to be human goes too.