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Edward Sapir et l'International Auxiliary Language Association

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LABORATOIRE D'HISTOIRE DES THÉORIES LINGUISTIQUES

Sapir et l'International Auxiliary Language Association

Chloé Laplantine





Edward Sapir (1884-1939)

It is the appreciation of the relativity of the form of thought which results from linguistic study that is perhaps the most liberalizing thing about it. What fetters the mind and benumbs the spirit is ever the dogged acceptance of absolutes.

*Perhaps the best way to get behind our thought processes and to eliminate from them all the accidents or irrelevancies due to their **linguistic garb** is to plunge into the study of exotic modes of expression. At any rate, I know of no better way to kill spurious “entities”.*



Alice Vanderbilt Morris (1874-1950)

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<i>Fundamental Type</i>	<i>II</i>	<i>III</i>	<i>IV</i>	<i>Technique</i>	<i>Synthesis</i>	<i>Examples</i>
A (Simple Pure-relational)	—	—	a	Isolating	Analytic	Chinese; Annamite
	(d)	—	a, b	Isolating (weakly agglutinative)	Analytic	Ewe (Guinea Coast)
	(b)	—	a, b, c	Agglutinative (mildly agglutinative- fusional)	Analytic	Modern Tibetan
B (Complex Pure-relational)	b, (d)	—	a	Agglutinative- isolating	Analytic	Polynesian
	b	—	a, (b)	Agglutinative- isolating	Polysynthetic	Haida
	c	—	a	Fusional- isolating	Analytic	Cambodian
	b	—	b	Agglutinative	Synthetic	Turkish
	b, d	(b)	b	Agglutinative (symbolic tinge)	Polysynthetic	Yana (N. California)
	c, d, (b)	—	a, b	Fusional- agglutinative (symbolic tinge)	Synthetic (mildly)	Classical Tibetan
	b	—	c	Agglutinative- fusional	Synthetic (mildly polysynthetic)	Sioux
	c	—	c	Fusional	Synthetic	Salinan (S.W. California)
d, c	(d)	d, c, a	Symbolic	Analytic	Shilluk (Upper Nile)	

NOTE.—Parentheses indicate a weak development of the process in question.

C (Simple Mixed-relational)	(b)	b	—	Agglutinative	Synthetic	Bantu
	(c)	c, (d),	a	Fusional	Analytic (mildly synthetic)	French *
D (Complex Mixed-relational)	b, c, d	b	b	Agglutinative (symbolic tinge)	Polysynthetic	Nootka (Vancouver Island) †
	c, (d)	b	—	Fusional- agglutinative	Polysynthetic (mildly)	Chinook (lower Columbia R.)
	c, (d)	c, (d), (b)	—	Fusional	Polysynthetic	Algonkin
	c	c, d	a	Fusional	Analytic	English
	c, d	c, d	—	Fusional (symbolic tinge)	Synthetic	Latin, Greek, Sanskrit
	c, b, d	c, d	(a)	Fusional (strongly symbolic)	Synthetic	Takelma (S.W. Oregon)
d, c	c, d	(a)	Symbolic-fusional	Synthetic	Semitic (Arabic, Hebrew)	

* Might nearly as well have come under D.

Why not push English, for instance, which is already spoken over a larger area than any other language of modern times, and which shows every sign of spreading in the world of commerce and travel? The consideration which gives rise to reflections of this sort, grounded in impatience as it is, looks for no more worthy solution of the difficulty than a sort of minimum language, a *lingua franca* of the modern world. Those who argue in this spirit invariably pride themselves on being 'practical,' and, like all 'practical' people, they are apt to argue without their host.

(“The function of an international auxiliary language”)

It is, therefore, highly desirable that along with the practical labour of getting wider recognition of the international language idea, there go hand in hand comparative researches which aim to lay bare **the logical structures that are inadequately symbolized in our present day languages**, in order that we may see more clearly than we have yet been able to see just how much of psychological insight and **logical rigour** have been and can be expressed in linguistic form. One of the most ambitious and important tasks that can be undertaken is the attempt to work out the relation between **logic and usage** in a number of national and constructed languages, in order that the eventual problem of adequately symbolizing thought may be seen as the problem it still is.

(« The function of an international auxiliary language”)

The nucleus of *Foundations of Language* consists of:

1. Introduction
2. Units of communication: the sentence
3. Fundamental types of referents: a natural basis for parts of speech
4. Fundamental relational notions and their linguistic expression
5. Notions of order
6. Indication
7. Quantity
8. Space
9. Time
10. Existents and their linguistic expression: the noun
11. Occurrents and their linguistic expression: the verb
12. Modes of existence and occurrence: the adjective and the adverb
13. Notional inventory of experience: its expression in nuclear words
14. Extension of the nuclear vocabulary: word-building
15. Expressiveness in language

« Totality »

1. General Introduction to notion of quantity
 - (a) Notions applied to quantification
 - i. Affirmation and negation
 - ii. Identity and difference
 - iii. Indication
 - iv. Grading
 - v. Limiting: excluding and gauging
 - vi. Composite wholes: aggregation and distribution
 - vii. Ratio and proportion
 - viii. Normation
 - (b) Quantifiables
 - (c) Methods of quantification: numbering, measuring, and calculating
 - (d) Quantificates
2. Classification of quantifiers and quantificates
3. Types of quantification
 - a. Singularity and plurality
 - b. Number: cardinals and fractions
 - c. Totality
 - d. Unity
 - e. Duality
 - f. Quantification by partials
 - g. Indefinite quantification
4. Negation in quantitative expressions
5. Transfer of quantitative concepts

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(5) *Relational locative expressions which may imply e-p relation.*

(5.a) *Those which require an explicit point of reference.*

F011	C'est toujours un cher plaisir que de retourner <i>chez soi</i> après un long voyage.	a movement	(r) a p at one's own place
F012	Il saute <i>dans</i> la tranchée avant tous.	a jump	(r) a p in the trench
F013	Il va <i>en</i> Italie.	a movement	(r) a p in Italy
F014	Le comte est allé <i>en</i> province.	a movement	(r) a p in the country
F015	Je me jette <i>sous</i> un arbre pour lire.	a movement	(r) a p under a tree
F016	La mouette descend lentement <i>sur</i> l'eau.	a movement	(r) a p on the water
F017	Place-toi <i>contre</i> ce logis. /Mol., in LITTRÉ	(a movement)	(r) a p opposite this dwelling
F018	La révolution de la lune interpose ce satellite <i>entre</i> le soleil et la terre. /LITTRÉ under 'interposer'	a movement	(r) a p between the sun and the earth

The Expression of the Ending-point relation in English, French, and German.

What is needed above all is a language that **is as simple, as regular, as logical, as rich, and as creative as possible**; a language which starts with a minimum of demands on the learning capacity of the normal individual and can do the maximum amount of work; which is to serve as a sort of logical touchstone to all national languages and as the standard medium of translation. It must, ideally, be as superior to any accepted language as **the mathematical method** of expressing quantities and relations between quantities is to the more lumbering methods of expressing these quantities and relations in verbal form. This is undoubtedly an **ideal** which can never be reached, **but ideals are not meant to be reached**: they merely indicate the direction of movement.

*Were a language ever completely
“grammatical,” it would be a perfect
engine of conceptual expression.
Unfortunately, or luckily,
no language is tyrannically consistent.
All grammars leak.*

*a perfect hornet's nest
of bizarre and arbitrary usages*

A rigorous thinking out of the true content of a sentence as contrasted with its **purely formal convolutions** often reveals the **humiliating fact** that it could have been expressed with half the apparatus. **Abstract nouns, in particular, are not nearly so useful or necessary as is generally assumed.** There should, perhaps, be some provision for their formation, perhaps by means of some indefinite noun like thing or matter or way {e.g., wise way for wisdom), but the real point is that they can often be easily avoided, and with a gain in vividness. Thus, there is nothing in the sentence "The wisdom of old age chills youth" which is not as adequately expressed, and with a more intuitive impact, in such a sentence as "Wise old person make cold (to) young person" (or « The wise old make cold the young"). In other words, we must not too lightly assume that the **grooves of thought** which we are accustomed to in our European languages are the easiest or most natural in a universal sense. It may be worth our while to get into the habit of simplifying **the pattern of our thought.** We are likely to find that it is **helped**, rather than **hindered**, by the unassuming simplicity of such languages as Chinese. Much of our seeming subtlety in expression is really **verbiage.**

... this is undoubtedly an ideal which can never be reached, but ideals are not meant to be reached : they merely indicate the direction of movement.

*Tout y parlerait
À l'âme en secret
Sa douce langue natale.*

we are the dupes of our forms.

There is no doubt that the critical study of language may also be of the most curious and unexpected helpfulness to philosophy. Few philosophers have deigned to look into the morphologies of primitive languages nor have they given the structural peculiarities of their own speech more than a passing and perfunctory attention. When one has the riddle of the universe on his hands, such pursuits seem trivial enough, yet when it begins to be suspected that at least some solutions of the great riddle are elaborately roundabout applications of the rules of Latin or German or English grammar, the triviality of linguistic analysis becomes less certain. To a far greater extent than the philosopher has realized, he is likely to become the dupe of his speech-forms, which is equivalent to saying that the mould of his thought, which is typically a linguistic mould, is apt to be projected into his conception of the world. Thus innocent linguistic categories may take on the formidable appearance of cosmic absolutes. If only, therefore, to save himself from philosophic verbalism, it would be well for the philosopher to look critically to the linguistic foundations and limitations of his thought. He would then be spared the humiliating discovery that many new ideas, many apparently brilliant philosophic conceptions, are little more than rearrangements of familiar words in formally satisfying patterns.

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(“The Grammarian and His Language”)

*Wu-river stream mouth evening sun sink,
North look Liao-Tung, not see home.
Steam whistle several noise, sky-earth boundless,
Float float one reed out Middle-Kingdom.*

*Single Algonkin words
are like tiny imagist poems.*

And yet in the recorded texts of primitive tradition and song there are many passages of unique vigor and beauty. The structure of the language often forces an assemblage of concepts that impresses us as a stylistic discovery.

Single Algonkin words are like tiny imagist poems.

We must be careful not to exaggerate a freshness of content that is at least half due to our freshness of approach, but the possibility is indicated none the less of utterly alien literary styles, each distinctive with its disclosure of the search of the human spirit for beautiful form.

(Language)