

# METALANGUAGE AS A LINGUISTIC PROBLEM

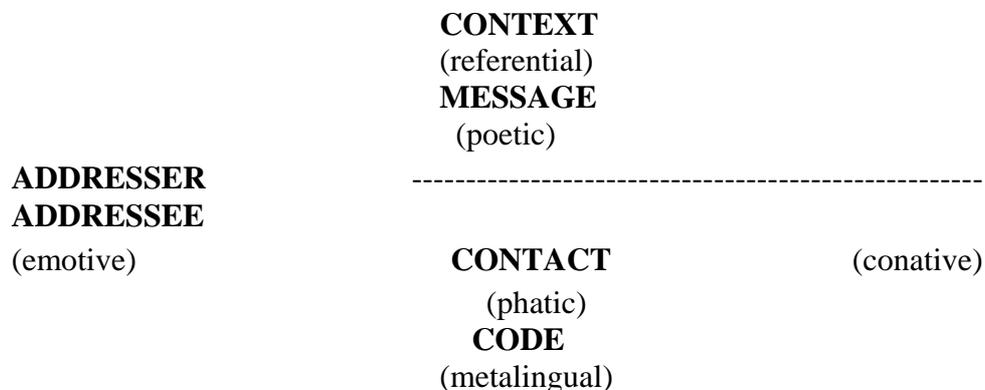
by

Roman Jakobson

*Selected Writings, VII.* Edited by S. Rudy. Mouton, 1985 (pp. 113-121)

First presented as the Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, December 27, 1956, and published in *Különtenyomat a Nyelvtudományi Közlemények* 76. Kötetének 2. Számából (1976), where it is dedicated "to the memory of his true friend and the courageous champion of linguistic truth, Gyula Laziczius".

Language must be investigated in all the variety of its functions. An outline of these functions demands a concise survey of the constitutive factors in any speech event, in any act of verbal communication. The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to ("referent" in another, somewhat ambiguous nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication. The six different functions determined by these six factors may be schematized as follows:



Although we distinguish six basic aspects of language, we could, however, hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function. The diversity lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several functions but in their different hierarchical order. The verbal structure of a message depends primarily on the predominant function, But even though a set (Einstellung) toward the referent, an orientation toward the CONTEXT — briefly the so-called REFERENTIAL, "denotative", [114] "cognitive" function — is the leading task of numerous messages, the accessory participation of the other functions in such messages must be taken into account by the observant linguist

The so-called EMOTIVE or "expressive" function, focused on the ADDRESSER, aims a direct expression of the speaker's attitude toward what he is speaking about. It tends to produce an impression of a certain emotion whether true or feigned; therefore, the term "emotive", launched and advocated by Marty, has proved to be preferable to "emotional". The

purely emotive stratum in language is presented by the interjections. They differ from the means of referential language both by their sound pattern (peculiar sound sequences or even sounds elsewhere unusual) and by their syntactic role (they are not components but equivalents of sentences). "Tut! Tut!" said McGinty"; the complete utterance of Conan Doyle's character consists of two suction clicks. The emotive function, laid bare in the interjections, flavors to some extent all our utterances, on their phonic, grammatical, and lexical level. If we analyze language from the point of view of the information it carries, we cannot restrict the information to the cognitive, ideational aspect of language. A man, using expressive features to indicate his angry or ironic attitude, conveys ostensible information. The difference between [yes] "yes" and the emphatic prolongation of the vowel [ye:s] is a conventional, coded, linguistic feature like the difference between the short and long vowel in such Czech pairs as [v- i] "you" and [vi:] "knows:", but in the latter pair the differential information is phonemic and in the former emotive. As long as we are interested in phonemic invariants, the English [e] and [e:] appear to be mere variants of one and the same phoneme, but if we are concerned with emotive units, the relation between the invariant and variants is reversed: length and shortness are invariants implemented by variable phonemes.

Orientation toward the ADDRESSEE, the CONATIVE function, finds its purest grammatical expression in the vocative and imperative, which syntactically, morphologically, and often even phonemically deviate from other nominal and verbal categories. Imperative sentences cardinally differ from declarative sentences: the latter are and the former are not liable to a truth test. When in O'Neill's play *The Fountain Nano*, "(in a fierce tone of command)", says "Drink!" — the imperative cannot be challenged by the question, "Is it true or not?" which may be, however, perfectly well asked after such sentences as "one drank", "one will drink", "one would drink", or after such conversions of the imperative sentences into declarative sentences: "you will drink", "you have to drink", "I order you to drink." In contradistinction to imperative [115] sentences, declarative sentences are convertible into interrogative sentences: "did one drink?", "will one drink?", "would one drink?", "do I order you to drink?"

The traditional model of language as elucidated in particular by Karl Bühler was confined to these three functions — emotive, conative, and referential — and to the three apexes of this model — the first person of the addresser, the second person of the addressee, and the "third person" proper — someone or something spoken of. Certain additional verbal functions can be easily inferred from this triadic model. Thus the magic, incantatory function is chiefly some kind of conversion of an absent or inanimate "third person" into an addressee of a conative message. "May this sty dry up, tfu, tfu, tfu, tfu" (Lithuanian spell). "Water, queen river, daybreak! Send grief beyond the blue sea, to the sea-bottom, like a grey stone never to rise from the sea-bottom, may grief never come to burden the light heart of God's servant, may grief be removed and sink away." (North Russian incantation). "Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Aj-a-lon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed \*\*\*\*" (Josh. 10:12). We observe, however, three further constitutive factors of verbal communication and three corresponding functions of language.

There are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works ("Hello, do you hear me?"), to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention ("Are you listening?" or in Shakespearean diction, "Lend me your ears!" — and on the other end of the wire "Um-hum!") . This set for CONTACT, or in B. Malinowski's terms PHATIC function, may be displayed by a profuse exchange of ritualized formulas, by entire dialogues with the mere purport of prolonging communication. Dorothy Parker caught eloquent examples: "'Well!' she said. 'Well, here we are', he said. 'Here we are', she said, 'Aren't we?' 'I should say we were', he

said, 'Eeyop! Here we are.' 'Well!' she said. 'Well!' he said, 'well.'" The endeavor to start and sustain communication is typical of talking birds; thus the phatic function of language is the only one they share with human beings when conversing with them. It is also the first verbal function acquired by infants; they are prone to communication before being able to send or receive informative communication.

The set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language. This function cannot be productively studied out of touch with the general problems of language, and, on the other hand, the scrutiny of language [116] requires a thorough consideration of its poetic function. Any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent. This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects. Hence, when dealing with poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry.

"Why do you always say Joan and Margery, yet never Margery and Joan? Do you prefer Joan to her twin sister?" "Not at all, it just sounds smoother." In a sequence of two coordinate names, as far as no rank problems interfere, the precedence of the shorter name suits the speaker, unaccountably for him, as a well-ordered shape of the message.

A girl used to talk about "that horrible Harry." "Why horrible?" "Because I hate him." But why not dreadful, terrible, frightful, disgusting?" "I don't know why, but horrible fits him better." Without realizing it, she clung to the poetic device of paronomasia. Two alliterative clusters must have favored the coalescence of "French fries" into a habitual phrase-word.

The political slogan "I like Ike" [ay layk ayk], succinctly structured, consists of three monosyllables and counts three diphthongs [ay], each of them symmetrically followed by one consonantal phoneme [..l..k ..k]. The setup of the three words shows a variation: no consonantal phonemes in the first word, two around the diphthong in the second, and one final consonant in the third. Both cola of the trisyllabic formula "I like/Ike" rhyme with each other, and the second of the two rhyming words is fully included in the first one (echo rhyme), [layk] [ayk], a paronomastic image of a feeling which totally envelops its object. Both cola alliterate with each other, and the first of the two alliterating words is included in the second: [ay] — [ayk], a paronomastic image of the loving subject enveloped by the beloved object. The secondary, poetic function of this electoral catchphrase reinforces its impressiveness and efficacy,

A discrimination clearly anticipated by the Ancient Greek and Indic tradition and pushed forward by the medieval treatises *de suppositionibus* has been advocated in modern logic as a need to distinguish between two levels of language, namely the "object language" speaking of items extraneous to language as such, and on the other hand a language in which we speak about the verbal code itself. The latter aspect of language is called "metalanguage", a loan-translation of the Polish term [117] launched in the 1930's by Alfred Tarski. On these two different levels of language the same verbal stock may be used; thus we may speak in English (as metalanguage) about English (as object language) and interpret English words and sentences by means of English synonyms and circumlocutions. Jeremy Bentham respectively delineates "expositions by translation and by paraphrasis". Like Moliere's Jourdain, who used prose without knowing that it was prose, we practice metalanguage without realizing the

metalingual character of our statements. Far from being confined to the sphere of science, metalingual operations prove to be an integral part of our verbal activities. Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused upon the CODE and thus performs a METALINGUAL (or glossing) function. "I don't follow you — what do you mean?" asks the addressee, or in Shakespearean diction, "What is't thou say'st?" And the addresser in anticipation of such recapturing questions inquires: "Do you know what I mean?" Then, by replacing the questionable sign with another sign or a whole group of signs from the same or another linguistic code, the encoder of the message seeks to make it more accessible to the decoder. — I eagerly brought out: "But not to the degree to contaminate." "To contaminate?" — my big word left her at a loss. I explained it, "To corrupt." She stared, taking my meaning in, (Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*.)

— It done her in ... — What does doing her in mean? — Oh, that's the new small talk. To do a person in means to kill them. — You surely don't believe that your aunt was killed? — Do I no! (G. B. Shaw, *Pygmalion*.)

Or imagine such an exasperating dialogue. — "The sophomore was plucked." "But what is plucked?" "Plucked means the same as flunked." "To be flunked is to fail in an exam," "And what is sophomore?" persists the interrogator innocent of school vocabulary. "A sophomore is (or means) a second-year student."

Such equational propositions ordinarily used by interlocutors nullify the idea of verbal meanings as "subjective intangibles" and become particularly conspicuous in cases of their reversibility: "A second-year student is (called) a sophomore"; "A gander is an adult male goose", but also conversely "An adult male goose is a gander." The former proposition is an example of C. S. Peirce's thesis that any sign translates itself into other signs in which it is more fully developed, whereas the reverse translation from a more explicit to a terser way of expression is exemplified by the latter proposition.

[118] Signs are viewed by Peirce as equivalent "when either might have been an interpretant of the other", it must be emphasized again and again that the basic, immediate, "selective" interpretant of any sign is "all that is explicit in the sign itself apart from its context and circumstance of utterance", or in more unified terms: apart from its context either verbal or only verbalizable but not actually verbalized. Peirce's semiotic doctrine is the only sound basis for a strictly linguistic semantics. One can't help but agree with his view of meaning as translatability of a sign into a network of other signs and with his reiterated emphasis on the inherence of a "general meaning" in any "genuine symbol", as well as with the sequel of the quoted assertion: A symbol "cannot indicate any particular thing: it denotes a kind of thing. Not only that, but it is itself a kind and not a single thing," (Collected Papers, 2.301.) The contextual meanings which particularize, specify, or even modify such a general meaning are dealt with in Peirce's speculative grammar as secondary, "environmental" interpretants.

In spite of some students' objections, it is clear that the "selective interpretant" of a proper name, too, necessarily has a more general character than any single "environmental interpretant". The context indicates whether we speak about Napoleon in his infancy, the hero of Austerlitz, the loser at Waterloo, the prisoner on his deathbed, or a hero in posthumous tradition, whereas his name in its general meaning encompasses all these stages of his life and fate. Like the metabolic insect in the sequence caterpillar-pupa-butterfly, a person may even acquire different names for consecutive temporal segments, "momentary objects" in W. V,

Quine's terminology. Married name is substituted for maiden name, monastic for secular. Of course, each of these named stages could be further segmented.

Metalingual operations with words or syntactic constructions permit us to overcome Leonard Bloomfield's forebodings in his endeavors to incorporate meaning into the science of language. Thus, for instance, the alleged difficulty of describing meanings in the case "of words like but, if, because" has been disproved by the treatment of conjunctions in symbolic logic, and such anthropological studies as *Les structures elementaires de la parente* by Claude Levi-Strauss have proved the groundlessness of assumptions that the various terminologies of kinship "are extremely hard to analyze". Yet on the whole Bloomfield's justified view of "one of the meanings as normal (or central) and the others as marginal (metaphoric or transferred)" requires a consistent application in semantic analysis: "The central meaning is favored in the sense that we understand a form (that is, respond to it) in the central meaning [119] unless some feature of the practical situation forces us to look to a transferred meaning." Such is the contextual metaphoric use of gander or goose in application to a person who resembles the bird in stupidity. The same word in the contextual meaning "look, glance" is a metonymic transfer from the goose to its outstretched neck and goggling eyes in a metaphoric application to a human being. Goose is a designation of a bird species with no reference to sex but in contexts opposing goose to gander, the narrowed meaning of the former vocable is confined to the females. The opposite transfer, Bloomfield's "widened meanings", may be exemplified by the use of the phrase-word morning-star to designate the planet Venus without reference to the time of its appearance. The literal, untransferred meaning of the two phrase-words morning-star and evening-star becomes apparent, for example, if during an evening stroll, by a casual slip of the tongue one would bring to the attention of his perplexed partner the bright emergence of the morning-star. In contradistinction to the indiscriminate label Venus, the two phrase words, discussed by G. Frege, are actually suitable to define and to name two different spatio-temporal phases of one planet in relation to another one.

A relational divergence underlies the semantic variance of near-synonyms. Thus, the adjectives half-full and half-empty refer to quantitatively the same status of the bottle, but the former attribute used by the anecdotal optimist and the latter one substituted by the pessimist betray two opposite frames of reference, the full and the empty bottle. Two slightly deviant frames of reference separate the anticipatory twenty minutes to six from the retrospective five forty.

The constant use of metalingual commutations within the actual corpus of any given language offers a groundwork for a description and analysis of lexical and grammatical meanings which complies even with the platform of those inquirers who still believe that "the determining criteria will always have to be stated in distributional terms". Let us cite such pairs of reversible propositions as "hermaphrodites are individuals combining the sex organs of both male and female" — "individuals combining the sex organs of both male and female are hermaphrodites", or such pairs as "centaurs are individuals combining the human head, arms, and trunk with the body and legs of a horse" — "individuals combining the human head, arms, and trunk with the body and legs of a horse are centaurs." In those two pairs we are faced with metalingual statements which impart information about the meaning assigned to the word hermaphrodite and centaur in the English vocabulary, but which say nothing about the ontological status of the individuals named. We apperceive the semantic difference between the nouns ambrosia and [120] nectar or between centaur and sphinx and we can, for instance, transmute the two latter words into pictures or sculptures, despite the absence of such kinds of individuals in our experience. The words in question may even be used not only in a literal but also in a

deliberately figurative meaning: ambrosia as a food which gives us divine delight; sphinx as a designation of an enigmatic person.

Statements of existence or nonexistence in regard to such fictional entities gave rise to lengthy philosophical controversies, but from a linguistic point of view the verb of existence remains elliptic as far as it is not accompanied by a locative modifier: "unicorns do not exist in the fauna of the globe"; "unicorns exist in Greco-Roman and Chinese mythology", "in the tapestry tradition", "in poetry", "in our dreams", etc. Here we observe the linguistic relevance of the notion Universe of Discourse, introduced by A. De Morgan onetime it may be the physical universe, at another it may be the imaginary 'world' of some play or novel, at another a range of possibilities. Whether directly referred to or merely, implied—in--an exchange of messages between interlocutors, this notion remains the relevant one for a linguistic approach to semantics.

When the universe of discourse prompts a technological nomenclature, dog is sensed as a name of various gripping and holding tools, while horse designates various supportive devices. In Russian kon'ki "little horses" became a name of skates. Two contiguous stanzas of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin (Fourth Chapter, XLII—XLIII) depict the country in early winter, and the gaiety of the little peasant boys cutting the new ice with their skates (little horses) is confronted with the tedious time of the landlord whose helpless saddle horse stumbles over the ice. The poet's clearcut contrastive parallelism of kon'ki and kon' "horse" gets lost in translation into languages without the equine image of the skates. The conversion of kon'ki from animals into inanimate tools of locomotion, with a corresponding change in the declensional paradigm, has been effected under a metalingual control.

Metalingual is the vital factor of any verbal development. The interpretation of one linguistic sign through other, in some respects homogeneous, signs of the same language, is a metalingual operation which plays an essential role in child language learning. Observations made during recent decades, in particular by the Russian inquirers A. N. Gvozdev and K. I. Cukovskij, have disclosed what an enormous place talk about language occupies in the verbal behavior of preschool children, who are prone to compare new acquisitions with earlier ones and their own way of speaking with the diverse forms of speech used by [121] the older and younger people surrounding them; the makeup and choice of words and sentences, their sound, shape and meaning, synonymy and homonymy are vividly discussed. A constant recourse to metalingual is indispensable both for a creative assimilation of the mother tongue and for its final mastery.

Metalingual is deficient in aphasics with a similarity disorder. labeled "sensory impairment"; despite instructions, they cannot respond to the stimulus word of the examiner with an equivalent word or expression and lack the capacity for building equational propositions. Any aptitude for translation, either intralingual or interlingual, is lost by these patients.

The buildup of the first language implies an aptitude for metalingual operations, and no familiarization with further languages is possible without the development of this aptitude; the breakdown of metalingual plays a substantial part in verbal disturbances. Finally, the urgent task which faces the science of language, a systematic analysis-of lexical and grammatical meanings, must begin by approaching metalingual as an innermost linguistic problem. We realize ever more clearly that any verbal message in the selection and combination of its constituents involves a recourse to the given code and that a set of latent metalingual operations underlies this perpetual framework.