

8-1954

Possibilities of Language

Donald McNichols

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfc_journal



Part of the [Communication Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McNichols, Donald, "Possibilities of Language" (1954). *George Fox College Journal, 1952-1966*. 14.
https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/gfc_journal/14

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Archives and Museum at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in George Fox College Journal, 1952-1966 by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.



George Fox College JOURNAL

VOL. III

AUGUST, 1954

NO. 1

*"Let all nations hear the word by sound or writing.
Spare no place, spare not tongue nor pen; but be
obedient to the Lord God and go through the work
and be valiant for the Truth upon earth—"*

Journal, George Fox, 1656

Possibilities of Language

BY DONALD McNICHOLS, DEAN

Correctness and precision in the use of language is indispensable to intelligent living inasmuch as language is the basis of both ideation and communication. This assertion is made in opposition to the prevalent attitude that good language is a nicety of culture, but is not necessary nor directly related to intelligent and responsible living. Contemporary psychology considers words to be units by which thinking is accomplished. It seems hardly necessary to observe that words are the vehicle for transmitting thought. Language, then, is the most basic essential for using the mind—or living with one's self, and is likewise fundamental to all meaningful relations with others. Thus when language is seen in its true importance it is not something to be taken or left alone at will, unless one is willing to admit that thinking and communicating with others are dispensable. It is the basis for all other academic disciplines, thus formal education always has its beginnings in the study of language. Charlton Laird correctly observed in *The Miracle of Language* that "language is, and since its invention or discovery has always been, the most important tool man ever devised."

Language offers three important possibilities. First, and most fundamental, as has already been stated, it is the stuff

of thinking. One contemporary essayist wrote, "The fewer the words in one's vocabulary, the fewer combinations (thoughts) possible." In other words, ideas are dependent upon words in combination. It is undoubtedly true that in the thinking process one's mind rises above individual words while working with an idea; yet symbols of some type supply the thought process with functional units. When an idea is formalized in the mind, it is done so with specific language, and it is at this point that one can detect the handicapping effect of language depravity upon the student who struggles to bring his idea into clear focus within his own mind. Laird also wrote, "Learning to use language carefully would seem to be training in using the mind carefully, and it has long been considered so."

Second, language is the material of communication. It is the means for conveying ideas, emotions, feelings, and of transmitting our culture. In this function the possibility and aim of language is clarity; the clearer the meaning the purer must be the language. In this relationship the impurities of language are to be avoided in so far as they impede the communication of meanings. Impurities may bar all meeting of the minds either through incomplete exchange of ideas or by conveying a wrong impression. Common among those language impurities which prevent entering college students from clear thinking and effective expression are inexact words, slang, and group cliches. Reference to these impurities does not imply that language ought to be prudish; however, an acceptable form of speech in one locality and situation might appear affected in another situation, depending upon the appropriateness of the language to the occasion and locality. Some linguists now insist that appropriateness is the only plausible standard for English, which view is not too extreme from that held by current regulating agencies. Our dictionaries are written from the point of view that "Language should have restrictive but not coercive standards". Dictionaries differ even though edited by specialists in language, because these specialists establish standards from usage and not all editors agree upon what has been standard usage. Formerly, handbooks were quite authoritarian in method, but current publications frankly admit that usage is their guide. Publishers

Most weary seem'd the sea, weary the oar, but evermore
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.

These lines below written by Sidney Lanier to illustrate a monotonous use of vowels contrasts in beauty of sound with the above lines:

'Tis May-day gay: wide-smiling skies shine bright
Through whose true blue cuckoos do woo anew
The tender spring.

Thought form in language requires equal skill and creativity as does the attention to sound. Figurative language comprises one segment within this group which is a method of comparison. The chief advantage of the figure is its ability to add expansiveness and completeness to meaning and is particularly useful when conveying sensory images or emotions. It enables one to use economy of words which complete their meaning through suggestion. To say "My love is like a red red rose" is a challenge to the reader to enumerate the qualities of the red rose and thereby know a great deal about the lover from only a few words—given in a precise artistic fashion. Because the figure is so vital to complete expression, as a form of art it is more than an ornament hung on the thread of language, it is necessary to basic communication.

The great vistas of narrative prose offer unlimited possibilities for artful language structure, thus we speak of the art of the short story, novel, essay, biography, drama, the speech, and letter writing. Each of these has an identifying general pattern developed to a form through which one can better convey meaning.

If this brief discussion, developed almost wholly without illustration, demonstrates consistency and unity it will suggest that language cannot be used adequately apart from its artistic standards. Observance of art in language is a challenge because of its possibilities; it is a duty because communication of meaning is only possible through this severe discipline. It then is incumbent upon the liberal arts curriculum to give students sufficient experience in expression and language study to help them become effective citizens through mastering the elements of thought and the means of communication on its pure and artistic level.

separated the English language into literary and spoken English may never be wholly closed due to the need for formal and informal language, but the influence of realism in all of its forms has had a tendency to make spoken English acceptable also as written English.

These first two possibilities of language develop its use no further than a bare minimum, yet this is not satisfactory for leadership nor responsible living. To what level should one attain? what is the necessary level of language use for minimum performance? This is a question for which a complete ready answer is not forthcoming, but when one seeks to ascertain the standard of language performance that should be required for college graduation it is certainly clear that the candidate ought to possess a vocabulary adequate for clear thinking and by which he can convey accurate meanings through speaking or writing. However, one must advance beyond these elementary levels before the great expansive possibilities of language are apparent. The great challenge is to visualize language as an art: to convey subtleties of meaning with discriminating words chosen with respect to stress, euphony, and regularity of meter. It is highly significant to our culture that man's accumulated symbols of communication are organized into logical patterns to aid in their usefulness, but it is particularly satisfying also as an art form.

The art forms of language are very broad, thus expanding its possibilities into an infinite number of areas. We can mention only two categories of language art in this outline treatment. These might be referred to as art forms derived from sound and those from thought arrangement. The "sound" group includes: stress, vowel and consonant arrangement, smooth and rough breathings, and the other sound variations which can be manipulated.

Language art on this level is attained by a discriminating attention to the arrangement of words to insure an aesthetically satisfying experience. This is a technical prerequisite of poetry and is also necessary for securing artful prose. An illustration of this principle is easily given by reading each of the following passages aloud. The first is from Tennyson's, "The Lotos-Eaters" and secures its pleasantness from the use of the long *e* and the long *o*:

have thus come to recognize the concept of language expressed by Thomas Hobbes:

For words are wise men's counters,—they do but reckon by them; but they are the memory of fools, that value them by the authority of an Aristotle, a Cicero, or a Thomas, or any other Doctor whatsoever, if but a man . . .

It might be asked, if usage determines the standard, why are these impurities objectionable? The classroom answer usually given is that they are disapproved by national use, by reputable men of language, or by present use; however, a more fundamental objection lies in meanings. Inexact language (*thing* and *case* are words in point) cannot convey accurate meanings.

The objection to slang was ably stated by Milton Millhauser in his essay, "The Case Against Slang":

Slang is a kind of speech that belittles what it conveys. It was developed to express a few widely prevalent attitudes and therefore lacks precision and variety. You should avoid it because it is inadequate to critical thinking and because it imposes a cynical or flippant tone on your serious ideas.

Group clichés are particularly damaging to young people. These patterns of speech are borrowed from others in the group and are used in substitution of adequate verbal facility. Most of these expressions were apparently originated by those whose training was poor and who could not bring analysis to bear upon the experience being described. Few clichés bear analysis; few young people can coherently explain what idea they are attempting to communicate by these hackneyed expressions. The objection raised against the cliché rests upon its tendency to be a cloak for thought and a deterrent to originality in expression.

The mention of excessive ornamentation is relevant in a discussion on purity of language because it too obscures meanings. This accounts for the rejection of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century prose with its tendency to prolixity, rhetorical ornamentation, and repetition. Leisurely embellishments in prose in excess of that necessary for communicating ideas and emotions is now labeled "insincerity" in language; consequently, it is discouraged. The great gulf that formerly

CALENDAR

- September 17—8:00 p. m., Faculty Reception for New Students.
19—11:00 a. m., Fall Convocation, Friends Church.
21—6:45 p. m., Night School Begins.
22—George Fox College "Day of Prayer".
- October 4-8—Christian Emphasis Week, Dr. J. Edwin Orr, Speaker. Meetings Daily, 10:45 a. m., 7:30 p. m.
15—8:00 p. m., Lois Burnett, Soprano, Senior Recital.
22—Portland Auxiliary Smorgasbord, Evening, Portland First Friends Church.
- November 6—Homecoming Day.
-

Published bi-monthly by George Fox College at Newberg, Oregon, by the Public Relations Office in cooperation with the Office of the Dean.