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Language and Thought: Some Dangerous Distinctions

Kenneth Badley

Ken Badley shows how influential the classifications we use are on how we think. With a series of examples he warns us against the unclear thinking and the faulty results that flow from inappropriate categorizations.

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It has become popular of late to identify and criticize various sorts of jargon and misuse of language. This popularity is evidenced in newspapers and popular magazines. *New York Times* readers are regularly treated by William Safire. *Time* paid attention to ordinary speech with an essay called "'80's Babble: Untidy Treasure" (January 28, 1980). Various Christian publications have taken notice of speech patterns as well.

Such popularity is not necessarily a bad thing, for it is important that people attend to their linguistic habits and note their frequent reliance on "buzz-words", cliches, and meaningless verbiage. In his essay "Politics and the English Language", George Orwell remarked that "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." His assertion touches on another aspect of how we use language, or perhaps in this case, of "how language uses us". I am referring here to the influence of speech habits on thought patterns. This is an aspect of language-use that, while more important than how jargon infiltrates our vocabularies or how we "misuse" language, has, up until now, received far less attention. If Orwell's comment is true and some of our foolish thoughts do find their root in our slovenly language then the connections between language and thought warrant examination.

A centrally important area of connection between language and thought is that of classification (organization, categorization). We "classify" whenever we treat something or someone as part of a group or class of things or people, usually on the basis of some shared characteristic(s). It is by means of classification that we make sense of an otherwise inchoate world of individual stones, books, fences, ideas, presidents, cars and trucks. To state the point another way, classification is necessary.

Some students of language, in fact, go so far as to say that classification determines "in large measure" the way we react to that which is classified (Wendall Johnson, *People in Quandaries*, p. 261). B.L. Whorf asserts an even stronger hypothesis than that of Johnson. He claims that language ordains the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning and builds the house of his consciousness (*Language, Thought and Reality*, p. 252).

Whorf's ideas were widely accepted initially, but have since been largely rejected for being too extreme. While there is this wide agreement that Whorf was wrong in thinking that language determines thought to such great degree, few claim that he was wrong in the general direction of his thought. Language does determine the ways in which people think to some extent.

In the classification process, language can exert its influence on thought at two points especially. First, the names or titles we give to our categories influence us and others positively or negatively about the individual things or persons we sort into those categories. This connects up with attaching labels and stereotyping, both of which are important, but neither of which can be our particular concern herein. The second sort of influence language has on thought within the broad area of classi-
fication is our concern here: that is, that we are often led on by our use of familiar, indeed well-worn, verbal categorizations with the result that we make logical or mental classifications inappropriate or inadequate to take into account that which we are thinking about or classifying. Noting the possibility of faulty thinking does not constitute a call for the abolition of categorization or organized thought. Genesis chapter 2 records how God commanded Adam to distinguish between or classify — to name — the animals. Running throughout the Bible is an underlying distinction between obedience and disobedience. In his commentary on Second Corinthians, P.E. Hughes notes that "the ultimate and radical division of persons before God is that between believers and unbelievers, between those who are in Christ and those who are not" (p. 245). Classification per se, then, is not the main concern. But when the ways we classify hinder clear thinking or actively lead us into foolishness, then we must be concerned. We will now examine a few examples from everyday speech that illustrate how we can be led astray in our thinking when we are not careful about our talking.

One obvious example of an inadequate classification system is to be found when we consider the sorts of persons who identify themselves as Christians. No simple, two-category division is adequate to account for the variety of sorts, yet the linguistic pair "conservative/liberal" frequently forces itself on the consciousness. If we accept the linguistic polarity, it will dictate, in part, the sort of thinking we do about those varieties of people. It will be with great difficulty that we would be able to think clearly about the persons in question if we were to attempt to do so using the categories furnished by the polarity in question. The trio of words often used to identify churches — "evangelistic/social action/renewal" is similarly inadequate to take into account the varied matter at hand. But, like "conservative/liberal", despite its inadequacy, it is deeply, even unnoticeably imbedded in our language and we often allow it to wrongly channel our thinking.

Notice the distinction between "church" and "para-church". As we consider the word "church" we see there are a number of senses or meanings. "Church" is used to mean local assembly or congregation, denomination or body of Christ...plus a number of other things. But "para-church", if not considered carefully, can register on the consciousness and even work its way into the consciousness as in some way outside the Church universal, the last sense of "church" listed above. We may mean to distinguish such groups or organizations from local congregations, but we possibly allow a seed of exclusivism to invade our thinking if we do not remember that "church" has many senses. When we do end up in faulty thinking such as this we should make an adjustment in our categories. But we often keep the faulty linguistic distinction because of its familiarity and make the adjustment in our understanding of the reality about us instead. In this way we construct a faulty view of the world. Exactly what Orwell said would happen takes place and our foolishness hinders our efforts.

One further polarity warrants detailed inspection, not only because it is dangerous, but because it uncovers a whole nest of logical and linguistic confusions surrounding a concept with which many Christians are properly (and some centrally) concerned: "integration". This polarity comes in various forms: we sometimes hear people say, "He missed heaven by eighteen inches, the distance from his head to his heart." Or we hear the commonplace, "Theological students' heads swell and their hearts shrink during their time of study." These two sayings, and others which, in some similar fashion, admit to a divorce between the intellectual and the spiritual, do not surprise us. At least two things foster this lack of surprise, both having to do with familiarity: the distinction explicit in the phrases is a familiar part of our thinking and the metaphorical use of "heart" is so deeply imbedded in Western thought (and, one might note, Christian thought) that it is, to use a technical term, a "dead" metaphor, one of which few people any longer take note. When we speak of the heart as the "seat" of the emotions or the source of the feelings we can tend to forget that it is merely a muscle, albeit a vital one, for pumping blood through the arterial and veinal systems. When we forget we are using "heart" metaphorically when we put it to work in this fashion, it can become a dangerous and misleading metaphor. We become victims of our own picturesque language with the result that we come to view the emotional, feeling, spiritual "part" of our lives as just that — a part of our lives. Furthermore, we come to view this "part" as separate from and opposed to rationality, thought and the intellectual "part" of our lives which we view as "seated" in the head. In short, we become trapped.

The fact that picturesqueness is identified
as part of the problem does not mean we should eradicate metaphor from our language. On the contrary, metaphor helps keep language from becoming boring, among other things. The metaphor in question — that of the heart as the seat of the emotions — might even be argued to be useful in terms of verbal economy (using fewer words to convey an idea), besides its obvious contribution of picturesqueness. But this "heart" metaphor, and the polarity of which, in this case, it is a part, refuses to relinquish its hold on our consciousness. We are hard-pressed to find new ways to speak about how the spiritual and intellectual aspects of life are inter-related. Additionally, our attempts to think about what is a problem — lagging spiritual fervor among theological students (another metaphor) — are hindered because the language and the logical categories made available by the language force us to conceive of the problem in only one, and in this case, inappropriate, way. We attempt to solve a problem according to how we conceive of the problem and if we conceive of it in the wrong way we will probably not succeed in solving it.

Some who have recognized how "heart" and "head" can come to have these dangerous senses have attempted a move in the right direction by using the word "integration". We frequently hear that some book, magazine or college will help the Christian integrate his or her "faith and learning" or "faith and life". It is probably safe to suppose that the people using "integrate" in such phrases want to demonstrate the inter-relatedness of faith and learning or faith and life; they are trying to communicate that they have some notion of "all truth being God's truth", "taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ", "thinking Christianly" (as H. Blamires discusses in The Christian Mind) or some similar idea. We would expect little protest that any school or publication should have such noble aims.

Yet phrases employing "integration" in the above ways accomplish two things that run directly counter to the purposes I attributed to the sort of people who use the word. First, "integration" persists in implying the existence of some basic division between faith and whatever it is that is to be integrated with faith. We adopt a word to indicate that we want people to understand the nature of the relations between Christian faith and all we are and do, but the word we choose constitutes an admission that the two are separate and refuse to go together easily. Thus we see that we have conceived of the problem wrongly: it is not that we want to relate two things, but that they are naturally related and we want people to view them in that way. Yet "integration" carries the connotation that we wish to join these two separate and in some elusive way, incompatible entities.

The second destructive accomplishment of "integration" is that it reduces the Christian faith to a level of logical equality with whatever it is being integrated with, whether that be "faith and learning", "faith and life", or, say, "Christianity and psychology". The question must be asked "How is the foundational 'thing' which underlies, informs, undergirds, overarches, motivates all one is and does and wants to become and do, how does this 'thing' — Christianity — integrate with one's job, one's learning or one's life?" Since the Christian faith which, in some senses, (again, what words does one use?) constitutes the basis of the person's life, is of a different logical sort from anything else which may be a "part" of that person's life, perhaps "integration" should be qualified and used with caution if it must be used.

The word "integration", then, not only admits to and continues to remind us of an old divorce we never wanted and are trying to forget, but renders "faith" the logical equivalent of whatever "part" of life it is we are talking about integrating with faith; it treats faith as logically similar to a discipline of study, a hobby or a vocation.

In light of the weaknesses of "integration" a replacement word or metaphor for it should be sought, one that has the strengths of "integration" but answers the two objections to "integration" I have raised herein. "Interwoven" (the tapestry metaphor) comes to mind as a possibility. It catches the sense of inter-relatedness better than "integration" does. Yet it logically reduces Christianity in the same, or perhaps a worse way, than "integration" does. Both criticisms must be answered for a replacement to be satisfactory.

Two further concluding remarks are in order. First, for all its drawbacks, at the present time "integration" seems to be the best word available to catch all that we mean when we talk about "integration". We thus may have no choice but to continue to use it, but we should always keep aware of how it imports other, destructive notions along with the notions we might intend at any particular time. Having begun to win the battle by recognizing some weaknesses of the "heart/head" polarity, let us not lose it by careless overuse or even careless use of "integration".
Second, and finally, since the best method of teaching the meanings of words is demonstrating how they are used in actual language, let us demonstrate what "integration" means by our own lives. The Bible says we are "new creatures" if we are in Christ. Let us let our new creature-lieness show how the spiritual is not a "part" of life at all; let us be integrated in that sense of the word.

Book Reviews

Prices are given in American dollars unless otherwise noted.


In the introduction to this book, Ericson makes clear something that not all of Solzhenitsyn's public know. Although Solzhenitsyn made public his commitment to Christianity only in the early 1970's, his faith had been hammered out on the anvil of the Archipelago years of the 1940's, when he moved from Marx to Christ. The consistent moral vision that Ericson claims for Solzhenitsyn, he insists, is based on his Christian faith and permeates all of his writing, even the earliest. Believing that the Russian novelist has been largely misunderstood and misinterpreted, Ericson sets out to explain his moral vision to two kinds of readers: the general reader (non-Christian and Christian) and specialists in the Slavic language and literature who, he believes, will bear "the major burden of mediating Solzhenitsyn to future generations of readers."

Misinterpretation of Solzhenitsyn arises mainly from the media, and although this fact is recognized by many thinking people, Ericson is to be congratulated on his courage in saying it out loud. Ericson points out how commentators and news writers fasten on Solzhenitsyn's non-literary speeches and letters, for example, "A World Split Apart" (the Harvard Address), and slip out illustrative references to the Vietnam war, pornography, television programming, etc., which comprise only fugitive passages, and blow them up to seem the burden of his message. This intellectual dishonesty he shows also in the media's strident and huffy reaction to Solzhenitsyn's exposure of the materialism and decadence of the West while, at the same time, it underplays the Russian writer's careful analysis of the underlying cause (largely secular humanism) of the decay.

To all the negative furor in the Western press to the published Letter to the Soviet Leaders, which decried Solzhenitsyn's nationalism, isolationism, authoritarianism and rejection of scientific technology, Ericson makes a single, devastating reply: "The first thing to understand about it is that it was intended to be practical advice to those aging men who actually held power in the Soviet Union. They are the audience, not Western intellectuals."

Ericson's book covers a wide spectrum of Solzhenitsyn's writings. However, the claim of Malcolm Muggeridge in the "foreword" that the author "takes the reader systematically through all Solzhenitsyn's works", cannot be substantiated. Ericson himself tells of his regret that The Oak and the Calf was not published at the time he wrote his book, and therefore he could not deal with it. Solzhenitsyn's Letter to the Third Council of the Russian Church Abroad is not mentioned, nor is his letter to the Secretariat of the Soviet Writer's Union upon learning of his dismissal from the Union on November 12, 1969 ("Blow the dust off the clock. Your watches are behind the times. Throw open the heavy curtains which are so dear to you. You do not even suspect that the day has already dawned outside.").

Significantly, the first work Ericson analyzes is the Nobel Lecture in Literature (1970). He rightly holds that only a thoughtful reading of this address will give the reader the clue to all of Solzhenitsyn's writings, for his theory of art defined in the address is indeed the only context within which all his works can be understood. Like Dorothy Sayers (The Mind of the Maker), Solzhenitsyn is convinced that art is a gift from God, and involves the exercising of the artist's God-given creative ability as "a common apprentice under God's heaven". As the artist recognizes these facts, he then realizes his indisputable responsibility to society.