

Chapter V.

SPEED, WORDS, AND CLEARNESS

1

The unseen environment is reported to us chiefly by words. These words are transmitted by wire or radio from the reporters to the editors who fit them into print. Telegraphy is expensive, and the facilities are often limited. Press service news is, therefore, usually coded. Thus a dispatch which reads,--

"Washington, D. C. June 1.--The United States regards the question of German shipping seized in this country at the outbreak of hostilities as a closed incident,"

may pass over the wires in the following form:

"Washn i. The Uni Stas rgds tq of Ger spg seized in ts cou at t outbk o hox as a clod incident."

(1) A news item saying:

"Berlin, June 1, Chancellor Wirth told the Reichstag to-day in outlining the Government's program that 'restoration and reconciliation would be the keynote of the new Government's policy.' He added that the Cabinet was determined disarmament should be carried out loyally and that disarmament would not be the occasion of the imposition of further penalties by the Allies."

may be cabled in this form:

"Berlin 1. Chancellor Wirth told t Reichstag tdy in outlining the gvts pgn tt qn restoration & reconciliation wd b the keynote f new gvts policy. qj He added ttt cabinet ws dtmd disarmament sd b carried out loyally & tt disarmament wd n b. the ocan f imposition of further penalties bi t alis."

In this second item the substance has been culled from a long speech in a foreign tongue, translated, coded, and then decoded. The operators who receive the messages transcribe them as they go along, and I am told that a good operator can write fifteen thousand or even more words per eight hour day, with a half an hour out for lunch and two ten minute periods for rest.

2

A few words must often stand for a whole succession of acts, thoughts, feelings and consequences. We read:

"Washington, Dec. 23--A statement charging Japanese military authorities with deeds more 'frightful and barbarous' than anything ever alleged to have occurred in Belgium during the war was issued here to-day by the Korean Commission, based, the Commission said, on authentic reports received by it from Manchuria."

Here eyewitnesses, their accuracy unknown, report to the makers of 'authentic

reports'; they in turn transmit these to a commission five thousand miles away. It prepares a statement, probably much too long for publication, from which a correspondent culls an item of print three and a half inches long. The meaning has to be telescoped in such a way as to permit the reader to judge how much weight to give to the news.

It is doubtful whether a supreme master of style could pack all the elements of truth that complete justice would demand into a hundred word account of what had happened in Korea during the course of several months. For language is by no means a perfect vehicle of meanings. Words, like currency, are turned over and over again, to evoke one set of images to-day, another to-morrow. There is no certainty whatever that the same word will call out exactly the same idea in the reader's mind as it did in the reporter's. Theoretically, if each fact and each relation had a name that was unique, and if everyone had agreed on the names, it would be possible to communicate without misunderstanding. In the exact sciences there is an approach to this ideal, and that is part of the reason why of all forms of world-wide cooperation, scientific inquiry is the most effective.

Men command fewer words than they have ideas to express, and language, as Jean Paul said, is a dictionary of faded metaphors. (2) The journalist addressing half a million readers of whom he has only a dim picture, the speaker whose words are flashed to remote villages and overseas, cannot hope that a few phrases will carry the whole burden of their meaning. "The words of Lloyd George, badly understood and badly transmitted," said M. Briand to the Chamber of Deputies, (3) "seemed to give the Pan-Germanists the idea that the time had come to start something." A British Prime Minister, speaking in English to the whole attentive world, speaks his own meaning in his own words to all kinds of people who will see their meaning in those words. No matter how rich or subtle--or rather the more rich and the more subtle that which he has to say, the more his meaning will suffer as it is sluiced into standard speech and then distributed again among alien minds. (4)

Millions of those who are watching him can read hardly at all. Millions more can read the words but cannot understand them. Of those who can both read and understand, a good three-quarters we may assume have some part of half an hour a day to spare for the subject. To them the words so acquired are the cue for a whole train of ideas on which ultimately a vote of untold consequences may be based. Necessarily the ideas which we allow the words we read to evoke form the biggest part of the original data of our opinions. The world is vast, the situations that concern us are intricate, the messages are few, the biggest part of opinion must be constructed in the imagination.

When we use the word "Mexico" what picture does it evoke in a resident of New York? Likely as not, it is some composite of sand, cactus, oil wells, greasers, rum-drinking Indians, testy old cavaliers flourishing whiskers and sovereignty, or perhaps an idyllic peasantry? la Jean Jacques, assailed by the prospect of smoky industrialism, and fighting for the Rights of Man. What does the word "Japan" evoke? Is it a vague horde of slant-eyed yellow men, surrounded by Yellow Perils, picture brides, fans, Samurai, banzais, art, and cherry blossoms? Or the word "alien"? According to a group of New England college students, writing in the year 1920, an alien was the following: (5)

"A person hostile to this country."

"A person against the government."

"A person who is on the opposite side."

"A native of an unfriendly country."

"A foreigner at war."

"A foreigner who tries to do harm to the country he is in."

"An enemy from a foreign land."

"A person against a country." etc....

Yet the word alien is an unusually exact legal term, far more exact than words like sovereignty, independence, national honor, rights, defense, aggression, imperialism, capitalism, socialism, about which we so readily take sides "for" or "against."

3

The power to dissociate superficial analogies, attend to differences and appreciate variety is lucidity of mind. It is a relative faculty. Yet the differences in lucidity are extensive, say as between a newly born infant and a botanist examining a flower. To the infant there is precious little difference between his own toes, his father's watch, the lamp on the table, the moon in the sky, and a nice bright yellow edition of Guy de Maupassant. To many a member of the Union League Club there is no remarkable difference between a Democrat, a Socialist, an anarchist, and a burglar, while to a highly sophisticated anarchist there is a whole universe of difference between Bakunin, Tolstoi, and Kropotkin. These examples show how difficult it might be to secure a sound public opinion about de Maupassant among babies, or about Democrats in the Union League Club.

A man who merely rides in other people's automobiles may not rise to finer discrimination than between a Ford, a taxicab, and an automobile. But let that same man own a car and drive it, let him, as the psychoanalysts would say, project his libido upon automobiles, and he will describe a difference in carburetors by looking at the rear end of a car a city block away. That is why it is often such a relief when the talk turns from "general topics" to a man's own hobby. It is like turning from the landscape in the parlor to the ploughed field outdoors. It is a return to the three dimensional world, after a sojourn in the painter's portrayal of his own emotional response to his own inattentive memory of what he imagines he ought to have seen.

We easily identify, says Ferenczi, two only partially similar things: (6) the child more easily than the adult, the primitive or arrested mind more readily than the mature. As it first appears in the child, consciousness seems to be an unmanageable mixture of sensations. The child has no sense of time, and almost none of space, it reaches for the chandelier with the same confidence that it reaches for its mother's breast, and at first with almost the same expectation. Only very gradually does function define itself. To complete inexperience this is a coherent and undifferentiated world, in which, as someone has said of a school of philosophers, all facts are born free and equal. Those facts which belong together in the world have not yet been separated from those which happen to lie side by side in the stream of consciousness.

At first, says Ferenczi, the baby gets some of the things it wants by crying for them. This is "the period of magical hallucinatory omnipotence." In its second phase the child points to the things it wants, and they are given to it. "Omnipotence by the help of magic gestures." Later, the child learns to talk, asks for what it wishes, and is partially successful. "The period of magic thoughts and magic words." Each phase may persist for certain situations, though overlaid and only visible at times, as for example, in the little harmless superstitions from which few of us are wholly free. In each phase, partial success tends to confirm that way of acting, while failure tends to stimulate the development of another. Many individuals, parties, and even nations, rarely appear to transcend the magical organization of experience. But in the more advanced sections of the most advanced peoples, trial and error after repeated failure has led to the invention of a new principle. The moon, they learn, is not moved by baying at it. Crops are not raised from the soil

by spring festivals or Republican majorities, but by sunlight, moisture, seeds, fertilizer, and cultivation. [\(7\)](#)

Allowing for the purely schematic value of Ferenczi's categories of response, the quality which we note as critical is the power to discriminate among crude perceptions and vague analogies. This power has been studied under laboratory conditions. [\(8\)](#) The Zurich Association Studies indicate clearly that slight mental fatigue, an inner disturbance of attention or an external distraction, tend to "flatten" the quality of the response. An example of the very "flat" type is the clang association (cat-hat), a reaction to the sound and not to the sense of the stimulant word. One test, for example, shows a 9% increase of clang in the second series of a hundred reactions. Now the clang is almost a repetition, a very primitive form of analogy.

4

If the comparatively simple conditions of a laboratory can so readily flatten out discrimination, what must be the effect of city life? In the laboratory the fatigue is slight enough, the distraction rather trivial. Both are balanced in measure by the subject's interest and self-consciousness. Yet if the beat of a metronome will depress intelligence, what do eight or twelve hours of noise, odor, and heat in a factory, or day upon day among chattering typewriters and telephone bells and slamming doors, do to the political judgments formed on the basis of newspapers read in street-cars and subways? Can anything be heard in the hubbub that does not shriek, or be seen in the general glare that does not flash like an electric sign? The life of the city dweller lacks solitude, silence, ease. The nights are noisy and ablaze. The people of a big city are assaulted by incessant sound, now violent and jagged, now falling into unfinished rhythms, but endless and remorseless. Under modern industrialism thought goes on in a bath of noise. If its discriminations are often flat and foolish, here at least is some small part of the reason. The sovereign people determines life and death and happiness under conditions where experience and experiment alike show thought to be most difficult. "The intolerable burden of thought" is a burden when the conditions make it burdensome. It is no burden when the conditions are favorable. It is as exhilarating to think as it is to dance, and just as natural.

Every man whose business it is to think knows that he must for part of the day create about himself a pool of silence. But in that helter-skelter which we flatter by the name of civilization, the citizen performs the perilous business of government under the worst possible conditions. A faint recognition of this truth inspires the movement for a shorter work day, for longer vacations, for light, air, order, sunlight and dignity in factories and offices. But if the intellectual quality of our life is to be improved that is only the merest beginning. So long as so many jobs are an endless and, for the worker, an aimless routine, a kind of automatism using one set of muscles in one monotonous pattern, his whole life will tend towards an automatism in which nothing is particularly to be distinguished from anything else unless it is announced with a thunderclap. So long as he is physically imprisoned in crowds by day and even by night his attention will flicker and relax. It will not hold fast and define clearly where he is the victim of all sorts of pother, in a home which needs to be ventilated of its welter of drudgery, shrieking children, raucous assertions, indigestible food, bad air, and suffocating ornament.

Occasionally perhaps we enter a building which is composed and spacious; we go to a theatre where modern stagecraft has cut away distraction, or go to sea, or into a quiet place, and we remember how cluttered, how capricious, how superfluous and clamorous is the ordinary urban life of our time. We learn to understand why our

addled minds seize so little with precision, why they are caught up and tossed about in a kind of tarantella by headlines and catch-words, why so often they cannot tell things apart or discern identity in apparent differences.

5

But this external disorder is complicated further by internal. Experiment shows that the speed, the accuracy, and the intellectual quality of association is deranged by what we are taught to call emotional conflicts. Measured in fifths of a second, a series of a hundred stimuli containing both neutral and hot words may show a variation as between 5 and 32 or even a total failure to respond at all. (9) Obviously our public opinion is in intermittent contact with complexes of all sorts; with ambition and economic interest, personal animosity, racial prejudice, class feeling and what not. They distort our reading, our thinking, our talking and our behavior in a great variety of ways.

And finally since opinions do not stop at the normal members of society, since for the purposes of an election, a propaganda, a following, numbers constitute power, the quality of attention is still further depressed. The mass of absolutely illiterate, of feeble-minded, grossly neurotic, undernourished and frustrated individuals, is very considerable, much more considerable there is reason to think than we generally suppose. Thus a wide popular appeal is circulated among persons who are mentally children or barbarians, people whose lives are a morass of entanglements, people whose vitality is exhausted, shut-in people, and people whose experience has comprehended no factor in the problem under discussion. The stream of public opinion is stopped by them in little eddies of misunderstanding, where it is discolored with prejudice and far fetched analogy.

A "broad appeal" takes account of the quality of association, and is made to those susceptibilities which are widely distributed. A "narrow" or a "special" appeal is one made to those susceptibilities which are uncommon. But the same individual may respond with very different quality to different stimuli, or to the same stimuli at different times. Human susceptibilities are like an alpine country. There are isolated peaks, there are extensive but separated plateaus, and there are deeper strata which are quite continuous for nearly all mankind. Thus the individuals whose susceptibilities reach the rarefied atmosphere of those peaks where there exists an exquisite difference between Frege and Peano, or between Sassetta's earlier and later periods, may be good staunch Republicans at another level of appeal, and when they are starving and afraid, indistinguishable from any other starving and frightened person. No wonder that the magazines with the large circulations prefer the face of a pretty girl to any other trade mark, a face, pretty enough to be alluring, but innocent enough to be acceptable. For the "psychic level" on which the stimulus acts determines whether the public is to be potentially a large or a small one.

6

Thus the environment with which our public opinions deal is refracted in many ways, by censorship and privacy at the source, by physical and social barriers at the other end, by scanty attention, by the poverty of language, by distraction, by unconscious constellations of feeling, by wear and tear, violence, monotony. These limitations upon our access to that environment combine with the obscurity and complexity of the facts themselves to thwart clearness and justice of perception, to substitute misleading fictions for workable ideas, and to deprive us of adequate

checks upon those who consciously strive to mislead.

1. Phillip's Code.
2. Cited by White, *Mechanisms of Character Formation*.
3. Special Cable to *The New York Times*, May 25, 1921, by Edwin L. James.
4. In May of 1921, relations between England and France were strained by the insurrection of M. Korfanty in Upper Silesia. The London Correspondence of the *Manchester Guardian* (May 20, 1921), contained the following item:

"The Franco-English Exchange in Words.

"In quarters well acquainted with French ways and character I find a tendency to think that undue sensibility has been shown by our press and public opinion in the lively and at times intemperate language of the French press through the present crisis. The point was put to me by a well-informed neutral observer in the following manner.

"Words, like money, are tokens of value. They represent meaning, therefore, and just as money, their representative value goes up and down. The French word 'étonnant' was used by Bossuet with a terrible weight of meaning which it has lost to-day. A similar thing can be observed with the English word 'awful.' Some nations constitutionally tend to understate, others to overstate. What the British Tommy called an unhealthy place could only be described by an Italian soldier by means of a rich vocabulary aided with an exuberant mimicry. Nations that understate keep their word-currency sound. Nations that overstate suffer from inflation in their language.

"Expressions such as 'a distinguished scholar,' 'a clever writer,' must be translated into French as 'a great savant,' 'an exquisite master.' It is a mere matter of exchange, just as in France one pound pays 46 francs, and yet one knows that that does not increase its value at home. Englishmen reading the French press should endeavour to work out a mental operation similar to that of the banker who puts back francs into pounds, and not forget in so doing that while in normal times the change was 25 it is now 46 on account of the war. For there is a war fluctuation on word exchanges as well as on money exchanges.

"The argument, one hopes, works both ways, and Frenchmen do not fail to realize that there is as much value behind English reticence as behind their own exuberance of expression."

5. *The New Republic*: December 29, 1920, p. 142.
6. Internat. Zeitschr, f. Arztl. Psychoanalyse, 1913. Translated and republished by Dr. Ernest Jones in S. Ferenczi, *Contributions to Psychoanalysis*, Ch. VIII, *Stages in the Development of the Sense of Reality*.
7. Ferenczi, being a pathologist, does not describe this maturer period where experience is organized as equations, the phase of realism on the basis of science.
8. See, for example, Diagnostische Assoziation Studien, conducted at the Psychiatric University Clinic in Zurich under the direction of Dr. C. G. Jung. These tests were carried on principally under the so-called Krapelin-Aschaffenburg classification. They show reaction time, classify response to the stimulant word as inner, outer, and clang, show separate results for the first and second hundred words, for reaction time and reaction quality when the subject is distracted by holding an idea in mind, or when he replies while beating time with a metronome. Some of the results are summarized in Jung, *Analytical Psychology*, Ch. II, transl. by Dr. Constance E. Long.
9. Jung, *Clark Lectures*.

