

The Power and Mystery of Words

By Walter J. Ong, S.J.

INSTRUCTION and research in a university are inseparable from deep involvement with language. Today we sometimes hear how primitive peoples entertain the bizarre idea that words give you power over things, as though this were a belief which intelligent persons can no longer in any way tolerate. But words do give you power over things. Can you imagine studying mathematics or physics without learning the words these sciences work with? If you want power over chemicals, you had better learn their names and a lot of related words besides. No vocabulary, no scientific control. A computer's work means nothing unless somewhere along the line someone *says* what it means. Without words, we are helpless.

Although all departments in a university must attend in one way or another to language, certain de-

partments make language in various ways the direct object of study. At Saint Louis University these include Philosophy, Psychology, Classical Languages, English, Modern Languages, Communication and Theater (known to older alumni by its earlier name as the Department of Speech), Communication Disorders, Marketing, Neurology, Psychiatry, Orthodontics, Biblical Languages and Literature, Education, History—and others, including many courses in Law. The University does not have a department of linguistics, but this subject as such is studied in several of the departments just mentioned, and the recently approved multidisciplinary program has made possible a Ph.D. in Linguistics, toward which several graduate students are now working.

The collection of articles in the present issue of the *Saint Louis University Magazine* does not give complete coverage to all research and teaching concerned with language at the University. But it does give a sampling which may hint at the spread of this vast subject of language. I have been asked by the editor, himself disabblingly adept at verbal persuasion, to lead off with some observations suggesting some of the deeper implications of language study.

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LET US start from a prime truth about words. Words are sounds. They are not “signs” in a strict sense at all. “Sign” suggests at root something visually apprehended, coming from the Latin *signum*, which referred to the standard that ancient Roman military units carried aloft to identify themselves to the eye. This is not what a word is. Real words cannot be seen. They can only be heard. If they are in some ways like a “sign,” they are also fundamentally quite different. You need words to tell you what signs mean more than you need signs to tell you what words mean. Can you draw a picture of a sound? Or a picture expressing what each individual word in this paragraph means? A picture of “about”? To show what “about” looks like? Or “like”? Or of “which”? Or “suggests”? Or a picture of “fundamentally”? Not pictures which you *say* mean these things, but pictures which simply do?

Every human language is based on sound. Human thought is allied to the sound world in a way in which it is not allied to any other sensory field. Even congenitally deaf persons learn to think and speak by getting themselves indirectly into the world of sounded words around them, which has been created by persons who can speak and hear.

We pick words off the written or printed page by sight, but we do so by reconverting them orally or in our imagination into sounds. Written and printed words are words only insofar as we pretend they are. They are in fact only marks which we set up to suggest sounds to us. They are not really words at all. We are likely to be betrayed by our scientific, technological, visualist bias here, thinking that what we see is more real than what we hear. But seen words are bogus words. You do not see real sounds (voice prints are not real sounds). The only way to perceive a sound directly is to hear it. Real sounds are invisible. Spoken, sounded words are the real ones, although semi-educated persons have long been convinced that the real words are in the dictionary.

This is not to say that writing and print are not of major importance. They give words new and marvelous potential. Without writing and print civilization cannot advance. This is true more than ever in our electronic age, when writing and print are not only with us but shifting their roles as they enter into complex alliances with other modes of communication. Without writing and print, what is on this page could reach very few persons. But writing and print are still secondary verbal phenomena.

Our thought ties into the world of sound more intimately than it ties into any other sensory field. Nothing else expresses thoughts so readily as words do. Nothing else makes thought possible as words do. It has been said that one picture is worth a thousand words. If this is so, why say it? Imagine trying to express what is in an encyclopedia entirely in pictures, with no words—none at all, either in your mind or anyone else’s. The task would be impossible and indeed in the strictest sense inconceivable.

Why our thinking ties into the world of sound so immediately and intimately remains to be studied in much further detail. No one knows the full story. I have suggested in *The Presence of the Word* and again in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* that probably the central reason for the intimate union of thought and words in every human culture ever known is the way in which sound relates to time, to present existence (which is the only real existence), and to power.

Sound exists only when it is going out of existence, and so do real words. When I pronounce the word “existence,” by the time I get to the “tence” the “exis” is gone. And it has to be gone. Writing and print suggest that all of a word can be present at once. It cannot. Real words, sounded words, the words that we speak or read, have to be run through sequentially. That is, not only the series of words, but also the parts of the individual words must be taken one after the other, either out loud or in our imagination.

The Homeric poems, which come from a culture without writing, sing of “winged words.” Words fly away. This does not mean merely that they depart. It also means that they are strong. Winged flight takes tremendous energy. And “winged words,” sounded words, real words, signal forceful action. Unlike the other sensory fields, sound always signals the present use of power. A primitive hunter can see a buffalo, smell a buffalo, touch a buffalo, and taste a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert or dead. But if he *hears* a buffalo, he had better watch out. Something is going on. To activate any of the senses, of course, power is needed—as that of light waves for sight. But with the other senses, while we may know that they require physical force, we do not necessarily perceive the power itself as we do with sound.

Persons from oral cultures, such as still exist in the nontechnologized areas of the world, know well that words have power because when they think of words they think commonly of real words, sounded words. Especially in the United States, which certainly has the most literate set of mind the world has ever seen, we find it hard to believe that words are always primarily, radically, and irreducibly sounds.

Or, even if we admit that they are, we are likely to misunderstand what this means. We readily think of sound in terms of wave lengths and oscillograph patterns and perhaps voice prints. But analyses of this sort are not sound, although they may be beautiful in themselves and absolutely necessary if you want to study sound. Your ears do not and cannot perceive oscillograph patterns. Only sound. Wave lengths and diagrams and voice prints are visual analogues—extraordinarily valuable ones—for the reality of sound. You work out something in the visual field that sound is like. But that is all: sound is not what you can picture. Sound cannot be completely reduced to any other sensory field. Sound is not exactly like anything else and words are not exactly like anything else either. There is no visually apprehensible model you can construct which will ad-

equately represent what goes on when we use words. There is no way fully to picture verbal communication.

Because we are so conditioned to associate words with writing and print, the sense of many profound statements may elude us or come to us only weakly. When the Gospel according to John opens, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," the evangelist—even though he may have been writing—was obviously not thinking of the written word or much less of a printed one. He was thinking of the human word as some kind of analogue of the divine, and the human word as it comes to us in living sound, vibrant, full of power, alive. But if man's spoken word can thus suggest the Word of God, it also differs vastly from God's because it is evanescent. Man's word is powerful, but it also is perishing, whereas "the word of the Lord endures forever." God's word however, in its permanence is not like our writing so much as it is like our silence, out of which our words emerge and which endures. The Word who is God's Son was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. And when He became flesh, what happened was not at all like reducing the living world of sound, where the spoken word has its being, to the quasi-permanence of an inscribed surface. It was like the embedding of speech and silence in a living body.

We often think of words as "media," or of communication as existing in a "medium." This is another attempt to picture words, to project them on a visual field, and it creates as many difficulties as it solves. A medium means something in between. What words do is precisely annihilate the in-betweenness which separates you from me and me from you. When I speak to you, I am inviting you to enter into my consciousness, and I am entering into yours. When you listen to me, you pretend that you are saying the same things I say to find whether they make sense. When I speak, I listen to myself to see if I am making sense to you. The listener speaks while the speaker listens. Words are invitations to community, to sharing, to existence in a non-medium.

Because community depends so much on language, some of the deepest divisions in mankind today exist for the reason that different groups speak different languages. In many developing countries, this problem is massive. Nigerians, for example, speak many different languages—not merely different dialects, but tongues as different as English and Russian. No citizen of this large country—56,000,000 inhabitants—can talk to all his fellow citizens unless he uses languages foreign to either him or them or to both him and them. China and countless other countries have similar problems. No matter how few speakers it has, every language is a treasure in itself, but our multitude of languages create vast human problems.

Languages provide our thought with openings into reality. If a particular language does not offer a ready way to speak of a particular aspect of reality, you are likely not to think about that particular aspect. There is no way in French to say "smooth." In English I can say that the window pane is smooth, the lawn is smooth,

my cheek is smooth (if I have shaved recently), and the asphalt tile floor is smooth. In French there is no readily available concept which you could apply this way to all these things. You would have to say of the window pane that it is *lisse* (slick-smooth). My cheek might be *molle* (soft-smooth). The lawn might be the same or it might be "well-clipped" or "evenly mowed" or some such thing. The asphalt tile floor would simply be *uni*—which means made up of small pieces united in such a way that if you run your thumb or finger over them you don't feel the joints very much. Since there is no way in English to express this concept very economically, we commonly do not refer to such a quality of a floor with this Gallic specificity. We do not have that particular window into reality, *uni*, as the French do not have our particular window "smooth."

But the window opened by any given language can be utilized by other languages. If we wanted to deal with the concept expressed by the French *uni*, we would do what we have normally always done in such cases. We would simply lift the word into English. We have done this with the French *milieu*, which means both the middle and everything around it. By contrast, our perhaps best alternative word, "environment" (an earlier borrowing from the French), puts what is around us at a kind of arms length. So, to gain a concept we needed, we formed the concept *milieu* by picking up the suggestion in the French term. By and large, the richest and most sensitive languages are those which have "mongrelized" or "corrupted" themselves by much borrowing.

It has been said that because everybody expresses himself in words, everybody thinks that he can talk about them. As a matter of fact, it is very difficult to talk about words and make sense. These brief thoughts here, if they do anything, can do no more than convey some idea of the mystery that words are, of their richness and their manifold relationship to the human lifeworld.

THE OTHER articles in this issue of the *Saint Louis University Magazine* bring out some particularly interesting ways of studying the phenomenon of language. Dr. Barclay treats the fascinating question as to how we get into language as infants. Dr. Finch shows that the language or languages we learn, whatever they may be, have built into them a tremendously long and involved history. Some languages have become more versatile than others, but there are no simple, primitive languages. Although he does not make this specific point, Dr. Finch's article does suggest the basic linguistic truth that a word means what its history has been. Father O'Connell and Miss Kowal remind us that pauses and silence are integral parts of speech—a truth of deep psychological significance. Dr. Seelye, besides showing the warm human concern which work with the actual speech problems of individuals demands, brings home the truth that speech has power. Thus an impairment of speech is a major problem for any individual and not just an incidental disability. Language is of the essence of human existence.■