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**Equality in Language**  
**Aspects of the Theory of Linguistic Equality**

**Peter Griffiths**

**Abstract**

This dissertation is an essay about the assumptions that make the systematic study of language possible. It attempts to refine and make explicit ill-defined ideas which underpin the most fruitful developments in modern linguistics. It charts the evolution of the concept of linguistic equality and its significance in many branches of study; and it tries to elaborate and sophisticate an analysis of the implications of the idea.

It attempts to test several hypotheses: that, at some point in the first quarter of the twentieth century, linguistic equality became "an idea whose time had come"; that the idea became a covert hegemonic concept and a necessary if insufficient precondition for all thinking and research about language.

There is no pretence that definitive answers have been given; only a hope that interesting and worthwhile questions have been asked.

**Equality in Language**  
**Aspects of the Theory of Linguistic Equality**

**Peter Griffiths**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of

**M.A. in Applied Linguistics**

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**School of English**

September 1990



14 OCT 1992

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## **Bibliography**

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## **Dedication**

To Esther, Jesse and Fleur; and my dear friends on the Durham M.A.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to express my warmest thanks to my Supervisor, Dr. Maggie Tallerman; and my gratitude to all the teaching staff on the M.A. in Applied Linguistics who have given such stimulating support



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1. Prophecy without honour: the idea and ideal of equality

Superficially, human beings are extremely dissimilar. Some are young, some old; some female, some male; some light-skinned, some dark. Every human that has ever lived has been distinguishable from every other human by appearance, by voice, by fingerprints, and so on. In character, too, huge extremes of behaviour are well known, from the kindest and most patient to the cruellest and most belligerent.

Vested interests of all kinds - ethnic, regional, national and commercial - have long played on these superficial and highly observable differences for their own questionable purposes. Yet at all times, there have not been lacking visionaries who could see beyond merely shallow and deceptive appearances. For closer and better-informed examination revealed far more enduring and significant similarities between all human beings. In the past 200 years, and more especially since the American and French Revolutions, more and more people have come to accept the fundamental unity and sameness of the human race. Many have striven (so far with limited success and many setbacks) to transform this profound insight into a permanent state of society, in which human rights and dignity are recognised as an embodiment of this basic human equality. Further, we could say that, in 1990, we have to recognise our own equality or perish amidst wars and the fouling of the earth.

Superficially, languages are extremely dissimilar too. To the speaker of one language others are unintelligible streams of sounds, without shape or sense. Presently there



are about 4500 different languages, the majority mutually incomprehensible. Gradually, however, many scholars have come to feel that there is a fundamental level in which all languages are the same. Indeed, if human beings (beneath the baffling intricacy of appearances) have the same essential qualities and natures, why should language, a quintessentially human characteristic, not partake of this essential unity?

The assertion of the essential or fundamental sameness or similarity of languages has taken many forms. To some it has appeared in the *limitation* of, say, the number of phonemes which are thought to constitute the basic building blocks for the sound system of all languages. For others it has often been a matter of finding universal meanings and intentions that are believed to underlie the thoughts expressed by language. For others still it has been a question of isolating the rules which are thought to provide a common basis for our ability to acquire, understand and produce language. And for others again it has been a matter of building a universal international language out of those that already exist.

Throughout recorded history, the assertion of human and now linguistic equality has been the task of a minuscule minority: prophets without honour, usually pilloried and persecuted as cranks by the purveyors of conventional wisdom. In the last few centuries, however, the tide has begun to turn. An ever-accumulating mass of inescapable evidence grows apace in the natural and social sciences; and this evidence suggests that the hitherto despised view is actually consonant with everything our best knowledge tells us about the world. Whether the "truth" about equality can survive becoming an orthodoxy is another matter; there is still far to go.

Another highly significant feature of egalitarian ideology since Rousseau has been its tendency to favour *diversity*. A belief that humans are equal has not, generally, been construed to mean that they are exactly the same, or ought to be made to conform to one standard. Indeed, with some serious lapses (of which the Soviet Union has furnished the grossest example) egalitarians have tended to be at the forefront of the struggle for human rights and freedoms. And these can never mean anything unless they include the right to think, speak and act differently from each other.

Likewise, some linguistic egalitarians have (often implicitly) been at pains to stress that their concerns include most of language rights and language variety. In part this springs from the fundamental liberal belief that no individual should be deprived of something they wish to retain, unless the survival of the human race (or at least of other individuals) may be said to depend on such deprivation. But here a doubt enters. For while a belief in human equality might be said to entail, or at least imply, a belief in linguistic equality, does commitment to linguistic equality *entail* devotion to perpetuating language diversity, as the proponents of linguistic human rights argue? Or does it rather push us in the "Esperanto direction". If individual languages do not (as egalitarians *tend* to think) uniquely preserve and carry cultural values; if, in other words, a language is not essential for the survival of a culture (and after all, Greek and Latin cultures have done pretty well without a living language), then may not the myriad of languages actually constitute a bar to human equality? The notion of linguistic equality may, like many other fruitful concepts, be highly paradoxical in its implications.

## 1.2. The Theory of Linguistic Equality

There should be good reasons for calling any idea a theory. It is employed here as a way of "interpreting, criticising and unifying established generalisations" (McLaughlin 1987, p3). A theory should serve several purposes and possess various qualities. The first is the *unifying and comprehending purpose*. A theory *reduces* a bafflingly large amount of knowledge to manageable proportions, and thus makes it possible to organise data into meaning. The world is indeed blurred and thus unknowable without the simplifying and clarifying lens of theory. Secondly, theories help *forecasting*, and should assist us to create testable hypotheses which can embody further predictions. And thirdly, a theory should and must transform our understanding of what we think we know. They thus alter our relationship to the world and our idea of the world. In this sense, a theory is a prerequisite for both changing thinking and changing reality.

A good theory should also have several qualities. The theory of linguistic equality should meet certain *criteria for adequacy*. It should be *observationally* adequate: that is, it should be able to indicate in what ways languages are "equal". It should be *descriptively* adequate if it can do this and, furthermore, tell us *why* these features should be considered to constitute equality of languages. And, finally, it must be *explanatorily* adequate. That is, it must be able to explain why languages have acquired their egalitarian features, how such characteristics help us to understand languages generally, and how they may assist us in understanding the acquisition of language by children and adults (Radford 1988, p29-30). In some way, it should thus make sense of the past, present and future.

Next, a good theory should be enormously *practical* and reasonably simple. It should be fertile in its practical applications and implications. To be such it should be lucid but not dogmatic, strongly delineated but capable of adaptation and the absorption of new ideas and research. Because of this, it must contain *empirical elements*. For a theory possessed of potent political, social and moral implications must be clearly demarcated from wishful thinking and pipe dreams. Equality must be "out there," in the world and its multitude of languages, not merely a creation of fecund and overheated optimistic minds. Simplicity too is important to counterbalance such sanguine idealism. Negatively, the theory of linguistic equality should not be so over-elaborate as to allow incessant evasion of contrary evidence.

Last, not least, and in keeping with most contemporary thinking in the social and natural sciences, our theory must be *falsifiable*. It must therefore be formulated in such a way that it admits of disproof, if not of proof. If it is worth its salt, it will be both open to disconfirmation and be able to stand the test of searching and unfriendly examination. We cannot verify the proposition that one language is equal to another, despite the enormous balance of evidence; but we can refute the statement.

The purpose of this dissertation is to pose stimulating questions, not to provide definitive answers. Tentatively, I think the theory of linguistic equality developed in the following section does meet, at least partially, the foregoing criteria; and the application of them will be briefly outlined in the conclusion.

### **1.3. Defining the Elements of the Theory**

Although the theory of linguistic equality is in a sense very old, the formulation of it in logical, lucid and elegant terms is in its infancy. And the theory is protean. Some

might feel that it is not so much one theory as many. Here we shall rather say that there is, behind much of the thinking about language since the Enlightenment, a mother theory which has given birth to several offspring. Some (like the notion of language universals) have become strong and independent - whilst others are still too attached to their parent to be considered autonomous.

*Equality* is the state of being equal. Underlying and embodied in the usage since the 1780s has been the notion, not of mathematical or surface identity, but of fundamental similarity, or deep sameness. This is the sense in which the term will be employed here.

*Language* is a more exacting definitional problem. It would be easy (indeed too easy) to think that the whole issue of language equality could be shown to be a terminological mirage called up by conflicting definitions of language. Probably the most influential redefinition comes from Chomsky: "From now on I will consider a language to be a set (finite or infinite) of sentences, each finite in length and constructed out of a finite set of elements" (Chomsky 1957, p13). But this definition does fly in the face of normal usage. The following may approach more closely what most language users actually consider language to be. Language is

- a) *a system of sounds, words, patterns, etc. used by humans to communicate thoughts and feelings (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary 1988).*
- b) *"Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (Sapir 1921, p8).*
- c) *"A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group co-operates" (Bloch and Trager, quoted in Lyons 1981, p4).*
- d) *A language is "the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols" (Hall, quoted in ibid).*

Sapir's definition (b) has two immense advantages. It does not tautologically presume language equality; and with the visionary foresight characteristic of this thinker it embraces the possibility that non-vocal, non-auditory systems like sign language may be full and complete languages in their own right.

Without unduly labouring a point prior to the presentation of evidence it does seem that none of these formulations, not even Chomsky's, absolutely presupposes equality in the sense of the latter term normally encountered in academic literature. Even the broadest assumption about structural properties, communicative function or cooperative purposes does not presuppose equivalence in logicality, complexity and even less in expressiveness or communicativeness. Yet, as we shall argue, it is actually *these* assumptions of equivalence (and even interchangeability) which actually account for any advances in thinking about language to which our century may lay claim. As we follow the tortuous road of linguistic thought, with its hairpins and cul-de-sacs, we shall notice a presence in the intellectual landscape. Whether the view of language be formalist or functionalist, rationalist or empiricist, and whichever definition of language we plump for, the reality of linguistic equality becomes incontestable. It is both the direction in which linguistic thought is tending and the principal cause of that movement. Linguistic equality is a "necessary truth" of the kind described by Leibnitz. Such a truth,

*"must have principles whose proof does not depend on examples, nor consequently on the testimony of the senses, although without the senses it would never occur to us to think of them".*

#### **1.4. A tripartite formulation.**

1. *Formal "Primary" Equality:* all languages are equally logical, rule-governed and complex. This implies:

2. *Functional "Secondary" Equality*: all languages and varieties of languages are equally communicative, and equally capable of expressing any idea that can be thought.

These two statements may lead to:

3. *Social and Moral Equality*: all languages are of equal worth.

The third assertion is of course ambiguous: in part it merely recapitulates what has been said in the first two: in part it dramatically extends it. This extension lies outside the scope of this work, though it will be alluded to on many points. For, although the three propositions, in my thinking, constitute a genuine trinity of truth about the real world, few would probably accept them. Most language users (at least in my straw poll of non-academics) actually think that languages are highly unequal in logicity, expressiveness and worth. When fused with immense social, political, racial and other inequalities, such a disposition goes far towards explaining the remarkably unequal treatment that languages receive. The linguist who accepts (as many implicitly do) the full theory of linguistic equality and yet defends unequal treatment of languages may well be guilty, if not of logical, then of psychological bad faith an "is" does not entail an "ought", but may imply one. But all this, alas, is the subject for another essay.



## Chapter 2

# Language Equality in Linguistic Theory. The Adventures of an Idea.

### 2.1. The late 20th Century consensus

Ideas, like the idea that all languages are at some vitally profound level the same, do not spring fully accoutred from their creator's brains. It is probably true that the principal triumph of twentieth century linguistics has been to establish (amongst a small and perhaps uninfluential band of academic linguists) that all languages are equal as languages (Hudson 1980, p191). But the exact process by which this stage was reached remains, and perhaps forever will remain, unclear. My own belief, baldly stated, is that thinking about language is governed by what we may loosely term social forces. It certainly seems inconceivable that an idea like linguistic equality could ever have been conceived or articulated without historically prior notions of human equality, though these, often pushed underground, may well be coterminous with the history of the human race.

Believers in primitive communism (as opposed the "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" life that Hobbes believed the original humans to have lived) think that a high degree of social and personal equality is "natural" in the earliest societies. And since human ideologies may mirror, as well as generate, social forms, we may speculate that the concept of human equality has a long, intricate and largely unknowable history. And perhaps the history of the concept of linguistic equality is equally long. In any case, to study ideas of any kind is an education in living with doubt, paradox and

ambiguity. That early modern Europe (and its colonial offspring) could at once be the home and stamping ground for the recent elaboration of egalitarian ideals and a bitter antagonist and violator to those ideals is an uncomfortable contradiction. By the last decade of the twentieth century lip-service to the maxim of theoretical linguistic equality has acquired a truistic feel about it. Many general textbooks make obeisance to the dictum. Many formulations have been essayed. One is that languages are equal because they are all cognitively complex. A second, that they are all equally logical; a third, that they are all rule-governed; and a fourth, that they are all capable of expressing any idea that has ever been thought or could ever be thought. Another might be that the equality of languages resides in the fact that they can all generate an infinitude of sentences from a finite and listable number of rules and lexical items. A sixth formulation concentrates on the impossibility of linguistic progress: there are no "primitive" languages, and therefore no demonstrable correlation between cultural development and linguistic sophistication, from rude barbarism to elegant complexity, or vice versa.

All these formulations derive from ideas and assumptions about the *intrinsic properties of languages themselves*. A different perspective is gained if we focus instead on the *capabilities of human beings*. Since, arguably, language concerns the capacities of the mind, and all human minds, in their native potential, are equal, then linguistic equality may stem from this working hypothetical truth. And another perspective is provided by the intellectually ingenuous insistence that linguistics must be descriptive not prescriptive: this, it may be said, presupposes an equality, or at least an equal interest, in the languages to be analysed. To be sure there are divergences between those who feel that the equality of languages is demonstrable, or derivable from the

"facts" about language, and those who feel that equality is not so much an empirical finding, or a verifiable or falsifiable assertion, but an ideological statement, or an assertion of the null hypothesis. But despite differences like these, we find even the skeptical proponents of the latter position gravitating back to a moderate statement of linguistic equality (Milroy 1985, p15). The whole notion has become very deeply embedded in the structure of thinking about language.

## **2.2. Origins**

An ever-regressive quest for ideological origins is fraught with perils and may be futile. The history of linguistic thought has been bedevilled by both ethnocentric and glossocentric thinking - both incompatible with a belief in linguistic equality and both intellectually disabling. Here it must suffice to note that one diachronic strand which unravels towards an egalitarian position is the search for language universals. At the onset of the seventeenth century Roger Bacon wrote that "Grammar is substantially the same in all languages, even though they may vary accidentally" (Lyons 1968, p333). This marked a welcome escape from the tedious sectarian attempts to find universal origins of language, a recursive obsession of early thinkers.

Traditional language education in Europe, both before and after Bacon's time, descended from the glossocentric work of Greek and Roman grammarians, exemplified best by Dionysius Thrax. Since these classically fossilised dead languages became marks of sacerdotal status and social exclusiveness, this spurious "universalism" served to underwrite destructive attempts to latinize English, and other bizarre prescriptive endeavours; a memorable example of dubious practices buttressed by erroneous theory.

Prescriptivism, essentially a form of linguistic anti-egalitarianism, enjoyed a long hegemony, founded largely on social, racial and ideological prejudice. Its demise, amongst serious students at least, was presaged by insights like Bacon's; and by the Jansenist Port Royal grammarians who partook of Cartesian rationalism and were attracted by the notion of a universal thought structure common to human beings (Robins 1967, p116). The knell of prescriptivism grows louder in Herder's famous essay of 1772 which argues for the inextricability of language and thought. Earlier thinkers, from Aristotle onwards, had assumed that language depended on prior cogitation and abstraction (op. cit. p151). Given an interdependency of language and thought, the thought patterns of people should be studied through the mother tongue. By contrast, Herder maintained that language and thought advanced symbiotically, and were together the distinguishing mark of humanity.

In a manner now familiar, Herder suggested a kind of human equipotentiality for both thought and language. Language, he agreed with Süssmilch and the pervasive "divine origin" school, could not have been invented by humans. Without reason Adam (and, presumably, Eve too) could not have been taught language, not even by God. He continues:

"Parents never teach their children language without the latter at the same time inventing it themselves. The former only direct their children's attention to the difference between things by certain verbal signs.... (and) by means of language only facilitate and accelerate for the children the rise of reason."

Innatist hypothesis like this were of central importance to the growth and intellectual consolidation of the notion of linguistic equality, and to the steady extension of egalitarian ideals generally since the Enlightenment. Herder subscribed to a dubious monogenetic theory of language origins, but his argument for the universality of

human language rings down the years, and his notion that humans are, by nature and endowment, everywhere the same, leads straight to dangerously radical conclusions in both linguistics and politics (Fromkin and Rodman 1988, p26).

But once again, ideas do not spring perfectly smooth and consistent from their creator's brains. Herder's work is still disfigured by the notion that "primitive" languages contain little abstract vocabulary and an inept grammatical structure: and it was not until as recently as 1972 that Labov finally demonstrated that not merely languages, but language varieties, are formally equal. More representative of much eighteenth and nineteenth century linguistic thought is the lamentable and egregious Lord Monboddo, in whose writings non-empiricist and non-rationalist prejudices combine in a grotesque farrago of ethnocentrism. "Primitive" languages were said to be devoid of syntactic categories, lexically impoverished, and rule-less. Chinese was "exceedingly defective" and accounted for that peoples' philosophical backwardness! (op. cit. p59).

Variations on these views remained popular among linguists until the twentieth century, and are still widely encountered among the population at large. It would be rash to assume that more than a fraction of the British population has, by 1990, assimilated any of the cluster of beliefs that make up the idea of linguistic egalitarianism. Indeed linguistic nationalism may well be more entrenched than other aspects of xenophobia.

### **2.3. Rationalism, Romanticism and Historical Linguistics.**

Comparative and historical linguistics, beginning perhaps with Dante, was slow to erode the foundation of prejudice. Monogenetic thinking, closely linked to

Christianity and the attempt to prove that Hebrew was the universal linguistic ancestor, was occasionally attacked, as by Scaliger in the sixteenth century. Four thinkers living and writing at the turn of the nineteenth century, Rask, Grimm, Bopp and von Humboldt mark the real beginnings of comparative and historical thinking about language and thus the substantial onset of egalitarian ideas in linguistics.

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) in particular stressed the creative linguistic capacity innate in the mind of every speaker. Language was not a mere product, and speakers have infinite power over finite resources. From our late twentieth century standpoint von Humboldt's thinking was patchy, since he followed Herder in thinking that each language quintessentially expressed the individuality of every nation or ethnic group (Stern 1983, p247). Here the way was open for the development of a racial and national mysticism, in which the Nazis were the fittingly hideous climax. And von Humboldt thought that Sanskrit was the world's best developed language because of his preference for synthetic languages, with Chinese as the most isolating and therefore least developed.

Nonetheless Chomsky was quite probably right in discerning in the Herder-von Humboldt tradition an acknowledgement of the value of cultural and linguistic diversity which has become the hallmark of the more consistent and serious form of linguistic egalitarianism. Von Humboldt, in particular, is seen as standing "directly in the crosscurrents of rationalist and romanticist thought and whose work is in many ways the culmination as well as the terminal point of those developments (Chomsky 1966, p2).

On the other hand, a tendency to see developments in "scientific" thinking as *necessarily* marked by a growing proclivity towards "value-free" thinking is scarcely borne out by the story of comparative and historical linguistics in nineteenth century Germany (the stamping-ground for thinking and research in that century just as America has been in ours). "Linguistic Darwinism" appropriated the more scientific side of Darwin's thinking and then suffused it with a great deal of anti-scientific and ahistorical thinking. This was highly ethnocentric and extremely anti-egalitarian, and led, inter alia, to the prediction that Indo-European languages would naturally and inevitably triumph in the survival of the linguistically fittest, a view that has disagreeably modern echoes in some of the modern proponents of various global languages.

#### **2.4. de Saussure and the Dawn of Modern Linguistics**

Perhaps the greatest single event which served as both a landmark and a pointer on the tortuous road to a securer conception of linguistic equality, was the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Generale*, published posthumously in 1916. Against the diachronic approach to language sponsored by the nineteenth century neo-grammarians, de Saussure stressed that a synchronic outlook could be both scientific and explanatory. Synchronic explanations were *structural*, historical ones *causal*. But here our interest lies not so much in de Saussure as a formulator of structuralism but as the creator of the *langue/parole* distinction which has inadvertently played an intriguing part in egalitarian thinking in modern linguistics. While neo-grammarian historicism had often succumbed to the illusions of linguistic superiority, it was much less easy to think of languages, (or language varieties for that

matter) as inferior or superior when they were studied as "forme, non substance." Detached from the complexities of human (as well as linguistic) history and scrutinised descriptively as, say, a self-contained system of communication, it was far easier to view languages as equally worthy of study for their own sakes. And looking at linguistic competence of the speaker (*langue*) rather than the utterances of real speakers (*parole*) posed a degree of abstraction in each speaker's linguistic knowledge which, irrespective of the rightness of de Saussure's ideas, *probably* helped to liberate linguistics from the very serious influences of overt and covert ethnocentrism.

Furthermore, de Saussure's focus was on the relative interactions between the components of linguistic thinking: like chess pieces and railway trains these are describable and comprehensive only within the totality of the game of chess or a railway system. This approach helped clear the way for the examination of the relations between the elements in all languages that cannot be described in a judgementally hierarchical way. If all languages are *structures* independent of the substance or medium in which they are bodied forth; if all languages are two-level systems of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations (Lyons 1981, p220); then "dispassionate" linguistic thinking about languages in general becomes not merely easier, but eventually inescapable.

The apparent self-contradictoriness between Saussure's views that:

- (a) languages must be studied in abstraction from society and:
- (b) that languages are social facts.

Or, to put it another way, that changes in *langue* derive from changes individuals forge in their *parole* is less pertinent here than another of his guiding principles; that of the



arbitrariness of the linguistic sign (*l'arbitraire du signe*) . Language systems which are external to individuals and constrain them, are semiotic systems in which the signified (*le signifie*) is arbitrarily associated with the signifier (*le signifiant*). It takes only a moment's reflection to grasp that this notion is highly corrosive to claims of linguistic superiority.

Most twentieth century structuralism has, in a Saussurean way, been linked to a relativistic approach that springs from the idea of arbitrariness. The hypothesis, that is, that language universals do not exist except for such very general semiotic properties as arbitrariness (op. cit. p17-24), productivity, duality and discreteness. My contention, however, is that both relativism and universalism were damaging to presumptuous claims to linguistic superiority.

## **2.5. Language Destruction and the hey day of American Structuralism**

It is not a mere historical accident that the first effective practical demonstration of the notion of linguistic equality (as expressed in 1.4.) occurred in early twentieth century America. For here, quite starkly, the lethal impact of an ethnocentric and self-confident European expansionism on technologically "backward" people was in grim evidence. And the contradiction between the European invasions and dispossessions, and the Rights of Man trumpeted in the American Declaration of Independence, eventually produced the remarkable investigations into indigenous Indian languages which played such an important role in American linguistics. Its monument is *The Handbook of American Indian Languages*, edited by Franz Boas and published between 1911 and 1922.

Both Boas and Sapir were anthropologists, and anthropology had long been bound up with "the expansion of European power and the conquests by the white man of other continents" in the Americas, Africa and Asia (Stern 1983, p196). In contrast with much earlier anthropological writing, with its essentially teleological notions of human kind progressing, in Morgan's evolutionary trichotomy, through savagery, via barbarism, to civilisation, Boas insisted that each society, and its language, should be studied on its own terms, in its own social and historical environment, and studied descriptively and empirically, avoiding the pitfalls of conjectures about language aetiology. There are, of course, very grave problems with this naive view, but it is at least arguable that it marked a necessary step towards a demonstration of language equality. But it certainly reveals an important paradox: it may be necessary (historically) to assume equality (or something very like it) in order to "prove" it.

American Indian languages had suffered grievously from the European colonial incursions of the seventeenth century onwards. By the latter part of the nineteenth century many small, weak and non-literate communities were faced with language death beneath the juggernaut of an ever-moving frontier and the relentless pressures of cultural conformity. The egalitarian rhetoric of the American republic, though grown tawdry, resurfaced in the struggle against slavery. Human equality was proclaimed as a "self-evident" truth in the Declaration of Independence. Hence the radical anthropological programme of studying Indian languages from non-evolutionary assumptions. Margaret Mead, one of Boas' many influential students, wrote:

"To get the depth of understanding he required meant submerging his thinking in that of another. It meant learning to think in another's terms and to view the world through another's eyes. The most intimate knowledge of an informant's thought processes was mandatory and could only

be obtained by intensive work over a long period..... but Boas conceived of his main task as the adoption of an informant's mode of thought while retaining full use of his own critical faculties" (Mead, quoted in Stern 1983, p197)

This essentially empathic approach to descriptive language study appears incompatible with notions of a *linguistic* hierarchy in language evolution (though it does not rule out *cultural* or *cognitive* hierarchies). The work of Boas and his collaborators incessantly emphasised that, just as the anthropologist must learn to accept (or at least respectfully and peacefully coexist with) diverse and unfamiliar life styles, so she should accept diversity in language. The vocabulary, grammatical structures and syntax of Indian languages were quite different from those of Indo-European languages, and should be treated on their own terms, not as a degeneration from some prescriptive norm. In this fundamental sense, Boas' enterprise actually analysed languages as though they were equal, a landmark in linguistic enquiry.

"No attempt has been made to compare the form of Indian grammars with the grammar of English, Latin or even among themselves: but in each case the psychological groupings which are given depend entirely on the inner forms of each language. In other words, the grammar has been treated as though an intelligent Indian was going to develop the forms of his own thoughts by an analysis of his own form of speech" (Boas, in Hymes 1964, p123).

## **2.6. Sapir and the Formal Equality of Language Systems**

This kind of formulation does not entirely avoid the charge of benevolent patronage, but does go a good way down the road towards an even-handed treatment of language in descriptive terms. Edward Sapir, Boas' pupil and a polymath whose figure still impressively bestrides the inter-war American linguistic scene, went a step further. In 1921, on the basis of empirical work, he declared that, as far as was known, there

was no justification for the concept of a primitive language (Sapir 1921, p8). And in his well-known article in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* he tellingly notes:

"The gift of speech and a well-ordered language are characteristic of every known group of human beings. No tribe has ever been found which is without language, and all statements in the contrary may be dismissed as mere folklore. There seems to be no warrant whatever for the statement which is sometimes made that there are certain people whose vocabulary is so limited that they cannot get on without the supplementary use of gestures so that intelligible communication between members of such a group becomes impossible in the dark. *The truth of the matter is that language is an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people.* Of all aspects of culture, it is a fair guess that language was the first to receive a highly developed form and that its essential perfection is a prerequisite to the development of culture as a whole" (Sapir 1963, p7).

or again, even more eloquently

"The outstanding fact about any language is its formal completeness. This is true of a primitive language like Eskimo or Hottentot as of the carefully recorded and standardised languages of our great cultures.... Each language has a well-defined and exclusive phonetic system with which it carries on its work, and, more than that, all of its expressions, from the most habitual to the merely potential, are fitted into a deft tracery of prepared forms from which there is no escape....we may say that a language is so constructed that no matter what any speaker of it may desire to communicate, no matter how original or bizarre his idea or his fancy, the language is prepared to do his work. He will never need to create new forms or to force upon his language a new formal orientation - unless, poor man, he is haunted by the form feeling of another language and is subtly driven to the unconscious distortion of the one speech system on the analogy of the other" (ibid. p153).

Sapir continues in this powerfully original and persuasive vein. Parrying a familiar counter-thrust, he notes that "Formal completeness has nothing to do with the richness or poverty of the vocabulary." Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* might very well be rendered into Eskimo or Hottentot since "there is nothing in the formal peculiarities of Hottentot or of Eskimo which would obscure the clarity or hide the depth of Kant's thought - indeed, it may be suspected that the highly synthetic and

periodic structure of Eskimo would more easily bear the weight of Kant's terminology than his native German" (ibid. p154).

I have, exceptionally, quoted Sapir at length to convey the generously polymathic nature of his writing. Interestingly, with his intense concern for the interplay between language and culture, he did not explicitly repudiate one conceivable implication of linguistic equality: that, since all languages are linguistically equal, and all are equally good and expressive as intellectual media, then why not settle for one rather than the Babel of thousands? As an idealist and an internationalist, Sapir comments favourably on the "logical necessity" of an international language, attacking critiques of Esperanto as artificial, and defending such a second learned language as a "secondary form of speech for distinctly limited purposes" (ibid. p31). Since he was interested in speech as a societal bond, Sapir argued for an "international auxiliary language of intercommunication which can be set aside for denotive purposes sure and simple." In arguing for the theoretical desirability of such a language he developed another memorably coherent exposition of exactly what it is that makes languages formally comparable. Examining English from the standpoint of simplicity, regularity, logic, richness and creativeness, he launches a compelling attack on the folk myth that one language is any simpler, more regular or more logical than any other. And he strengthens his case by noting that richness ("all those local overtones of meaning which are so dear to the heart of the nationalist") would be furnished by "interaction of human beings who make use of the international medium" (ibid. 118).

Dictates of Tradition and "irrational usage" preclude existing languages from creating new words and combination of words, and thus "No national language really corresponds to the analytic and creative spirit of modern times. National languages

are all huge systems of vested interests which sullenly resist critical enquiry" (ibid. p118). We need not follow Sapir further to appreciate the significance of these devastating thrusts at all varieties of linguistic chauvinism.

## 2.7. Bloomfield and Intra Lingual Equality

To turn from Sapir to the other colossus of inter-war American linguistics, Leonard Bloomfield, is to enter a drier intellectual climate in which the fragrant breeze of humanism is stilled. Bloomfield's later inductive/mechanistic/behaviourist approach fell from fashion many years ago (though pedagogic methods based on it are amazingly resilient) but his *Language* - essentially a 1933 behaviourist reinterpretation of a work originally published in 1914 - is still perhaps the most influential book ever published on the subject. In terms of developing and refining the concept of linguistic equality (which I have argued was a necessary but insufficient prerequisite for serious theoretical movement in the discipline) Bloomfield's work is equivocal. Because of the fierce inductivism of his approach ("The only useful generalisations about language are inductive generalisations") (Bloomfield 193, p20) and because of his sense that empirical research into language was still in its infancy; he eschewed *overt* speculation about the nature of language. Thus language universals were abandoned, *pro term*, for an emphasis on the apparent diversity of languages.

Because of this restriction on the scope and method of linguistic enquiry (as part of a bid to establish linguistics as a natural science) many fruitful developments may have been blocked for many years by Bloomfield's vast and God-like authority. This was lamentable, as the method he confidently advocated (exemplified by the now hilarious stimulus, response and reinforcement analysis of Jack, Jill and the theft and

consumption of the forbidden apple in Ch.1) is now viewed as, at best, a confusing half-truth. In these respects, Bloomfield's influence may be seen as causing stagnation, even regression, in the history of linguistics.

Yet this is not the complete picture. Bloomfield's assault on the snobbery of prescriptivism and insistence that all varieties of language may well be worthy of serious study should not be overlooked. There is actually a strand in Bloomfield which may be seen as descending from the American populist tradition. Even Bloomfield's creaky philosophy of language did depend (implicitly) on a prior egalitarian assumption completely incompatible with his insistence that only what may be induced from observable data really merits scientific study. And the currency of his writings helped to make anti-prescriptionist intralingual egalitarianism academically respectable: for in academic terms, "worthy of serious study" may be taken to mean equal in potential theoretical significance.

Language prescriptionism had always been powerful in the post-independence United States, though it was not unchallenged (Drake 1977, *passim*). Thus Bloomfield's protest against it, in the original 1914 version of his book, was especially notable, though it failed to gain credence outside narrow circles of linguists (Drake 1977, p46) In the later edition Bloomfield extends his attack on the bastions of prejudice by a withering analysis of the logical oddity of the process of language standardisation (Bloomfield 1933, p48-56). And in the final chapter there is a comprehensive critical analysis of the psychology underpinning the readiness of people to be bluffed by grammarians in their hierarchic ordering of language varieties. Social insecurity is seen as the key to this trick: socially insecure people,

diffident about their speech (and nearly everyone is socially insecure at many points in their lives) fall easy prey to linguistic authoritarianism (ibid. p497).

"For the native speaker of substandard or dialectal English the acquisition of standard English is a real problem, akin to that of speaking a foreign language.... Our schools sin greatly in this regard....the unequal distribution which injured him [the learner] in childhood is a fruit of the society in which he lives.... he should rather take pride in simplicity of speech and view it as an advantage that he gains from his non-standard background" (ibid).

## 2.8. The Behaviourist Cul-de-Sac and the Way Out

Bloomfield's spirited and polemical mauling of the "fanciful dogmas" of the guardians of correctitude in speech still convinces. But it is sorely *ad hoc* and superficial. Nowhere in the work does he address himself to the vital question of *why* language varieties (or languages themselves) are equally interesting, rewarding to study and worthy of preservation. Subsequent structuralists developed the notion that a language is essentially what the native speaker says it is, reaching a point of extremity which dismissed, not merely prescriptivism, but all language rules (and therefore abolishing the *langue/parole* distinction through the native speaker's infallibility) (Diller 1978, p18). But Bloomfield merely assumes that "whatever is, is right;" all observable, surface features of any linguistic phenomenon are of broadly equal value in the study of a language.

We are thus, by the extension of this style of thought, carried in an extremely un-egalitarian direction. The behaviouristic repudiation of the binding importance of the human mind, and the concentration on the alarming and possibly limitless diversity of surface features, leads us to a conclusion that languages are chaotic, and have nothing in common at all. But of course behaviouristic students of language in



reality did assume *some* universals of language: for without these they could not even begin to study or describe languages. There is a yawning theoretical emptiness, and a regression from Sapir's insights, in the "pure" inductionist data-driven approach.

The intellectual bankruptcy of extreme behaviourist thinking about the nature of language actually sprang from its repudiation of the notion of language equality. Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour* (1957) was of course the work whose weakness finally bust the "strong" behaviourist paradigm. For Bloomfield's milder catholic and unrigorous version was supplanted by an arid orthodoxy in which fundamental questions were systematically avoided. Skinner's work thus constitutes the most powerful negative evidence for the thesis of this dissertation. Ultimately, it represented the suicide of thinking. Skinner, to whom such notions as the "essential" sameness of languages were trivial or meaningless, was forced to take refuge in the idea of a "verbal community" (Skinner 1957, p461). The human mind is now a *tabula rasa* in its initial state, with incoming data scribbling furiously away on it. Such a position leads, not merely to skepticism about any universals of language, but to doubt about whether any systematic study of it is possible at all. Had Chomsky not existed, it would have been necessary to invent him simply to ensure a rationale for the continuance of academic linguistics (Newmeyer 1980, p42)

## Chapter 3

# Linguistic Equality Revived: The Quest for Universals of Language

### 3.1. Equality and Universality:

The intimate yet difficult relationship between the twin ideas of *equality* and *universality* in language is manifest throughout the history of linguistics. The search for universals has often been accompanied by an awareness of the many implications of cross-linguistic similarities for the very nature of language. Behaviourist structuralism repudiates this: languages could differ unpredictably and without limit. This assumption, married to Bloomfield's rejection of the mind in linguistics, left a discipline shorn of everything except field methods and descriptive methodologies: but even these depended on the existence of formal language universals like syntactic categories, universals of meaning as assumed by translation, and so on. Again, a degree of belief in some comparability, and, by implication, some language equality was a *sine qua non* of the most anti-theoretical descriptive study.

Broadly speaking, the relevance of the search for typological universals (associated with Joseph Greenberg) and of Chomsky's U[niversal] G[rammar] to the concept of linguistic equality is this. Children and adults acquiring knowledge of language are subjected to an enormous range of linguistic environments. Some hear an incessant stream of language, much of it addressed to them. Others encounter exceedingly little. Unless we assume the existence of biologically determined principles which equip *all* human minds with a perfect and equal capacity for language acquisition, the absolute

success of all "normal" children in attaining total command of their language variety (or varieties) by the age of 5 is completely incomprehensible.

The (allegedly) data-driven Greenbergian universals are being incorporated into the framework of linguistics. The presuppositions of universal grammar have achieved an even greater hold on the way we think about language. Work in both areas lends handsome support to our central hypothesis.

### 3.2. Typological Universality and Language Equality

No *classification* of languages can be essayed at all unless they are *comparable* (Greenberg 1974, Ch.3). Comparability implies common qualities, though these may be obscured by schema which *divide* languages into over-rigid groups, as with Schleicher's famous tripartite division into isolating, agglutinative and inflective (ibid. p20). Sapir's scalar approach emphasises connections, not divisions (Though his *weltanschauung* notion of language as expressing a people's spirit led him another way: ibid. p15). Some structuralists stressed diversity, not similarity, but

"the Prague school of structuralism insisted that, since language is not a collection of traits but a configuration in which *tout a tient*, it follows that there must be recurrent and law-like relations among the properties of language and such clusters define types" (ibid. p43)

Clarification of these issues was unlikely while Bloomfield's dogma ("The only useful generalisations about language are inductive generalisations") held sway. Charles Hockett's reformulation, in the early '60s, of these ideas was illuminating. Of course, universals must be actually "there" in languages, not mere fictions invented by linguists to satisfy a desire for regularity. Hockett notes that "the search for language universals" and "the discovery of the place of human language in the universe" are

actually different formulations of the same enquiry. He attempts a clarification of Bloomfield's "terse remark":

"1.1 The assertion of a language universal must be founded on extrapolation as well as empirical evidence" (Hockett, "The Problem of Universals in Language" in Greenberg 1963).

Because many natural languages are extinct, and some of these are unknowable, *complete* factual information about human language will be forever unattainable: a problem compounded by creolisation and language creation as well as language death.

"1.2 The assertion of language universals is a matter of definition as well as of empirical evidence and extrapolation" (ibid. p3).

Hockett was himself a structuralist, but here, while claiming merely to "expand" Bloomfield, he effectively demolishes his fragile "common sense" edifice. This was an important intervention and leads toward a redefined conception of the role of theory, and to a restructured notion of language equality *qua* theory.

Hockett's other observations are equally pertinent: he had travelled far from the neogrammarians (who viewed language as a totality of individual items, each explicable in terms of historical process), and from early structuralism, which saw languages as organised synchronic systems, possessing unity but who tended to emphasise diversity at the expense of unity: Hockett takes us, unwittingly, a step nearer the approach of transformational grammar to language universals. Here language becomes a set of internalised rules rather than mere observations about surface phenomena; and also another step along a path which begins with linguistic equality (in all its senses) as an idea entertained (if at all) by cranks, to a plank in the platform of respectable mainstream thought.

The discovery that historically unrelated languages (like English and Navaho) shared common features (if these are not merely adventitious) must mean that they share them because it is some kind of requirement of human language that they are there (Herbert H Clark and Eve V Clark, "Language Processing", in Greenberg 1978, Vol I, p229). Languages do not vary randomly and limitlessly: severe limits are placed on variation. These are the very features that fulfil the four conditions which *a priori* each human language must be capable of:

- 1 Being learned by children (and adults)
- 2 Being spoken and understood by adults easily and fluently
- 3 Embodying the ideas people normally want to convey
- 4 Functioning as a communication system in social and cultural settings (ibid. p28)

We have now reached the confluence of several streams. American anthropological linguistics posed the question "How do we account for the simultaneous sense we have of the unique and the universal in our fellow men?" (Joseph P Casagrande, "Linguistic Universals and Anthropology" in Greenberg 1963, p294). It is now joined by Chomsky's innatist ideas to form a broader and more powerful current: And the idea has been floated that Greenbergian probabilistic universals (for example, "with overwhelmingly greater than chance frequency languages with SOV order are post-positional") are absorbable within Chomsky's framework, as part of an evaluation measure for grammar. Indeed, a *rapprochement* between the two types of universals has been going on for some time (Smith and Wilson 1979, p260-264).

### 3.3. Generative Grammar, Universal Grammar and Linguistic Equality

Generative grammar, which ousted the various varieties of structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, was characterised by tenets not merely favourable to the idea of the "deep" equality of languages, but which indeed sprang from this *a priori* supposition. Language egalitarianism underlies the kind of thinking that makes the generative approach possible. Essentially a generative grammar is a system of rules which specifies what combinations of such basic elements as phonemes, morphemes, etc are permissible or well-formed. This grammar thus generates (or defines as grammatical) all the well-formed sentences of a language and fails to generate (or declares the ungrammaticality of) all the ill-formed combinations (Lyons 1987, p27-28). Thus the generative grammarian embarks on the huge task of describing the *langue*, the language system or linguistic competence of the native speaker; or, to put it another way, "of what is judged pretheoretically, and at some level of idealisation or abstraction, to be a given language community."

This task thus involves getting "the best fit that is possible between the sentences of the language generated by the grammar and the utterances (ie the actual or potential instances of *parole*) that might be produced, understood and accepted as normal by the members of the language community in question" (ibid. p28). It would also be curious, or even unbelievable, if the various *langues* were somehow unequal, or of unequal interest to the linguistic scholar.

An equally large and pertinent legacy of Chomskyan linguistics has been the assertion that the human language faculty is innate and unique (Cook 1933, Ch.I). *Innateness* points unmistakably towards language equality *in the initial state* of the child's

language faculty. Uniqueness also leads towards equality, but by exclusion. For it excludes, say, animal systems of communication, the dancing of bees, the wise thrush, sagacious owl and so on. All these fascinating creatures indubitably communicate, but Chomsky would counter that communication is not the essence of human language (And perhaps, therefore, that a communicative approach to the teaching of language quite misses a vital formal quality of language: Smith and Wilson 1979, p266). Amongst the many discrepancies between animal communication and human languages the absence of rule-governed creativity in the former is the most distinctive: Animal messages are finite and stimulus controlled. Descartes observed

"... there are none so depraved and stupid ... that they cannot arrange different words together, forming of them a statement by which they make known their thoughts, while ... there is no animal ... which can do the same".

And Bertrand Russell notes

"No matter how eloquently a dog may bark, he cannot tell you his parents were poor but honest" (Fromkin and Rodman 1988, p19-23).

In this respect Chomsky stands at the end of a long and disparate historical line which has underscored human brotherhood by insisting on qualitative distinctions between humanity and other sentient creatures. One should recall here that Chomsky himself has denounced animal experimentation of the kind used to underwrite behaviourism, since all creatures may suffer even if they possess no language faculty.

An important and, I think, a telling point about language universals are their arbitrariness. Their universality does not derive from universally recurring properties of logic, thought or reality. Chomsky feels that universality resides in (inherited) formal characteristics of language, and the type of rules that their description demands, and does not lie in the relations that hold between language and the world (Lyons 1981,

p232). By divorcing the universality of language from other allegedly universal human traits (of character and thought) that were once supposed to underlie it, Chomsky greatly strengthened *linguistic* egalitarianism, though conceivably at the expense of other aspects of human equality. Against this it may well be urged that while "human nature" shows distressingly variable manifestations, from Primo Levi to the Nazis, the very solidity of formal properties of languages provides a reassuring benchmark for the assertion of one piece of evidence for innate human equality.

### **3.4. The Biological Foundations of Language Equality: The Lenneberg Thesis**

Small wonder, therefore, that Chomsky sought succour for his general notions by harking back to the biological and psychological make-up of human beings. For in biology is to be found much apparent support for the contention that

"there is surely no reason today for taking seriously the view that attributes a complex human achievement entirely to months (or at most years) of experience, rather than to millions of years of evolution or to principles of neural organisation that may be even more deeply grounded in physical law" (Chomsky 1965, p5).

Lenneberg underwrites this theory with "five empirically verifiable general biological premises" (Lenneberg 1967, p371-374). These are

- 1 Cognitive function is species specific
- 2 Specific properties of cognitive function are replicated in every member of the species. Cognitive processes and potentialities are replicated for all species members (but note that this holds only for what an individual does, not what he is capable of doing).
- 3 At birth man is relatively immature: certain aspects of his behaviour and cognitive functions emerge only during infancy. Human children's postnatal state of maturity is less advanced than that of other primates.
- 4 Certain social phenomena among animals come about by spontaneous adaptation of the behaviour of the growing individual to the behaviour



of other individuals around him. Adequate environment includes not merely nutritive and physical conditions, but for many creatures specific social conditions and specific stimuli (eg certain action patterns in a mother, a sexual partner etc). For humans the right kind of stimulation must occur in the narrow formative period of infancy; if it does not subsequent development may be irreversibly distorted. But note that the prerequisite social triggering mechanism will not *shape* social behaviour in the way that Emily Post may shape the manners of a debutante (ibid. p374).

The enormous significance of all this for linguistic equality is at once apparent. Lenneberg inclines to the untestable view that language depends on cognition, rather than the other way round and that "cognitive function" is a more basic and primary process than language. Does this crucially matter for our conception of linguistic equality? I think not, for there is nothing in the idea that *necessarily* demands that the human language faculty does not structurally depend, and possibly yield chronological priority to, the human cognitive faculty. Some "egalitarian" thinkers have favoured or implied language priority, some cognitive priority, and some like Humboldt, have argued for simultaneity.

Lenneberg then presses forward by characterising his underlying cognitive function as a modification of "a ubiquitous process (among vertebrates) of categorisation and extraction of similarities" (ibid). Language perception and production is actually reducible to categorisation processes (ibid. p271-272). Moreover, particular "specialisations in peripheral anatomy and physiology account for some of the universal features of natural languages" (though the primacy of the cerebral factor in language behaviour is attested by the very fact that languages competence is attainable even by individuals with broad peripheral anomalies) (ibid. p375).

Furthermore, biologically determined human cognitive qualities severely restrict the possible variations in natural languages: infinite variation is possible within outer

limits. This notion is obviously pertinent in that it implies that the "surface" forms of languages may be hugely diverse, but that "deep" underlying types remain constant. The language readiness of the child is a state of *latent language structure*, while the restricted development of language transforms this into a *realised structure*. Lenneberg views this as, perhaps, a biologically-based formulation of the ancient distinction between *universal and particular grammar*.

"He that understands grammar in one language, understands it in another as far as the essential properties of grammar are concerned. The fact that he cannot speak, nor comprehend, another language is due to the diversity of words and their various forms, but these are accidental properties of grammar" (Roger Bacon 1214-1294) (Fromkin and Rodman 1988, p388).

Latent (or, in our terms equal or equivalent) structure thus becomes responsible for the underlying UG. Realisation entails:

- (a) performance peculiarities
- (b) the unique features of the particular grammar of any natural language (Lenneberg 1967, p376). Thus cognitive/biological equality would only exist at the "deepest" (and most fundamental) level, a notion we have frequently encountered in different forms (Lenneberg 1967, Table 9.2, p388, for variations and constancies of natural languages). Since the initial language capacity (or latent language structure) of all humans is the same, this view leads directly and decisively to a powerful statement of "fundamental" or "deep" linguistic equality.

Just as importantly, it also leads us straight to the conclusion that all children are *linguistically equal*. *For it is language, not speech, that is based on biology* (Fromkin and

Rodman 1988, p388). Deaf children acquire a non-spoken language because language acquisition does not spring from the capacity to produce and hear sounds, but on a highly abstract cognitive ability, biologically determined, which accounts for the remarkable similarities between spoken and sign languages (ibid. p384). Moreover, language maturation ("the traversings of highly unstable states") is seen as a series of disequilibria which *may* lead from this state of initial equality to an unequal maturity. Though Lenneberg does not address this issue, he holds to the critical period hypothesis, in which a steady state is reached in the early teens, and "the cognitive processes are firmly entrenched, and the capacity for primary language synthesis is lost, and cerebral reorganisation of function is no longer possible" (Lenneberg 1967, p376-377). For some this process might seem to provide a linguistic parallel to the story of the Creation and Fall, or another way of expressing Rousseau's "Man is born free but is everywhere in chains". Certainly language users appear to start equal, but everywhere seem to become unequal. Biology lends support to a notion of language equality in the initial state; or perhaps, following Lenneberg, we should say infant cognitive capacities as they relate to language. Because it is the biologically-given cognitive and language structures within each healthy child, rather than language equality *per se*, which is at stake here. The replication of language structure in each child, and the fact that every language must possess *an identical inner form* (despite boundless surface variety) means that all languages have the same basic syntax:

"utterances consist of concatenated morphemes and the concatenation is never random. Words and morphemes are always assignable to functional categories; sentences in all languages may be judged as grammatically acceptable or unacceptable by criteria of underlying structure" (Lenneberg 1967, p381).

This is the language equality that explains language equipotentiality in children: that is, the undisputed ability of all normal children to learn any natural language (and probably non-natural ones too, like sign language or Esperanto). Thus the deep identity of languages reflects the identity of human biological makeup. To many this notion will seem both theoretically satisfying and morally cheering. And, of course, it also goes some way to establishing a particular notion of language equality as an empirically justifiable concept; or, at least, an overwhelmingly probable one.

## Chapter 4

# The Equality of Language and the Quality of Learners

### 4.1. Age and Language Equality

The spectre of aging has haunted the history of the idea of linguistic equality. It will almost certainly continue to do so, despite furious attempts to exorcise it. Indeed, we may go further and say that the shadow of the child lies, often unnoticed, over most aspects of language study. The mystery of how a child can possibly acquire a language inspired much of modern linguistics. And the child and her genetically determined human language faculty (for simplicity labelled UG) indominatably continues to assert her position in both theory and practice.

### 4.2. The Decline of the Critical Period Hypothesis and Adult Language Learning Equality

Another underlying presence has been the desire to connect: to connect language to meaningful generalisations about the wider world, to connect particular to universal. Now we turn from a consideration of the properties of languages to one of the characteristics of language learners. The strongest thread in such a connection would be spun by a theory which showed that the child's initial and egalitarian language state is, *to some degree*, shared by the grown child. The adult comes, not in utter nakedness or entire forgetfulness, but trailing clouds of innate grammatical universality.

For many years this view seemed untenable. Generative grammarians, following Chomsky, leaned towards the idea that a child's brain is plastic by comparison with

an adults. Penfield wrote influentially in 1959 that, prior to the age of 9-12 a child is "a specialist in learning to speak. At that age he can learn two or three languages as easily as one." But after this age "for the purposes of learning languages, the human brain becomes progressively stiff and rigid" (Penfield and Roberts 1959, p235-236).

This kind of neurological argument sprang from clinical studies of aphasia, and the amazing speed with which children (but not always adults) recover speech capacity after injury or disease destroys the speech areas in the dominant left cerebral hemisphere (Harley 1986, p4).

Such ideas were grist to the innatist mill, since they tended to diminish the role of the language environment severely, and upgraded the part played by natural endowment. Chomsky (1965), McNeill (1966) and Lenneberg (1967) all pressed the innatist case with vigour. And writers in this tradition were at the forefront of the movement for language equality and for the equality of the child learners' language faculties. Lenneberg argues persuasively that despite the "enormous variety of environmental conditions" the age of the onset of certain speech and language capacities is relatively unaffected (Lenneberg 1967, p139). He suggests that there may well be a universal age for speech onset, and cites, when criticising the notice of a "primitive" language, the comment that those aspects of Russian morphology and syntax which Russian children learn after entering school are both infrequently and wrongly used in discourse. Lenneberg concludes by supporting a biologically based critical period of language acquisition between the ages of 2 and 13.

Generativist emphasis on the richness and uniqueness of the child's language faculty, a faculty distinct from other cognitive capacities, and activated in diverse environ-

ments despite degenerate and confusing input, fitted quite neatly with the biological C[ritical] P[eriod] H[ypotheses]. But it does not *require* or even imply it. Lenneberg fully accepts that an adult can learn to communicate in a second language, but believes that the route pursued will be different and that success, far from being absolutely certain, will be doubtful. And

"the cerebral organisation for language learning has taken place during childhood, and since natural languages tend to resemble one another in many fundamental respects ... the matrix for language skills is present" (Lenneberg 1967, p176).

By contrast to the child's "automatic acquisition from mere exposure" language must now be taught and learned through a tediously conscious process. And biologically determined child/adult similarity in language equipotentiality is damaged by the proposition that

"the *biological* fact of adulthood is enough to establish an insurmountable obstacle in most cases for complete language acquisition. The incompleteness of the adult learners L<sub>2</sub> system has a *physiological* basis and concomitant cognitive correlates" (Harley 1986, p7).

Subsequent research has suggested that the critical period does *not* coincide with brain lateralisation (which may be complete at 5) and that the brain has achieved 90% of its adult values by the age of 6. Only in phonology do children seem to have an immense advantage over adult learners; and the latter often have the edge in learning vocabulary. The decline of behaviouristically based contrastive analysis, with its narrow focus on Mother Tongue interference, which also tended to privilege children over adults, has also left the biological CPH looking pretty battered. Children may indeed come to language by a different *route* to adults, but this does not entail that the two language faculties are different.

Terminologically, this is treacherous ground. We shall have cause to examine very different approaches to the question of the alleged similarity of C[hild] L[anguage] A[cquisition] and S[econd] L[anguage] A[cquisition]. And it seems that the acquisition *process* itself may have a heavy bearing on the question of language equality. We might say we "know" about language equality not merely from a static "initial language faculty", but by back-hypothesising through our struggle to understand why language exists at all and how it comes to be acquirable and transmissible. And, analogically, we may back-hypothesise further from parallel knowledge about the existence, acquirability and transmissibility of second languages. Fundamentally, the shaky nature of the neurophysiological evidence for a critical period allows us to hold that there may be enough similarities between CLA and SLA for the broad conception of linguistic equality to encompass them both.

The barricade formed by a biologically rooted CPH to a *linguistically* equal second language faculty is therefore largely demolished. Evidence does not suggest that UG is "consumed" in childhood. Excepting phonology, adults can do as well or better than children in SLA. If it may be assumed that there is a "single mechanism for learning languages" (Ellis 1985, p201) we have reverted to a singularly egalitarian position, not merely between adults and children, but *between adults and adults* as far as their linguistic faculties go.

### **4.3. The Cognitive Critical Period and the Equality of Learners**

Cognitively based CPH's constitute little threat to the idea of an equal language faculty in both children and grown-ups. Indeed, they may powerfully underwrite the hypothesis. For Piaget "cognitive development is in principle both autonomous from



language development and causally prior to it" (Fletcher and Garman, 1986, p11). Language is neither necessary nor sufficient for cognitive development. Vigotsky, by contrast, felt that thought and language interact, and that thought is neither independent of language, or causally prior to it. Krashen and others have built on Piaget's ideas by positing that the growing ability of the young adult to construct hypotheses may stunt the learner's "natural" language acquisition capacity.

The adult's desire to have a conscious knowledge of language may be just what prevents him from attaining full competence: it is quite difficult to express all of a language in terms of isolated rules. Thus the adult may be limited by his ability to describe language to himself (Harley 1986, p9).

Krashen conjectures that interference error is commoner in the intensely self-conscious correctitude-oriented period of adolescence than in unselfconscious childhood. This kind of theorising leaves intact the possibility of an equal language faculty in children and adults. Indeed, the entire monitor model has many implications for language equality. For Krashen language acquisition is quite distinct from learning about a language, and is a "subconscious process *identical in all important ways to the process children utilise in acquiring their first language*" (Krashen 1985, p3). Adult acquirers have recourse to the same LAD as children. Indeed, in Krashen, the language faculty itself is virtually identified with unconscious acquisition, though Chomsky himself had pictured it as merely one amongst several "mental organs" that co-operate with each other and with language input to achieve competence (McLaughlin 1987,p23). The LAD thus only applies to the initial state, prior to language input. Interestingly, and contentiously, Krashen broadens this idea to embrace a "device" possessed by adults too, although often severely hampered in its operation by the affective factors he describes. Chomsky himself initially believed in the atrophication of the human language faculty, with adult learners having to rely on

other mental capacities. But he now holds a view closer to Krashen, and the latter argues that the distinction between "cognize" and "know" is similar to that between "acquire" and "learn".

#### **4.4. Universal Grammar, Second Language Acquired**

The power and prestige of Chomsky is such that his altered position on these matters has issued in renewed interest in language universals and SLAD UG is focussed on abstract and linguistically significant principles that are believed to underlie all natural languages. They thus comprise "the essential language facility *with which all individuals are in general uniformity and equally endowed*" (McLaughlin 1987, p23-24). Chomsky's most recent contributions have emphasised a parameter setting model of language. This model strives to account for:

- (a) language diversity
- (b) the speedy and uniform growth of child languages in accordance with certain patterns.

The language faculty, intrinsic in us all, is both unique to us and uniform for all of us (Flynn and O'Neill 1988, p77). UG theory must

"be compatible with the diversity of existing ... grammars [and] be sufficiently constrained and restrictive in the options it permits so as to account for the fact that each of these grammars develops in the mind on the basis of quite limited evidence" (Chomsky 1981, p3).

Universals and innateness are again two of the most productive and revealing areas and the ones which bear most pertinently on the equality of learner's language capacities. The explosion of interest in first language acquisition research occurred in response to Chomsky's 1959 review of Skinner, asserting that much of grammar is innate and that therefore all languages are, in some profound sense, the same. Many

still believe that UG "will eventually explain all of the significant structural and semantic aspects of child grammar" (Newmeyer 1988, II, p35).

Children's early hypotheses about language will thus be structure dependent. And structure dependence here means that "experienced language will be analysed in terms of an abstract representation of sentence stimuli" (Newmeyer 1988, p55). The principles of structure dependence are not learned, but an essential precondition of language learning. Thus, forming and producing an utterance is, for the child, not merely a matter of putting words in a particular sequence: Rather, "every sentence has an inaudible internal structure which must be understood by the learner" (Newmeyer 1988, p55). L<sub>1</sub> learning also involves a biologically predetermined deductive component, through which given principles and parameters are applied to the structure dependent encounter with input. It is precisely this underlying structure dependency, this *underlying sameness*, which constitutes UG's contribution to notion of language learner equality. Work on parameters, in the last decade, have fortified the idea that they are part of the universal competence for first *and* second language acquisition.

Workers in the Chomskyan vineyard have thus extended UG from L<sub>1</sub> to L<sub>2</sub>, and have pinpointed several areas. These include the waning of the "narrow" CPH; interlanguage theory; the need the L<sub>2</sub> learner has to construct complicated grammars on the basis of insufficient and deficient data. As for children, some structures are so unusual and peripheral that learners can scarcely have adequate exposure to them. Wrong hypotheses demand detailed negative feedback if they are to be repudiated, but they often do not get it. And, as with L<sub>1</sub> the grammar rules are incredibly abstract, and do not merely mirror surface structures (McLaughlin 1987, p91-92). Observations of this

kind powerfully stimulated interest in the possible presence of underlying universals of SLA which *might* have comparable significance to those operative for the child acquirer.

Learning, in this school of thinking, is thus a highly misleading term for language development. Cook notes that

"a bulb becomes a flower; some cells become a lung. We do not say that the bulb 'learns' to be a flower or the cells 'learn' to be a lung, although in both cases certain aspects of the environment such as water and nourishment are necessary to the process. Instead, we say the bulb and cells 'grow'. Their growth is the realisation of their genetic potential in conjunction with 'triggers' from the environment, the achievement of something that was within them from the start ..." (Cook 1985, p3-4).

And Chomsky has observed that "a central part of what we called 'learning' is actually better understood as the growth of cognitive structures along an internally directed course under the triggering and potentially shaping effects of the environment. But, of course, Chomsky speaks only of competence in *language*. Thus acquisition alludes only to a speaker's knowledge of language, stripped of all maturational and processing restrictions, defects of memory and all motivational and cognitive factors too. These collectively make up a child's "channel capacity", the ability to make sense of information, and are excluded. The linguistic faculty is there, *ab initio*, intact and perfect. Variable, and therefore de-equalising non-linguistic factors, do affect its actual operation. And thus in Chomskyan thought it is this inborn faculty which captures and represents the essential similarity of all learners/acquirers (McLaughlin 1987, p94)

Parameter theory has opened up another sweeping vista for the ever-widening horizon of linguistic equality.

UG theory holds that the speaker knows a set of principles that apply to all languages, and parameters that vary within clearly defined limits from one language to another. Acquiring language means learning how these principles apply to a particular language and which value is appropriate for each parameter. Each principle of language that is proposed is a substantial claim about the mind of the speaker and the nature of acquisition ... the importance of UG is its attempt to integrate grammar, mind and acquisition at every moment (Cook 1988, p1-2)

Essentially, then, each speaker's set of principles and parameters are fundamentally the same. "Experience is required to set the switches. Once they are set, the system functions" (McLaughlin 1987, p94-95). By these presumptions it would be odd, even incredible, if each speaker's intrinsic capacities were not identical. But since the system will work automatically once input (however sparse, low quality or muddled) have set the switches, it would be equally unbelievable, in this latest twist of Chomsky's thought, if the speakers linguistic capacity did not remain equal, or even identical, *after* switch-setting has occurred

UG asserts that at some fundamental level all languages conform to a particular pattern ... Their uniformity is not due to common historical origins, nor to the communicative needs of the user, but to the properties of the language faculty, the UG at the heart of grammatical competence ... knowledge of a language means knowing how it fits the general properties of UG with which the mind is equipped. We don't know English as such, or Arabic as such: we know the English version of UG or the Arabic version of UG (Cook 1988, p50).

The process sketched here deals only with "core" grammar: those pieces of linguistic competence created in the child via the interaction of UG and input. But many aspects of grammar are peripheral: these are not constrained by UG. Peripheral rules are often historically determined ("the more the merrier" is derived from Old English), are borrowed or are accidental. But although peripheral (marked) rules may be harder to learn than core (unmarked) ones, all languages are alike in that they possess both types of rule, and are also alike in that the relationships, or properties, of core

to peripheral are broadly similar interlingually. A language which was largely composed of peripheral (and hence unbounded and unpredictable) rules would not be a language at all in the Chomskyan sense: it would be bereft of the property of learnability. Hence the core/periphery distinction offers no real threat to any of our component elements of linguistic equality.

The associated notion of markedness draws the same kind of comment. Generally, marked structures are labelled idiosyncratic, irregular, rare, less transferable (to a second language) and more intricate; unmarked ones are more easily learnable, by only a minimal exposure to evidence. It has been further contended, though by no means proved, that unmarked forms are more easily - though not necessarily earlier - acquired by second language learners. It is quite possible that further research will falsify this claim, but anything approaching verification would be a great leap forward towards the goal of showing the L<sub>2</sub> learner to be in full or partial possession of initial UG and therefore subject, in some degree, to the same generalisable language equality as the child (McLaughlin 1987, p97-98). Interlanguage research could well be tending in such a comparably decisive direction (Ellis 1985, p201-206). Comparative analysis of CLA and SLA may well forge the key which locks the door against assertion of linguistic inequality.

#### **4.5. The Innateness Debate: Equality and Inequality in SLA**

No consensus stalks these pages, but a certain yearning for one will probably be detectable. Nor shall we discover much in the area of SLA and language innateness. Perhaps the only area in which an appearance of agreement is visible is that of the magnitude of the child's achievement. The absorption and production of the delicate-

ly intricate systems that underlie all languages and the normal child's capability to absorb and produce unerringly and with great celerity constitute a powerful case for children's linguistic equality.

*Uniformities* in the output ... [of the learner] must be ascribed to the structure of the [language acquisition] device if they cannot be shown to be the result of uniformities in the language the learner hears. (Chomsky 1961, p207)

However, the attempt to extend the innately endowed qualities of the child to adult learners has met with incredulous opposition. Corder's remark that the "processes of first and second language acquisition may very well be the same" (Corder, in Schacter 1988, p23) has sparked an animated but highly inconclusive debate. Diagrammatically and maybe simplistically, this is expressible thus (Cook 1988, p182-183)

With access to U.G.		Indirect access to U.G.	No access to U.G.	
U.G.		U.G.	U.G.	Other mental faculties
L1 competence	L2 competence	L1 competence L2 competence	L1 competence	L2 competence
Equality			Inequality	

Actually the extreme points on this continuum are not really occupied. Cook and Schacter, who join battle here, would both probably wish to take up positions on the left and right of centre respectively. Cook thinks that UG's relevance lies "not so much in the uncertain analogy to L1 learning as in the original conundrum of the poverty of the stimulus" (Cook 1985, p9). If the L2 learner grasps that \* "is the programme that on television is good?" is ungrammatical, and if this knowledge is not derivable from experience, that intuition must be innate. Research focussing on the celebrated "easy/eager to please" puzzle is employed to show that adult learners' perception of the structural difference is *not* ascribable to "teaching syllabuses, structural exercises or pedagogical grammars, and [that] ... it is improbable that native speakers have

demonstrated it to the L2 learner". Thus inherent cerebral qualities must account for this insight.

This seems to me the most potent of the battery of arguments in favour of an adult access to the language faculty. Given the extreme abstractness of grammatical rules, it would be impossible for anyone to learn a language without pre-existing linguistic knowledge. Amongst protagonists of the adult UG position there is a strong *tendency* to assimilate L1 and L2 acquisition. Cook for example, admits that the two processes are not absolutely identical, but are similar "when situational and cognitive factors are ruled out". Chomsky himself has challenged the idea that the L1 might be a mediator or link to UG, but Cook defends this notion, at least in a weakened form. Chomskyan acquisition, or ideal language learning, means that real-time sequences of development can tell us nothing about acquisition.

Schacter's strictures are levelled principally against the assimilationist hypothesis. She fully accepts the persuasive force of mentalism, but counters that the linguistic attainments of L2 learners are so staggeringly different from those of children that it is quite preposterous to imagine that the underlying processes could be the same. Her vigorous critique falls principally in two areas:

First, *completeness*. Any two normal L1 learners soon achieve perfectly complete competence, notwithstanding variable performance. But scarcely any L2 learners ever approach anything like indistinguishability from L1 speakers: Perhaps no L2 learner can ever reach the native speaker's normal state of grammatical competence. Schacter even suggests that L2 learners merely accumulate more native-like syntactic patterns. While going some way with Schacter here, her conclusions remain disput-



able and the accumulating evidence *suggests* at least a shadowy presence of UG in adults.

Second, *equipotentiality*. Small children are equipotential for any language - they can acquire any natural language with equal speed and facility. But the case is utterly different for adults, who are not equipotential for any language. A Spanish speaker finds English more difficult than French, a Dutch speaker less, and all experience more difficulty acquiring Japanese than each others' language. Even in the lexicon there are significant variations in the speed and difficulty of learning. While these points may shake our faith in the "back to UG" stance, they do not, to my mind, critically damage the "start with L<sub>1</sub>" standpoint, since learned L<sub>1</sub> could obviously retard or accelerate L<sub>2</sub> acquisition (Schacter 1988, p225-226).

One origin of the non-equipotentiality of the adult learner is quite manifestly previous knowledge: this produces effects like avoidance, underproduction, time lags and speed ups. "Fossilised" ungrammaticalities also occur incessantly in adult learners, but in a quite different way in children. Schacter believes that it was the mysteriously extraordinary nature of child language acquisition that generated Chomsky's original hypothesis. The patchier and more humdrum and immeasurably less successful phenomenon of adult learning, with its issue in, at best, imperfection, demands a far less potent hypothesis to make it comprehensible. She summons Chomsky to her side, and avers that resemblances between child and adult learners in such areas as morphemes, negations and error types may be due, not to a linguistic faculty, but to "quite disparate cognitive systems that interweave in normal cognitive development."

In sum, it is still not patently absurd to assert that the L<sub>2</sub> learner has *some kind of direct or oblique access* to the universal language faculty which partakes of a similar equality to that we have upheld for the child: the child enjoys normal access to UG; the adult an obscured and abnormal vision of it. The lack of correspondence between IQ scores and language learning "ability" (Spolsky 1989, p102-104) may actually entitle us to hold that SLA does exhibit and embody a kind of equality which transcends the notable differences in adult learning capacities in other cognitive areas. This view entails not merely assenting to the idea of adults still having an intact but distant and muddled UG, but also to the notion that language learning is not like our other "academic" educational experiences at all. For, as Chomsky notes, teachers could try "to create a rich linguistic environment for the intuitive heuristics that the normal human being automatically possesses".

Over and above all this, we may conjecture that (linguistic) science advances (or perhaps merely changes) not through the rigorous formulation and testing of theory, but through the presentation of new ways of thinking about the world. Such an insight was expressed by Chomsky in 1965

It seems plain that language acquisition is based on the child's discovery of what from a formal point of view is a deep and abstract theory - a generative grammar of his language - many of the concepts and principles of which are only remotely related to experience by long and intricate chains of quasi-inferential steps.

The formalism, the emphasis upon depth and abstractness, all these derive from the dawning realisation that, whatever the Babel-like confusion of languages, *language* is a universal and equal human possession. The crucial insight, still productive of many more, is thus that of linguistic equality, which both underlies and accounts for the formality, depth and abstractness of all languages.

## Chapter 5

# Exemplifications, Arguments, Conclusions

### 5.1. Gender, Race and Class

Temporal and spatial constraints have dictated that full justice has not been done to all the parameters of language equality. In particular the significance of *intralingual equality* has not had its due. To many it will appear a bewildering paradox that linguists could pay lip service to a formal and functional equality obtaining between different languages, and yet ignore or deny that such equality was equally apparent between varieties of the same language. Recent work has turned the tide. On *gender variations* most feminist writers would probably agree that it makes little sense to speak of the *langue* as "man-made"; yet gender variations in *parole* are endemic. All the evidence points towards an equal language faculty in men and women. The biological endowment (with, from our standpoint, unimportant laryngeal differences) is the same, and the formal equality stems from that. Functionally, too, "female" and "male" language may be said to have an equal potential and, maybe, actual expressiveness (Newmeyer 1988, IV, p75)

More contentious, and more volatile, has been the issue of *race, class and language*. Assumptions about racial, social and national superiority are not absent from the history of linguistics, though they may well be cleverly concealed. Until quite recently it would have been impossible to assert the formal, let alone the functional equality of, say B[lack] E[nglish] V[ernacular], or the despised industrial speech patterns of Birmingham or Tyneside and be taken seriously. There seem to be a complex

hierarchy of dialects in most languages studied. The vast majority of people in Europe still probably accept the old prescriptionist illusions about the superiority of one dialect over another. Long ago Sapir (perhaps infelicitously) expressed the formal equality of dialects.

"When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head hunting savage of Assam" (Sapir 1921, p219).

But it was not until the 1970s that Labov and others finally nailed the myth that some language varieties are both formally and functionally inferior to others; an assumption inadvertently buttressed by the work of Bernstein and Farrell and knowingly by that of Jensen, where arguments for black children's genetic intellectual inferiority were tricked out by fallacious "evidence" drawn from blacks' language. The 1972 resolution, passed by the Linguistic Society of America and composed by Kroch and Labov, brilliantly exposed this erroneous and disturbing tendency. Labov, in his celebrated essay "The Logic of Non-Standard English" had already shown, conclusively to my mind, that BEV, and by implication all non standard forms of any language, are just as logical and abstract as any other variety, and therefore able to perform a comparable range of functions.

These contributions marked such a watershed that they deserve to be quoted at length. In their declaration Kroch and Labov, commencing with an assertion of intralingual equality, note that children learn, without being taught, the grammar of their native language; that no language yet examined is conceptually or logically more primitive, inadequate or deficient than any other. But they continue by noting that

the non-standard dialects of English spoken by lower class families in the inner cities of the United States are fully formed languages with all of the grammatical structure necessary for logical thought ... linguists agree that all children who have learned to speak a human language have a capacity

for concept formation beyond our present power to analyse (Kroch and Labov 1972, p17-18).

Other writers have begun, after a neglect stretching throughout the history of linguistics, to document the expressive capabilities of non-standard language varieties: While it is probably easier to demonstrate the more easily definable notions like logicity or abstractness, or even of functional efficacy and stylistic variety, it is harder to prove equality in aesthetic notions like literary and evocative power. Translation, say, of Shakespeare into BEV may go some way towards this. It would be foolish to claim that all will one day agree that literary "masterpieces" are translatable into any language variety with no loss of literary force, but to the doubters we must say: Why on earth not? If we accept that one piece of a particular language may be translated into another with no *necessary* loss of aesthetic significance, then why should any variety of language not be adequate for this?

Most linguists argue for the equal logicity and complexity of all natural language varieties. From this fundamental equality springs their equal potential expressiveness and worth. But, of course, it may well be advantageous for every individual to have some command of several dialects of any language; but even here the advantage derives, in part, from prejudice against the allegedly limited potentialities of unprestigious and stigmatised forms. Thus prejudice quickly draws a vicious spiral. Lack of prestige makes a particular variety less useful or acceptable; and hence users are unreasonably forced to acquire others. And, to pursue this a little further, equality will also be possessed, not merely by dialects, sociolects and such collective concepts, but by idiolects, the linguistic range of a single individual. For it is too easy to forget that language equality is instantiated in every human being.

## 5.2. Language Birth and Language Death

Pidgins and creoles are another richly rewarding area. Pidgins, created in unequal multilingual contact situations, are clearly not the equal of "real" language in their complexity, and therefore in their range of functions. A pidgin is born when two structurally and semantically equivalent language systems are crudely and often cruelly thrust together in highly exploitive or unequal situations: slavery is merely the most extreme of these. Although they are logical and rule-governed their restricted uses in communicating only with members of *other* speech communities ensures a reduction in complexity; and therefore a depleted capacity for embodying ideas, emotions and so on.

What eventually happens at the birth of a new natural language, when a pidgin becomes creolised and acquires native speakers, is that the pidgins become "ordinary languages like any others" (Holman 1988, p154-155). And this "instant acquisition" of logicity, complexity and underlying abstractness derives from the creative equality of children's language faculties, as they transform reduced and restricted codes into fully humanised ones.

Again, it would be presumptuous to claim an academic consensus. In Bickerton's "bioprogram" account creoles are invented by children. Hearing (*inter alia*) the degenerate input of insufficiently structured and pragmatically penurious pidgins, they bring their inborn linguistic capacities to bear to remould this data into fully-fledged languages. But, while he still believes that similarities between different creoles reflect the innate language faculty, he has denied ascribing simplicity (and therefore presumably lack of complexity) to creoles; commenting that "the whole

concept of simplicity in language is strewn with epistemological and other landmines, and should perhaps be avoided altogether" (Hudson 1980, p67). Simplicity, of course, *may* merely mean "closer to UG" and therefore free of the idiosyncrasies bestowed by diachronic change. In this sense it does not entail lack of structural complexity, and the bioprogram approach certainly does not invite us to treat creoles as anything less than full languages.

Other recent enquirers like Pieter Muysken contest the alleged morphological and grammatical simplicity of creoles. He outlines seven theories which try to account for the supposed properties of creoles (similarity, simplicity and mixed grammars). Of these, two do not attribute simplicity to creoles at all, and we have contended that the bioprogram model does not imply simplicity in a derogatory sense. Pointing to the fact that simplicity has been taken to mean (a) lacking in morphology and (b) having a simpler grammar, Muysken concludes that creole grammars are neither especially simple or unmarked (Newmeyer 1988, II, p302). We have already encountered the erroneous notion that analytic languages are less complex and less adequate than synthetic ones. The hydra of primitivism will always have more heads to sever. But the case for the formal and functional equality of creoles has been convincingly made, and linguists increasingly treat them as languages like any other.

Equally illuminating and pertinent is the process of language death. Attention has been called to the similarities between dying languages, in their terminal stage before dissolution, and pidgins. Both are used monostylistically, and therefore become functionally inadequate to certain linguistic situations (Muysken, *ibid.* p289). The sociolinguistic and pragmatic norms which govern stylistic choice have been lost in a terminally sick language, just as they have not yet been gained in a pidgin. And there

is the same impoverishment of grammar and lexicon, the decline of inflectional morphology, synthetic constructions and word formation rules. Even so, dying languages do seem closer to living ones in many ways than do pidgins. It is the loss of logicity and complexity, the increasing shakiness of that internal coherence which characterises a living language, which issues in the pragmatic and sociolinguistic poverty of a disappearing tongue. A living language is, after all, a language in which we can freely and comfortably think. To identify the exact point at which an endangered species becomes one doomed to extinction may be a pedantic question, but the theory of linguistic equality has much to offer in constructing satisfying explanations for these critical moments. All languages must change, slowly but ineluctably; change is thus a necessary for existence: but if change spells the loss of those features which make languages equal, extinction is not far away.

And, in the context of newly minted languages, recent investigations of sign languages provide a refreshing reminder that the language faculty may not be dependent on speech at all. Bloomfield thought that gestural languages were secondary to speech (Newmeyer 1988, IV, p188-189), but many now feel they are natural languages, analysable in the same way as others, and thus endowed with all the formal and functional values of non-sign languages (Bloomfield 1933, p39). It is the language, not the speech faculty, which is basic, as Sapir recognised in his sagacious delineation of the qualities of a language.

That a language may be born at the very moment an infant restructures a structurally insufficient pidgin is perhaps the most striking testimony of all to the limitless creative power of children's brains. Conversely, *language attrition* begins at that moment when the possessor of a logically and structurally complete language loses command over



its full complexity. Of course, every language is probably losing speakers at any point in its history, but an individual speaker's disacquisition may rehearse global language death. This leads to an interesting and testable possibility: using criteria of logicity, regularity and complexity, it could be possible to test for language disacquisition. Even using a scalar approach it may be possible to find a particular point at which competence is too uneven to measure up to the standards of language equality. This could be another excellent way of demonstrating that logicity and complexity are core concepts when testing for the presence of a complete language (McCormack 1990, *passim*).

### **5.3. Thinking and Language**

Linguistic equality has sweeping implications for the question of language, culture and world view, for linguistic determinism and linguistic relativism. Most evidently, it appears totally at variance with stronger forms of the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: that language determines and dictates thought, that there can be no thought without language, and that consequently there are no real restrictions on the variations between people in the concepts they form. "We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language" (Newmeyer 1988, II, p15). The burden of proofs marshalled thus far is heavily against this admittedly thought-provoking idea. Rather, the equality of our linguistic faculties and therefore of the languages it spawns, point to thought determining language and the essential translatability and even interchangeability of languages. These possibilities stem directly from the deep likenesses in the structural systems of all languages which in turn flows from our common humanity. Of course, it may well be true that highly dilute forms of

Whorfianism may be acceptable, but doubts persist, and the decline of linguistic determinism may be seen as an unconscious acknowledgement that it is irreconcilable with the universalist thrust of modern linguistics. And, no facet of thinking about the equalness of languages need discourage advocates of "Whorfianism of a third kind", an ethical relativism which defends the worth of despised languages and cultures to the rich and precious diversity of human experience (Whorf 1956, p207). Linguistic equality may well be a far more valuable defence for desirable variety, or, indeed, of an ideal world language, than any form of determinism. And it exposes the intellectual hollowness of the ethnically and socially distorted treatment of languages so lamentably characteristic of much national language planning.

#### **5.4. Is Linguistic Equality an Anglocentric or Prescriptive Idea?**

Nearly everything so far has concerned the thoughts and writings of Europeans and North Americans. Indeed, the genesis of the ideas discussed seems to lie in Europe and North America. Linguistics as we know it is a European and North American study which, like many others, seems set fair to colonise the entire intellectual world.

But, at least from the time of Boas and his colleagues onwards (and sporadically much further back in time) much of the *evidence* for linguistic propositions has been drawn from non-European languages. Admittedly, the researchers often possessed far below a native-like competence in the languages studied. In sum, while we need to accept a Eurocentric and Americocentric bias in linguistic thinking, the claims made by this thinking may well have universal validity *within the terms of linguistic theory*. More than this could scarcely be demanded of any system of thought.

The question of ethnocentricity in linguistics has arisen in a rather different way with regard to language universals. We have argued that the notion of linguistic equality is both logically prior to, and more epistemologically embracing than, the daughter idea of language universals. It is possible to conceive of universals without linguistic equality, but not *vice versa*. Because of the Anglophonic monolingualism of *some* of the protagonists of both universals and generative grammar, these theories became easy targets for shallow allegations of presumptuous ethnocentricity. Defenders have not been slow to point the hyperbole behind some of the charges (Newmeyer 1988, p15). Since introspective judgments about grammaticality are much easier and safer in one's mother tongue, and since these judgments have been vital in generative grammar, it is easy to see how such suggestions might gain credence.

If generative grammar is right, each and every language will reveal a large part of the truth about languages, because all are fundamentally similar. The language faculty is precisely the same for all children and this similarity is reflected in the grammatical principles children possess. As Chomsky notes: "It is only through intensive studies of particular languages that one can hope to find crucial evidence for the study of universal grammar" (Newmeyer 1983, p68). Languages clearly do need to be studied in great depth and with enormous rigour. Otherwise "universal" principles could be deduced from the most perfunctory examination, which, fairly obviously, they cannot. In this respect, modern linguistics is like its founders: complex, demanding and difficult.

Another suggestion, that anglocentricism has somehow determined the shape of grammatical theory, seems highly improbable. Newmeyer argues that the excessive permissiveness of Chomskyan theory constitutes an opposite deficiency.

Unquestionably, egalitarian and universalist ideologies do constitute a "Western" mode of thinking, though one which has now spread far and wide.

One preoccupation of this dissertation has been the impossibility for any fruitful theory to be *completely* value-free. Generative grammarians can only escape "values" by taking refuge in secondary, and derivative, aspects of grammatical study. Our argument throughout has been that belief in the possibility of language universals, *and in the worthwhileness of studying them*, and indeed the whole project of describing the underlying grammatical principles of a language - all these ultimately stem from highly "ideological" concerns.

Frank acceptance of the hidden intellectual origins and agenda of modern linguistics is both necessary and desirable. Even if concepts like logicity, regularity, complexity and abstractness were absolutely value-free, we should still have to defend the importance we attach to them, and argue for the significance of that idea of equality which binds them into a meaningful whole.

It would take a very militant linguistic determinist to hold that the idea of linguistic equality *cannot* be understood by those educated in non-Western ways of thought: And the idea does dignify all languages and invests them with equal worth and potential. Can we really therefore say, without self-contradiction (or at least without logical and psychological oddity) that a theory can be ethnocentric which does *not* favour its own language or ethnic group? To accuse anti-racists of racism because not everybody in the world agrees with anti-racism seems to be a bizarre accusation. If the theory is wrong, it is not because it is ethnocentric. A far more plausible case might be made for the essential anti-ethnocentric implications of most modern linguistic

theory. Many linguistic conservatives (of, say, the prescriptive type) may dislike this, but, on this occasion, they cannot have their cake and eat it.

But the relationship of theory to practice may well be equivocal. The way in which Chomsky, most notably, has actually formulated his ideas may unintentionally have favoured a kind of language prescription.

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and error (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language to actual performance (Chomsky, *ibid.* p69).

Undoubtedly, these ideal speaker-listeners have *tended* to be linguists themselves, introspecting their own arid standard languages. This was an unfortunate, but accidental feature of some linguistic theory. But there is nothing at all in the theory which implies that the ideal speaker-listener should be a standard speaker; indeed, essentially transformational grammar is an anti-prescriptive force in the world of language (Chomsky 1965, p3).

This is perhaps the place, if any is, to note what, amongst lay people, is probably the commonest objection to language equality: that some languages (normally other peoples') do not possess enough words, or specialised-enough words to be treated as functionally equal to others. How frequently most of us have heard English lauded for its large vocabulary, sometimes with the implication that a language can be confined and captured within the covers of a dictionary. It is perfectly true that there is a minimal lexicon (or non-written signs) without which a language could be neither formally or functionally adequate; but every language must have this as soon as it acquires its first native speakers - the precise point, that is, at which it becomes a

language. Additional words are in fact already present; or rather the realities which they express are already there in the necessary conceptual and linguistic structure. Whilst Inuit may rejoice in five words for different varieties of snow, temperate lexicons can encompass this by distinguishing between wet, dry, melting etc. snow. Too often an essentially lexicocentric view of language blurs our awareness of the conceptual equality noted by Sapir in 1921.

## 5.5. Linguistic Equalities Revisited

*Formal equality* seems to be the irreducible kernel at the heart of the equality of languages. It also seems to be the least debatable element of the tripartite theory. For it should be possible to demonstrate, at least to our own satisfaction, that every language has an equally logical, regular and complex internal pattern, even if such putative universalistic norms are tainted by Eurocentric bias.

The *functional equality* of languages is probably harder to establish. And it may be flawed by lack of diachronic comparability between languages, such as the absence of a written literature, the attrition of oral literary traditions and so on. Unwritten languages suffer a similar disadvantage to unwritten dialects in this respect. However much we may feel that the functional force of a language is predetermined by its formal qualities, the demonstration of this will be highly problematic.

*Equality of value* will, *a fortiori*, be bedevilled by even greater doubt. For it is hard to exclude from our notion of worth such volatile concepts as ‘valuable for career, family, race, class, nation’ and so on, and those muddy tributaries soon cloud the pure waters of linguistic thinking. Ironically, such opacity could well conspire towards the real-world death of our original notion. It is not beyond our imagination to conceive

a world in which all but few of our existing languages were extinct. Linguists debated the records of those perished tongues; anthropologists celebrated their cultural heritage; and all agreed that languages always were linguistically equal.

## 5.6. Conclusion: Is Theory Worthwhile?

Encounters with many aspects of linguistic thought now enable us to propose a refined description of the theory of linguistic equality.

1. The relations between sounds and meanings in all languages are equally arbitrary. But the internal relations between these signs form a consistent and rule-governed system in every language.
2. This universal interior linguistic regularity accounts for the creativity of all languages. At any time in the history of language, most of the sentences, spoken and heard, have never been identically said or heard before.
3. The grammatical systems of all languages possess equivalent qualities. They can all, as a consequence, fully express any conceivable thought.
4. All normal children have equal language acquiring capacities for any natural language.

The foregoing pages have been a faltering struggle to come to grips with a hegemonic concept which seems to make sense of many features of both linguistics and language itself. Numerous exemplifications of the theory hopefully go a little way, and in the right direction, to answering our rhetorical question, Is the theory a good one? Harking back to the critical demand that any theory should satisfy searching norms, that satisfaction has now been attempted. The theory assists comprehension of both linguistic and social reality; it has predictive value and creates testable hypotheses; it is transformative, revolutionising our very idea of language. Further, it is

observationally, descriptively and explanatorily adequate. And it is falsifiable. And, because of its empirical elements, it is hugely practical.

Pedagogically, it has radically humanistic implications for our disposition towards the learner. It casts a powerful beam on critical contemporary issues like language standardisation, and highlights the choices with stark clarity. And, perhaps in common with all good theory, it is equivocal in many of its implications, clarifying conflicts rather than resolving them. For standardisation may be as easily attacked as defended via the theory. One multi-stylistic language could conceivably perform all the important tasks presently carried out by four and a half thousand with equal or greater ease and success. But, by a similar token, it lends no succour at all to the chauvinistic ideologists of various global languages.

Ignorance forms a large part of all forms of bigotry, including prejudices about language. But, even after the miasma has been dispelled, decisions will not be sublimely simple. A final criterion for a decent theory is its capacity to be truthful to the complexities and contradictions of life. In this case such truthfulness will need to embrace consequences that, at first glance, may well appear astonishing. In the short term, wider acceptance of linguistic equality will lend dignity to all languages and varieties, with exciting effects on linguistic and human rights, and the legitimate self-esteem of minorities. In the longer term, it could well issue in both the preservation of diversity and the growth in sympathy for the idea of a single world language, with its own varieties and normal propensity to change. Unbeknown to itself, linguistics seems to be travelling the same road as the natural and social sciences: towards a more sophisticated, more intricate but quite definite conception of human equality.



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