

# LINGUISTICS: SCIENCE OR MYSTICISM?

by  
Paul Christophersen

The difference between, on the one hand, linguistics and other arts subjects claiming to be sciences and, on the other, the exact sciences lies in the nature of the material they deal with and not in their basic principles, which are those of all empirical investigation. Yet some areas of linguistic thought still contain irrational elements, or at least a lack of clarity, as over the alleged or assumed difference between mother tongues and other tongues, and over pure and applied linguistics. The widespread opposition to prescriptivism lacks a sound foundation: man is not only capable of influencing usage, he may in some cases be well justified in doing so.

The question posed by my title was prompted by a recollection of Bertrand Russell's essay *Mysticism and Logic*. To Russell these two terms represented two very different human impulses and sources of belief or knowledge about the world around us, about reality. Other terms for the same contrast are instinct and reason, or intuition and intellect, or mysticism and science. Instinct and intuition may in some cases, particularly in practical everyday situations, lead more quickly and more surely to a correct judgment than cumbersome intellectual analysis. But in less directly practical issues, in those involving more abstract thought, instinctually held beliefs are often wholly wrong. Instinct tells us that the Earth is flat; intellect arrives at the conclusion that it must be spherical. Now in the branches of linguistics that it has fallen to my lot to be particularly concerned with – historical philology and language acquisition – I have detected a small but significant number of widely held beliefs of doubtful scientific validity and perhaps best described as mystical. In the interests of linguistic science I propose to point them out.

First, however, let me attempt to define the word *science*. As we all know, it comes from Latin *scientia*. My Latin dictionary tells me that in classical times this word indicated both theoretical knowledge and practical skill in any particular area. The word thus appears to have been more or less synonymous with the word *ars*, which also covered the two aspects of expertise, practical and theoretical. In medieval times both words were taken over into English, and in English too *science* and *art* were originally almost synonymous.

Medieval scholars referred interchangeably to 'the seven liberal arts' and 'the seven liberal sciences', i.e. the group of subjects that made up the medieval BA syllabus, of which some subjects, such as grammar and rhetoric, would nowadays be classed as arts, and others, such as geometry and astronomy, as science subjects.

In the course of the modern English period *art* and *science* have diverged in meaning, and they now form a fairly sharp contrast in the academic world. In the eighteenth century, according to the OED, Isaac Watts explained in his *Logick* that the distinction between an art and a science is that one refers to practice and the other to speculation. This seems nearer to the modern way of looking at the difference, but it still does not quite cover either ordinary usage or the common perception nowadays. The present-day distribution of subjects in a university between the arts and the science faculty has had an effect, I think, on people's thinking and has created a belief, not confined to lay minds, that there is an essential difference between two types of approach to university studies depending on the faculty concerned. There is even a tendency to distinguish two types of temperament, to think of arts students as artistic and imaginative and of science students as coldly scientific and matter-of-fact. This attitude is undoubtedly linked with the now widespread, but in my view deplorable, use of the word *science* to indicate only natural and physical sciences, two branches of study also known as 'exact' sciences. Arts studies, by contrast, are considered incapable of reaching similar degrees of precision and certainty in their results.

In my view the basic difference between the arts and humanities, on the one side, and the exact sciences, on the other, lies not in the principles they follow in their research, which are those of all empirical investigation, but in the methods that they need to employ because of the nature of their material. The exact sciences are favoured by nature; the arts and humanities have to deal with material that is much less amenable to systematic investigation. It is not easy to put human lives and activities under the microscope, literally or figuratively, and experiments involving human beings are fraught with grave problems. One of my concerns at the moment is first-language learning, and important problems would be solved if we could experiment freely with human infants and observe how language develops under varying conditions, but for obvious ethical reasons that procedure is ruled out. Yet even where that difficulty does not exist, as in experiments with more mature humans,

problems arise because there is often no way of isolating one particular factor for the purpose of close investigation. There is an almost infinite variety in the make-up of the human personality, due to differences in genetic endowment as well as in external formative influences. For one thing, each individual has a consciousness and a will of his own.

I am aware that there are other ways of interpreting the humanities-versus-science dichotomy, more popular ways perhaps, but without a doubt mistaken. Some years ago a Chaucer scholar, Ian Robinson, argued against using a restored Chaucerian pronunciation based on the 'fairly loose and probabilistic' results of historical philology (1971:23). He ridiculed the claims of this branch of study to be called a science, and found A.C. Gimson's concept of a reasonably certain conjecture 'an odd one', as if that idea were totally foreign to workers in the exact sciences. To Robinson, obviously, the great divide between arts and science amounted to a difference between probabilistic and exact knowledge. He was unaware that, except in logic and pure mathematics, all scientific results are probabilistic, even though the degree of probability may vary and will sometimes be very high.

It may justly be held that although an important duty of a university lies in the sphere of theory and principle, concern with practical performance is not only a necessity and a duty but a help in fructifying the teaching. My worry is that ideas from the practical field will sometimes invade academic argumentation and lead to false pleading. Ian Robinson's basic objection to historical philology appeared to be that it was apt to produce wooden and uninspired reading of Chaucer's lines. So indeed it may, as all who have taught Chaucer will know. But this is not an acceptable argument against historical linguistic research.

Let me briefly outline the principles and practice of scientific research common to all subjects. In all rational search for knowledge the primary source of information is observation, which will eventually produce a body of facts held together by inferred relationships, by theories regarding possible links between the facts. In the formation of these theories logic will play a controlling role; but the fundamental element is observation, for logical rigour alone makes no discoveries. A third contributing factor is the researcher's power of imagination, his ability to think of ways of establishing links between his observations. How those ideas come to him, where he gets

his hunches or flashes of inspiration from, we do not know; there may well be an element of mysticism here, though under the strict control of reason. Hunches, however, are enormously important, in arts and science subjects alike, because without scientific imagination no progress is ever made. The imagination plays with the previously observed facts, but under the controlling influence of logic and reason.

I come now to the main part of my paper, in which I shall argue that certain traditional ways of looking at language do not agree with the available evidence and with the principles I have just outlined. My fire will be specially directed at the term 'native language' and associated usages (e.g. 'native speaker' and 'he speaks French natively'), because these phrases, by linking together the concepts of language and birth, suggest that a person is born with his or her language. We know now that this is not so, and it is all the more regrettable that phrases like these should be so firmly established in probably all European languages that the belief that originally brought them into being is likely to be kept alive for a long time to come.

Interest in languages and speculation about their age and development are of ancient date and perhaps as old as the human race. In a story told by Herodotus (book 2, chapter 2) we hear that the Pharaoh Psammetichus (seventh century B.C.), anxious to find the most ancient nation, arranged for two newborn babies to be looked after well but isolated from any other human contact. After a couple of years they were repeatedly heard to utter the word *bekos*, which was identified as the Phrygian word for bread, and so the conclusion was drawn that the Phrygian nation must be of greater antiquity than any other. Underlying this experiment was the correct observation that children normally learn the language of their environment, and so an attempt was made to exclude that factor. But the assumption that this would mean that the children would instead speak the language of the most ancient nation was pure speculation and was hardly confirmed by this experiment.

Man's thirst for knowledge about his origin and original speech is such that it would not surprise me to learn that this experiment had been replicated – or independently undertaken – many times. I know of two such attempts. One was conducted by the emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (reigned 1212-1250). This is attested by the contemporary chronicler Salimbene, who disapprovingly calls the experiment *superstitio* ('lunacy'). He wanted to investigate, says

Salimbene (1966:I.510), what sort of language and speech boys would have as they grew up if nobody spoke to them. He therefore gave instructions to the nurses in charge of some newborn babies that they were to give them milk and suckle them at the breast and also bath and clean them, but they were in no way to fondle them, nor to speak to them. 'He wanted to find out whether the children would speak the Hebrew language, mankind's oldest, or perhaps Greek or Latin or Arabic, or indeed the language of their parents of whom they had been born.' But he laboured in vain, says Salimbene, because without clapping of hands and encouraging smiles and caresses the children could not survive; they all died.

Another experimenter was James IV of Scotland, who in 1493 had two young babies placed on the island of Inchkeith in the charge of a dumb woman. This story was reported about 1575 by the historian Piscottie (1899:I.237), who says about the result: 'Sum sayis they spak goode hebrew bot as to my self I knaw not bot be the authoris reherse ["account"]'. The modern editor comments (II.374): At this date few persons in Scotland knew Hebrew, still less what was good Hebrew.

From all three experiments one thing emerges: a strong and persistent belief in an inherited language, but a language which will only manifest itself if all influence from the environment is eliminated. Clearly a mystical notion. The posited inherited language was generally thought to be man's original speech – Hebrew in the Christian world – but on this point Frederick II, with his cosmopolitan outlook, had a less prejudiced and more open mind, allowing the possibility that the inheritance might involve some other language.

We also, however, from fairly early times and in many languages find terms that seem to imply belief in some form of heredity involving not an ancestral language but the actual daily speech of the surroundings, the language which the early experimenters that I have just mentioned were trying to exclude from their investigation. This is not the place for long lists of examples;<sup>1</sup> let me merely mention that the medieval chronicler Frutolf says of Godfrey of Bouillon, the hero of the first crusade, that he spoke both French and German like a native, *per innatam sibi utriusque linguae peritiam* (Frutolf 1844:218 [AD 1099]). In the thirteenth century we find phrases like *natale idioma* and *nativa lingua* – and also from about the same time *lingua materna*, which apparently indicated

particularly the language of infancy, the home language as distinct from the scholar's Latin, *lingua litterata*.

Does any of this mystical or semi-mystical belief survive until today? The answer, I think, is Yes. Among non-linguists there is often some speculation or a vague belief that in some way language is inherited. People sometimes discover with surprise that a foreign child who has been brought up in England from birth has no foreign accent in his English. In his biography of Disraeli Lord Blake points out that despite his un-English appearance there was nothing foreign about Disraeli's speech (Blake 1966:567). It is interesting to note that, since few westerners nowadays believe in the literal truth of the Bible's account of creation, it is no longer Hebrew but the mother tongue that people in the west may be inclined to regard as inherited. Moreover, that inclination has been strengthened in recent centuries by romantic nationalism with its emphasis on the national tongue as a treasured possession, a symbol of the nation's distinctive identity.

Within the linguistic profession, too, remnants of a belief in linguistic heredity appear to survive. The terms 'native' and 'non-native' are in regular use, especially among language teachers. There is a curious aura of mystique surrounding the competence of so-called 'native' speakers. Their language, their L1 as the jargon goes, is invested with the same prestige and respect that a genetically inherited language would command if such a one existed - but it doesn't exist, as I shall show presently. L1 speakers are considered to 'own' their language, and the assumption of ownership is thought to justify the dictum used by some linguists, that 'the native speaker is always right'. By contrast 'non-natives', or L2 speakers as they are technically known, people who started life with another language, are thought incapable of ever attaining to a similar degree of authenticity in the use of their second-learned language. I detect a good deal of mysticism in these attitudes.

In the first place, there is great and bewildering confusion in the use of the relevant terminology, especially L1 and L2, corresponding to first and second language. It needs to be emphasized that *first* can mean either 'first in time' or 'first in importance', and these two meanings must be kept strictly separate if we are to avoid confusion. In a book on second-language learning, Robert Lado proposes to exclude from consideration cases in which young children's learning goes 'beyond the level of mastery of the first language, as at that level it [i.e. the second language] would become the first language'

(1964:37). A language either *is* or *is not* chronologically first; it cannot *become* first after having been second, except in the sense of 'first in importance'.

In fact, the original proposer of the terms L1 and L2, J.C. Catford, defined L1 as 'usually, but not always, the language first acquired in childhood; it is the language of its speaker's intimate daily life' (Quirk and Smith 1959:165). If, on the other hand, we assume, as many now do, that the chronological order of acquisition is also the order of importance, we shall find that large numbers of grown-up people, for example many who were born into a minority-language group, have partly or wholly forgotten their L1 and are functioning almost entirely, and for most or all purposes, in an L2 (the majority language). Should no weight be given to such speakers' own preference? After all, they alone can speak with authority about their intimate daily life. It has sometimes been suggested that a better term than L1 in the sense of 'first in importance' would be 'preferred' or 'dominant' or 'primary' language. Of these terms I think preference should be given to 'primary', because it goes equally well with 'language' and with 'speaker'. A primary speaker, whether of an original L1 or L2, is a bearer of the language tradition, and as a regular user of the language has as good a right as anybody to regard it as 'his' language.

It can now be stated categorically that a child's first language is not innate but is acquired from the environment. What *is* innate is an ability to *learn* the language of the immediate surroundings. All normal human babies regardless of parentage, whether European, Eskimo or African, are endowed with an innate ability to acquire with equal ease the language of any environment in which they are placed. Although our conscience would no longer allow us to conduct experiments like those of the Pharaoh Psammetichus and the Emperor Frederick, we think we have the answer that those early experimenters were seeking. Unless a child is exposed to human speech in its early years, it will simply not learn to speak or understand any language. The young child's learning of its first language is closely bound up with the development of the speech centres in the brain during the period when the brain matures; and without exposure to a language, any language, during the early years those centres will not develop and may ultimately atrophy. It seems that in such cases it becomes increasingly difficult or impossible after the age of puberty to start learning a first language. In the course of human

history, over many centuries, there have been reports of neglected children, brought up without human contact and consequently with little or no ability to speak. The latest such case is a girl in California known as Genie, now a grown woman, with only rudimentary speech because until the age of thirteen and a half she had little or no opportunity to hear any human speech (Curtiss 1977).

The time between birth and puberty, the period when the language centres in the brain are ready to develop but cannot do so unless stimulated by exposure to human speech, is thus highly important and is often referred to as the 'critical period', a term introduced by the late Eric Lenneberg (1967). His exciting theory has aroused widespread interest and is now generally accepted, because it explains comprehensively a number of separate observations concerning language learning, which in this way fall into place. But it has also sometimes been misunderstood. To say that 'there is no L1 learning after puberty' is true only if the learner is in the sad situation of having been deprived of human contact during the crucial years when the rest of his brain was maturing; and in that case there would be no L2 learning either, in fact no language learning of any kind. But for a normally developed person the ability to learn languages, and to improve his knowledge of those he has already learnt, including his L1, continues throughout life – possibly, as I shall explain later, with some decline after puberty in the power to imitate new speech sounds spontaneously.

Generalizations are difficult, however, because human circumstances vary so much. By the age of five, a child usually has a quite fluent command of its L1; yet if he or she is moved to a different language environment, it takes only a few months for the first language to vanish without trace from the conscious mind and be replaced by the language of the new environment, which will then become the child's primary language. And if a child is exposed simultaneously to two different language backgrounds – say, one at home and another at school – it will acquire what should perhaps be called two L1's. Whether the child will be able to preserve both these languages into adulthood depends on what chances there are to develop them further and receive formal instruction in both; otherwise the likelihood is that the home language will one day become merely a distant memory which the grown-up person is unable to use for any serious purpose. A lot depends of course on the learner's own wish.

A somewhat later change of environment, at nine or ten, will usually have the same effect as at five, except that some memory of the first language is more likely to remain. This will certainly be so if special arrangements are made by parents or guardians to ensure that the first language is kept alive. The further fate of the two languages beyond childhood depends mainly on the learner himself; if he continues to live in L2 surroundings, he will most likely merge entirely into his new environment. But where a change occurs still later – say, at fifteen or sixteen – the result is less certain; it depends to a great extent on whether the learner takes to his new surroundings and wishes to identify with them. His personality is developing; he is more conscious of his earlier background, and this may cause him to feel an outsider and will possibly lend a certain foreignness to his L2, which, though fluent, may never become fully his primary medium.

The group of learners that I have just mentioned is similar in some respects to those that I want to mention next, schoolchildren learning a foreign language. Some of the children may not take to the subject at all and will probably never get very far; their L2 will be distinctly foreign and possibly quite inadequate as a medium of communication; others may take to the subject like ducks to water.

Failure in L2 learning has a number of possible causes, one of them being inadequate teaching. The European language-teaching reformers of the 1880s wanted to assimilate second- to first-language learning as closely as possible,<sup>2</sup> first of all by reducing the grammar and translation element of the course to a minimum, secondly by teaching primarily the spoken language as used in ordinary daily life, and thirdly by seeking to ensure a good pronunciation with the help of phonetics. An overarching aim of the course, and a help in the teaching at all levels, was the development of empathy with the target-language community. I am not aware that these aims have been bettered anywhere, but I have a distinct impression that some courses neglect one or more of them.

One aspect of second-language teaching of which many teachers seem strangely neglectful is pronunciation. One has the impression that they regard it as a waste of time to teach what they are convinced their pupils cannot possibly learn. Is this another instance of mysticism? I shall return to this point later. Very young children pick up new speech sounds with ease by simple imitation, but during the second decade of life that ability begins to decline, and older L2 learners often need help, which can indeed easily be provided by

means of phonetics. Although a foreign accent contains other ingredients,<sup>3</sup> the main component is imperfect pronunciation. Now that a knowledge of phonetics has become part of a good language teacher's professional equipment, a well-taught and well-motivated L2 learner will sometimes be hard to tell from an L1 speaker, and he may eventually choose to become a primary speaker.

We have now entered the territory of bilingualism, by which term I mean the possession by one individual of two languages. The two may be to some extent in competition, but most often one of them will be the speaker's more personal medium, his primary language, and as J.C. Catford has pointed out, this will not necessarily be the language he learnt first. My concern in the last few pages has been to show how variable the relationship between a bilingual's two languages can be, depending on external conditions but also, and mainly, on the speaker's own will and preference. The target of my attack is the assumption that some people, linguists and laymen, seem to make in reference to any one particular language: that mankind can be divided for ever into two distinct categories, those who started life with that language and the rest who did not. In fact, notwithstanding the historical fact of the order in which they were learnt, the relation between a bilingual's two languages may well change radically in the course of his lifetime. To assume that a few years' handicap in childhood or youth will for ever hinder a person from acquiring a full and normal command of his second-learnt language is an unproved and unprovable notion. We are in the realm of mysticism.

Perhaps the best proof that chronologically secondary status is no bar to full and effective use of a language is to be found in creative literature. In the course of human history there have been thousands upon thousands of examples, extending back well over two millennia, of imaginative writers employing a second-learnt language and employing it well. The earliest case known to me is Quintus Ennius, who flourished around 200 B.C. and who is often referred to as the 'father' of Latin poetry, although Latin to him was in fact his third language in order of learning. Quite a few other well-known names in classical Roman literature appear to have started life with another language than Latin, and for many centuries after the classical period, throughout the middle ages, long after Latin had ceased to be a living language in the usual meaning of that term, it continued to be used in the western world for almost all literary purposes, poetry as well as

prose, liturgy as well as historical records and administrative accounts.

Since the Renaissance, European writers have frequently used a modern language other than their first for literary purposes, especially poetry. During the heyday of romantic nationalism, with its mystical faith in the nation's language as the only true vehicle of the national spirit, this kind of activity largely ceased; loyalty to the nation's language became a patriotic duty. From the beginning of the twentieth century, however, there have again been plenty of examples. A few years ago a number of bilingual writers were interestingly discussed by Leonard Forster (1970), who surprisingly failed to mention the Irish dramatist, novelist and poet Samuel Beckett, a large part of whose writings was in French. Another, earlier omission in Forster's book is the German romantic poet Adelbert von Chamisso, who started life in France as Louis Charles Adélaïde de Chamisso de Boncourt. An émigré from the revolution he settled in Prussia, where eventually, after the war, he became director of the botanical gardens in Berlin and in his spare time a writer of German poetry and prose. But in the meantime, faced with a conflict of loyalties when war with France broke out in 1806, he returned to his native country and became for a time part of Madame de Staël's circle at Coppet. In 1821, when Chateaubriand was French ambassador to Berlin, he made contact with Chamisso, and in his memoirs he comments on this meeting and prints what he describes as 'l'ouvrage le plus touchant peut-être' (1982:III.58-61), a French verse translation by Chamisso of a German poem he had written about his ancestral château at Boncourt.

From what I have just said it is clear that Chamisso must have retained a full command of French into maturity, and since he had spent part of his childhood in Prussia, his German too was presumably free of any foreign accent. I have seen or heard no comment on Samuel Beckett's French; but it is reported that two other bilingual writers of the mid-twentieth century using English as one of their media, Vladimir Nabokov and Karen Blixen, had marked foreign accents in their English. The reason is probably that their training in English at school was of the kind that paid insufficient attention to speech, and long residence in English-speaking surroundings at a later age will not usually, without special help, remedy this neglect. As speech and writing are to some extent independent modes, the matter is not remarkable in itself, but it raises some important questions.

The chief innovation in the previously mentioned European language-teaching reform of the late nineteenth century was the practical application of phonetic expertise to L2 teaching, mainly due to the influence of the Englishman Henry Sweet. For centuries and perhaps millennia many people seem to have held quite sensible ideas about how to teach foreign languages; but a thing that defeated them was pronunciation. The apparent impossibility of acquiring a good accent in another language after the age of about ten or twelve served no doubt to reinforce the belief that a person's true language was acquired at birth. The eighteenth-century Dano-Norwegian dramatist Holberg mentions in an autobiographical note (1953: Epistle no. 396) that he once in Paris made a prolonged and determined effort to acquire a true Parisian accent; but overhearing a Frenchwoman declaring that he spoke French 'comme un cheval allemand' he gave up the struggle as hopeless. Over the centuries thousands of others must surely have had similar disappointments, so the introduction of phonetic-inspired teaching must have struck many at the time as little short of revolutionary: a foreign accent was avoidable and curable! This is arguably the greatest advance in language teaching in the course of human history.

We have entered the field of applied linguistics, and the practical application of scientific knowledge is often fraught with special problems. Who is in charge of such an operation, and who decides whether and when to go ahead? – because pure science is morally and strategically neutral, concerned only with the acquisition of knowledge, regardless of whether this is immediately useful or not or even potentially harmful. Nuclear physicists have discovered how to split the atom, but it is not for them to decide whether to construct a bomb on this principle, still less whether to drop it, and on whom. Any policy-making is outside the range of pure science, because it involves considerations that go far beyond the limits of science. Naturally, as an ordinary citizen a scientist has the same right as anybody else to an opinion, but he must not claim that this opinion is what science tells him should be done, for science can do no such thing.

The application of phonetic knowledge to language teaching has not escaped controversy. To a romantic nationalist, or a traditionalist, close imitation of foreign speech seems unpatriotic or, at best, a silly affectation, and to those on the other side of the language boundary, those whose speech is being imitated, it may seem suspicious and

embarrassing if they cannot easily tell a foreigner from a compatriot; they may feel irritated or angry with the foreigners, because 'after all, it's not their language!' Both attitudes receive powerful support from mystical notions about the significance of what at first glance seems nature's birthday gift, the mother tongue, quite unlike other languages deliberately learnt later on.

Some teachers, as I have already hinted, seem not to believe in the possibility of teaching a good accent; but for those who do, there remains an issue which some would consider ethical in nature: what is the goal of foreign-language teaching? Should the aim be indistinguishability from speakers of the target language? Or is there a suitable and definable stage short of what may be termed 'perfection' which teachers should aim at? – because close imitation of the speech of another nation can never be merely an external facility: it inevitably becomes imitation not only of the language but of the culture of that nation, and it may thus have a profound effect on the learner's personality by giving him roots in two separate and most often politically divided communities. It should be emphasized, though, that such an effect will never occur without the learner's willing cooperation.

The personal problems of bilinguals have been widely discussed.<sup>4</sup> It looks as if we are faced, and not for the first time in history, with a situation in which scientific potentialities are ahead of what our society is prepared to accept. Should science scale down its endeavours, or is there a prospect that society may one day change and come to look with more friendly eyes on individuals who have their roots on both sides of a political boundary? It might be thought that our late twentieth-century world would benefit from having more people like that.

There are indeed signs of a shift, of things now beginning to move. Until the early part of this century, bilingual activities belonged in the main to a social and intellectual élite. For hundreds of years the general population of most western countries had remained fairly static. It could be foreseen that a new-born child would most likely spend the rest of its life within the country of its birth and would thus in all probability grow up to speak that country's language as its primary medium, its 'native' language. Since 1945, however, a drastic change has taken place; ordinary people are now much more mobile; there are much closer international contacts on many levels, and the link between nationality and language has

become less predictable. Some international organizations have taken notice of this change and modified their administrative procedures. I understand that the United Nations when advertising for specialist staff used to specify the 'mother tongue' that applicants were required to have, but in view of the growing international mobility of our time that practice has now been abandoned and instead a required 'main language' is indicated. Similarly, various other organizations advertising for staff now omit terms like 'native language' and 'mother tongue' and simply ask for 'an excellent/perfect/full command of English (French, etc.)' or simply 'fluency in English', etc.

The range of uses or possible uses of applied linguistics is wide and comprises other concerns besides language teaching and learning – for instance, language planning, i.e. devising officially sponsored policies for linguistic structure and standards, especially in new nations. Up to now, however, the interest of 'applied' linguists has focused mainly on language teaching, and it is only in that area that I have detected traces of mysticism. I have finished my comments on L2 teaching; but I should like, before I end, to make some remarks about L1 teaching, the much-debated topic of mother-tongue teaching.

Strange as it may seem, there are linguists who hold that man is incapable of influencing the course of linguistic history, and who believe that language will always pursue its own course regardless of human efforts. Among observations that may have led to this conclusion is the fact that often when phonetic decay of endings threatens the loss of important grammatical distinctions, e.g. case and mood distinctions in Middle English, the system appears to effect its own repair and restore the former balance by other means such as the extended use of prepositions and modal verbs. But the process is slow and uncertain, and the belief that any human interference is unnecessary and indeed futile savours of mysticism. It rests on shaky foundations.

In fact, the belief in the futility of human interference is negated by the success of language planning in various countries. It is interesting to observe how a firm believer in the futility theory, the late A.C. Baugh, author of a learned *History of the English Language*, squares this belief with a fact which scholarly honesty obliges him to record in his book, namely, the 'considerable influence' exerted by eighteenth-century grammarians on English usage 'through the use of their books in the schools' (Baugh 1978:274). 'We must admit', he

says (1978:284), 'that a considerable number of disputed points, rightly or wrongly, were settled and have since become established.' He is clearly unhappy about the grammarians' influence, but fails or refuses to see that the success of their efforts is a refutation of his own theory. Only a couple of pages further on he again asserts 'the futility of trying to interfere with the natural course of linguistic history' (1978:286). Undoubtedly, this assertion should be seen in conjunction with a belief that Baugh expresses elsewhere in his book, that 'language has a way of taking care of itself' (1978:268). Is this another instance of mysticism?

Another linguist, Jean Aitchison, is equally unhappy about the influence of eighteenth-century grammarians but for a radically different reason. There is no doubt in her mind that individuals can and do influence linguistic history, but she condemns any such attempt because no one should appoint himself arbiter of usage and impose his own idiosyncratic standards of correctness on others. In a book a few years ago she described the influence of Robert Lowth, Bishop of London 1777-87 and author of a widely used grammar, as 'profound and pernicious because so many of his strictures were based on his own preconceived notions' (Aitchison 1981:25). In the modern jargon, his rules were prescriptive, while the linguist's job, as she sees it, is merely to observe and describe, not to *prescribe*. 'Did he believe', she asks, 'that, as a bishop, he was divinely inspired?' But what inspiration, we may ask, justifies her own condemnation of the bishop's 'puristic passion'? Has she any more authority, social, ecclesiastical or linguistic, than the bishop? She may claim that, as a modern linguist, she has more knowledge and understanding of languages than Bishop Lowth; but other linguists, equally well equipped, will not necessarily agree with Professor Aitchison on questions of English usage. The point is that we are in the field of applied scientific knowledge, which, as I said earlier, is outside the range of pure science, because other than purely scientific interests are involved. Professor Aitchison has no more right than Bishop Lowth or any other individual to decide what is good or correct usage – just as nuclear physicists have no more right than the rest of us to a voice in policy decisions regarding nuclear weaponry.

It might help to clarify the minds of some 'applied' linguists if they were to cast a glance at another applied science, medicine, and take a leaf out of the medical practitioner's book. Imagine the uproar that would follow if doctors decided to spend their whole time



observing and describing illnesses, but refused to prescribe treatment on the plea either that it is futile to interfere with nature, or that human health has a way of finding its own level anyway, treatment or no treatment. After all, sooner or later we are all going to die. Or suppose the general public came to view the work of doctors with suspicion: what right have they to interfere with our lifestyle?

I turn again to linguistic matters. There are good reasons why a community should take an interest in its language. The structure and cohesion of any human society depends totally on its language, which is the cement that holds a nation together, enables its citizens to communicate and makes a civilized communal life possible. A language may be said to belong to the community rather than the individual members, who only use it by virtue of their membership. Living entirely and permanently by himself a member would no longer need a language.

The government of a civilized country legislates in a number of areas of common concern, education, health care, road traffic, etc. In view of the importance of language and its necessity for the whole community, there is no intrinsic reason why a government should not lay down rules of usage, and there are indeed good reasons why it *should* attempt to regulate the use of the national language in official, nation-wide contexts, in laws and law courts for instance. What and how a person chooses to speak in his own home is a private matter, and so is his language in personal letters and similar communications, whether spoken or written; but the way he speaks and writes when addressing the whole nation or an important part of it is a matter of public concern. We need a national standard to ensure the two essentials of an official language, stability and precision; and we need it now and not when the language at some future date, perhaps a century or two hence, gets round to 'taking care of itself'. Moreover, we live in a world where national and international concerns are becoming curiously intertwined; reverberations of the public use of a language like English extend far beyond the confines of the nation. As an international language English needs stability and precision even more than a national one does. Let us hope that the British media, including the BBC, and any 'applied' linguists advising them, will take due notice and live up to their responsibility. The international community is watching and listening.

Let us hope, too, that it will be borne in mind that, unlike pure science, which is neutral in regard to questions of morality and public

policy, a widely applied science like linguistics needs an ethic for this purpose. It needs agreement among its practitioners about aims and methods and about rules of professional conduct, and it needs a professional body to draw up and enforce such rules. The profession needs to be governed by an institution that can command authority, ideally – in Britain – a royal college.

*1 Corfe Close*  
*Cambridge CB2 2QA*

#### Notes

1. For more examples see Christophersen 1973.
2. See Christophersen 1994.
3. See Christophersen 1992.
4. See Christophersen 1973: section 25 (esp. 77-81).

#### References

- Aitchison, Jean. 1981. *Language Change: Progress or Decay?* Fontana.
- Baugh, A.C., and Thomas Cable. 1978 (3rd ed.). *A History of the English Language*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. - I quote from the third edition, but the relevant passages also occur in the first edition (Appleton-Century, 1935), with Baugh alone as the author.
- Blake, Robert. 1966. *Disraeli*. Eyre & Spottiswoode.
- Chateaubriand, François René de. 1982. *Mémoires d'outre-tombe, I-IV*. Flammarion.
- Christophersen, Paul. 1973. *Second-Language Learning*. Penguin.
- Christophersen, Paul. 1992. 'Native' Models and Foreign Learners. *English Today*, no. 31.
- Christophersen, Paul. 1994. *Jespersen and Second-Language Learning*. In: *A Linguistic Miscellany*, publ. by the English Department, University of Copenhagen.
- Curtiss, Susan. 1977. *GENIE: a psychologic study of a modern-day 'Wild Child'*. Academic Press.
- Forster, Leonard. 1970. *The Poet's Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature*. University of Otago & Cambridge University Press.
- Frutolf. 1844. *Chronicon Universale* (formerly ascribed to Ekkehard of Aura). *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptores*, ed. G.H. Pertz.

- Holberg. 1953. Kai Friis Møller (ed.), Ludvig Holbergs Selvportræt. Copenhagen: Det Berlingske Bogtrykkeri.
- Lado, Robert. 1964. Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach. McGraw-Hill.
- Lenneberg, Eric H. 1967. Biological Foundations of Language. Wiley.
- Pitscottie, Robert Lindsay of. 1899. The Historie and Cronicles of Scotland, ed. Æ.J.G. Mackay, I-II. Scottish Text Society.
- Quirk, Randolph, and A.H. Smith (eds.). 1959. The Teaching of English. Secker & Warburg.
- Robinson, Ian. 1971. Chaucer's Prosody. Cambridge University Press.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1953. Mysticism and Logic. Penguin (first published 1918).
- Salimbene de Adam. 1966. Cronica, I-II, ed. G. Scalia [Scrittore d'Italia, nos. 232 & 233]. Bari.