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FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF NONSENSE LANGUAGE

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Is there anything that man has perceived or experienced that he has not incorporated in some system? Everything man lays his hands on, he uses. Language is no exception. Man takes both his linguistic capacities and his — or someone else's — linguistic output and uses them in ingenious ways. The investigation of these capacities and man's utilization of them is the subject matter of linguistics. But linguistics has been primarily, and almost exclusively, concerned with man's normal use of language. Of man's use of abnormal language there is still far too little known.

Common sense permits the polarization of normal and abnormal language. If for no other reason, this dichotomy is justified by heuristics: until our knowledge about language is far richer than it is today, we are entitled to say that whatever is comprehended by our linguistic generalizations is 'normal' and whatever is excluded is 'abnormal'. Ultimately, of course, a single linguistic theory must account for all linguistic variables.

In this paper I do not attempt any characterization of abnormal language. That would be a venture far too audacious, for me at least, or perhaps for any one at this time. I limit myself to only one kind of abnormal linguistic behavior. And if by doing this I succeed in identifying a particular species of linguistic phenomena, somehow really different from all others, then I will be satisfied. This I call 'nonsense language', and 'pseudolanguage' is a perfectly acceptable synonym. (My own use of the word nonsense should not be confused with other uses. I do not mean, for example, what is incomprehensible although based on normal linguistic material.)

Nonsense — the kind under discussion — is characterized, obviously enough, by making no sense. It is unintelligible, however, to the speaker as well as the hearer. But since we are all capable of meaninglessly passing on what had meaning for the original speaker of a different language (witness what happens in multilingual situations when people repeat words and phrases for prestige purposes), we must qualify by saying that

the utterance is unlearned. Pseudolanguage is therefore unintelligible and spontaneous.

But pseudolanguage must also be language-like. Babbling, ejaculations of pain and pleasure, and other utterances covered by the term 'gibberish' are specifically excluded. A pseudolinguistic utterance is a certain kind of surrogate for normal language. It is felt to be so by the speaker. This is a psychological criterion, admittedly; but there are linguistic implications and correlates. An acceptable language surrogate has linguistic features that distinguish it from other forms of nonsense. This is stated as a finding and as a hypothesis to be tested. It will be confirmed by both linguistic and nonlinguistic evidence. Of the latter type is the observation that subjects who have listened to samples of pseudolanguage rank them closer to real language than to nonlanguage (Carlson MS).

Although pseudolanguage will be easily distinguished from normal language, this is not to say that they are in themselves pure types. It is convenient to see human speech consisting of a broad spectrum of phenomena. At one end is normal language; at the other end are things like interjections and repetitions of simple syllables (for example, in incantations). In between these are found many kinds of utterances. Glossolalia is probably somewhere in the middle of this scheme, with nonsense syllables like *tralalala* in musical refrains to the left (toward simple repetitions) and the nonsense of "be bop" or "scat" singing somewhat closely. To the right are to be found private languages and argots that have pseudolinguistic features (they do not necessarily have them). Finally, there are people who have a few pseudolinguistic innovations like the word *kunaman* 'wonderful' used by two male cousins since childhood. The man who reported this use was a normal member of the linguistic fraternity. Neologisms also occur, of course, among schizophrenics (for which see the novel by Green).

We will not at this time characterize the linguistic features of pseudolanguage (for which see Samarin 1968). We do need to define the concept of meaninglessness.

Pseudolanguage is nonsense because there is no semological structure with which the phonological structure is correlated. That is, the phonemic stratum is not the apparent realization of a sememic stratum. Even where a pseudolinguistic text is motivated by a conceptualized (or conceptualizable) emotion, there is no neat way of showing the relation between units of speech and units of meaning. One such text, obtained from the speaker PL described below, was associated with the concept of love, and in it there was a very high incidence of the syllables *zuw*, *žuw*, *juw*,

and *šuw*, but this is all that one can say about the correlations at this time. Even if a syllable, say, *šuw*, could be identified with some concept associated with love in a language known by the speaker and even associated by him with a particular (perhaps childhood) experience, we learn nothing about meaning in this particular pseudolinguistic text.

There is, however, a great deal of meaning conveyed prosodically and paralinguistically. How much of this is linguistic? Even if one describes the sememic stratum of language as having units that encode affects that are realized either prosodically or lexemically (e.g., *you poor thing*), we would have to say for pseudolanguage that there is no separate semology. Whatever system it has is borrowed into the pseudolanguage as a 'co-existent system', to use a term from the phonemics of the 1940s, and it is realized only prosodically and paralinguistically. This is why intonations of pseudolinguistic texts are so much like those of the languages known by the speakers whereas the segmental phonology is substantially restructured. In some sense, therefore, the speaker of pseudolanguage is talking two languages at the same time!

Having characterized the form of pseudolanguage, we can now discuss its function.

The best-known pseudolanguage is glossolalia or 'speaking in tongues'. It occurs in some forms of the Christian religion and is reported also for some non-Christian religions. It is best known but very little understood, partly because it has been considered gibberish or hysterical in nature. It is clear now that glossolalia is not a very unusual phenomenon and that it serves several functions, some social and some personal. For example, it legitimizes a particular kind of religious experience, it authenticates the authority of sect leaders, and it produces euphoria and may even lead to mild states of trance. But it has these functions primarily because its speakers do not realize that glossolalia is accessible to everyone. Glossolalists capitalize on the obvious distinctiveness of glossolalia and on the apparent difficulty people have in producing their own forms of pseudolanguage. The result is a complex belief system that explains how one acquires the skill, how it is to be used, what its value is, etc.

But glossolalists are only using in a social way what others have used in a personal, or, if social, then ephemeral way. Many people have used pseudolanguage only once or rarely in their lives; others have used it sporadically or rather consistently for a long time. Many people indulge in pseudolanguage when they are especially happy. Walking down the street or driving their cars, they may give expression to their emotions by talking without saying anything. Some use pseudolanguage to express

strong emotion, anger as well as pleasure, in the presence of and even to someone else. One such person when still a boy burst out in pseudolanguage in a fit of anger at his brother. Another person (PL, referred to above), now retired, has been using pseudolanguage socially and personally since he was fifteen years old. Today, if he happened to drop a package while paying his bus fare, he might very well express his exasperation in a stream of pseudolanguage. As he puts it, Alakinky (a name invented by him for the investigation now being carried on by one of my students) blunts the edge of his emotions.

Other people have produced pseudolanguage in a playful attempt to simulate a foreign language. One such person spoke in this way to confound his friends or when he, being a country lad, talked to the cows. As he put it, "They couldn't understand English anyway, so it didn't make any difference what I said to them." Children talk in pseudolanguage for more serious reasons. Several people have told me that when they were abroad, their children — out of desperation we would say — created their own pseudowords in talking French or Japanese, for example. In the latter case, what was remarkable was that almost all adults, even the Japanese, thought that the child was really talking Japanese. In these cases the children pretended that they were talking a real language, not to confound but to assume their part of dialogue. But the motivations for pretending to speak another language are legion. On a train in Holland a girl picked up a newspaper in her own language and read it off in pseudolanguage just to be silly (or was she conscious of my being a foreigner?). And in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, a young man whom my wife and I had just passed was heard to speak out in pseudowords in a parody of our English. Different, but not necessarily more interesting linguistically, are those cases of children who grow up not learning to speak, although understanding, their parents' language, and speak a pseudolanguage instead for several months or years.

More examples of the use of pseudolanguage can be given, but all of them would, I think, be similar to those already cited. At this stage of our investigation of pseudolanguage, it would be premature, however, to suggest a full inventory of functions. They would in all probability parallel those of normal language to some extent. There would naturally be some glaring discrepancies. Pseudolanguages would have no cognitive function, for example, but they would have a strongly emotive one. This is why one would expect them to be associated with the private, the esoteric, and the religious.

In talking in this way about the uses to which pseudolanguage can be

put, one is close to if not within the domain of psychology. And, as one might expect, psychologists have shown an interest in pseudolanguage. Laffal, one of these, first met pseudolanguage in a couple of his schizophrenic patients. (I have heard the tape-recordings, and the utterances are similar indeed to glossolalia.) His explanation of these outbursts in pseudolanguage is that the patients wanted to express themselves without really giving anything away (Laffal 1965). He also suggests (1967) that since language serves as an 'energy discharge mechanism', pseudolanguage may be used instead of normal language by some disturbed patients to vent their emotions. These are interesting hypotheses that need a great deal of study, always within view of the overall investigation of pseudolanguage. (He and I are now cooperating in the analysis and interpretation of data obtained from a well-educated, normal glossolalist subject.)

My own contention is that pseudolanguage is available to everyone, that is, everyone who has normal linguistic competence. *It takes brains to talk nonsense*. Among the mentally retarded, I predict, will never be found speakers of pseudolanguage. The explanation is quite simple, given a certain understanding of the nature of pseudolanguage: pseudolanguage is parasitic; it is a derived form of speech; its creation depends on the speaker's ability to abstract, from what he hears or knows, the units and the tactics — the rules — of a marginal and simplified form of speech.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have suggested that pseudolanguage is one of the abnormal forms of language but that it is also more common than we have generally realized. The implications of the study of pseudolanguage for linguistics and psychology are not spelled out, but they are there for all to see. This investigator encourages the study of pseudolanguage and welcomes information, even if only anecdotal, and data about it.

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