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BILINGUALISM

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by

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IT is popularly assumed that the professional linguist, the man who studies many languages in order to compare them linguistically, is able to speak all the languages he studies. One of the founders of linguistic science, R. K. Rask, is said to have known fifty-five languages, including most of the European ones and a large number of oriental languages, but he certainly could not speak all these strange tongues. He could no doubt make himself understood in several, but he spoke only two languages with ease, Danish and Icelandic—Danish because it was his mother tongue, and Icelandic because he spent several years in Iceland in early youth, so that in a sense he was bilingual. As for the rest of the languages that he was supposed to know, he avoided speaking them if he possibly could. He worked as sub-librarian in the University Library in Copenhagen, and when visitors came from abroad, he—the great linguist—would slink away and hide behind some bookcases, leaving the other members of the staff to cope with the visitors.

The point I want to make is that it is not possible for an ordinary human brain to handle more than two—or at most three—languages with any degree of perfection, and a professional linguist is probably more conscious of his limitations than other people and consequently hesitates to speak a language he does not know well. There are undoubtedly phenomenal persons who speak five or ten or even twenty languages. They are gifted with an exceptionally capacious verbal memory, but I would make bold to say that they are not genuine linguists. Their freakish memories allow them to acquire after a fashion the vocabularies of many languages, but they mostly use those vocabularies as practically interchangeable vocal counters to represent always the same, usually rather limited, set of notions. It is possible, of course, to acquire a reading knowledge of many languages—to be able to read them with the help of dictionaries. It is possible, too, to speak several languages fairly fluently—i.e. without hesitation and with a tolerable degree of accuracy—but to be 'at home' in more than two or three languages, to use them with the same ease and accuracy as native speakers, is not given to ordinary mortals.

Even with regard to so-called bilingual persons there are a number of popular misconceptions. Bilinguals are commonly imagined to be people who can at will, and without the slightest difficulty, turn

on either of two languages, say English and French, and thus, in the twinkling of an eye, change to all appearances from an Englishman into a Frenchman. Bilingual persons are frequently envied by those who struggle laboriously with grammar and dictionary to acquire proficiency in a foreign tongue. Most unilingual people are not conscious of any effort when speaking their native tongue, and they assume that for the bilingual it is the same with his two languages. To some extent this is true—but only up to a point: bilingualism does undoubtedly require a greater mental effort than unilingualism, and the bilingual person is more conscious of his two languages than the unilingual person is of his. Keeping up two languages can sometimes be a strain, even if one has known them both from childhood, and two languages are as much as most people can manage. A few specially favoured individuals seem able to handle three languages perfectly: I do not believe that anybody can do more than that.

Before I go any further, let me make it quite clear what I mean by 'bilingualism'. The word is used in at least two different senses. A country like Belgium is sometimes called bilingual, because it has two languages, French and Flemish. But that does not mean that all the inhabitants speak both languages equally well. Most Belgians are unilingual and speak either French or Flemish, although they have some knowledge of the other language of the country, which is taught as a second language in the schools. The same is the case in Finland, where both Finnish and Swedish are spoken. But here, again, most of the inhabitants have only one mother tongue, although they know something of the other language. Canada is another bilingual country, while Switzerland is even trilingual; but comparatively few Canadian and Swiss citizens are bilingual, let alone trilingual, speakers. Bilingualism among individual citizens is quite a different thing from national bilingualism; it may occur sporadically even in unilingual countries. I propose to deal first, and chiefly, with the problem of bilingual individuals, with people who have, as it is sometimes put, 'two mother tongues'.

Strictly speaking, it is nonsense to say that a person has 'two mother tongues'—unless, of course, his mother herself has two languages. 'Mother tongue', however, is a fixed phrase, and we must use it in spite of its unsuitability. But even if a person has only one mother tongue, it is not always his mother's language. It does not help much to say 'native language' instead, for 'native' is connected with birth and language is not. There is a story—how true it is I do not

know—of an English married couple who adopted a French baby and started to brush up their French so that they would be able to understand the child when it began to speak. A person's language is a product of his upbringing, it is a social habit acquired through contact with his surroundings.

It is amazing how little influence a mother has on a child's speech habits—and a father, too, for that matter. A child's language is influenced far more by his playmates. Children have their own methods of language teaching: in Kipling's *Stalky & Co.* we read how Stalky and Beetle systematically *kicked* McTurk out of his Irish dialect. It has often been observed that children of Danish parents in Greenland learn Eskimo before they learn Danish, and if they were not later on sent to school in Denmark, they would undoubtedly get Eskimo as their 'mother tongue', possibly with Danish as a close second. Similar cases have been observed in other parts of the world. It is a matter of common observation that even if a mother comes from another country and speaks with a strong foreign accent, her children will usually grow up to speak with no trace of an accent.

It is not even possible to define a person's mother tongue as his 'first' language, in the chronological sense, because a child's language will in fact change with his surroundings. If a family moves to another country and the children are sent to school there, they will almost automatically acquire the language of the school, and even if the parents insist on speaking their own language in the home, the children will in most cases come to feel more 'at home' in the language that was originally a foreign medium to them. It may even be that the children do not realise very clearly that they are speaking two languages. Probably they will be aware of them only as two aspects of their own particular tongue.

An experiment was recently conducted in a Girls' High School in Istanbul. A kindergarten class was started, consisting of twenty boys and girls of about seven years of age. A large number of different nationalities were represented, including Turkish, Greek, Jewish, Armenian, Iraqi, Syrian and Bulgarian; and all, except a few British and American children, were entirely ignorant of English when they entered the school. Amongst them they spoke some fifteen different languages. There was therefore no common medium, and so the children were taught entirely in English by an English teacher. I ought to mention that the rest of the staff were English, or English-speaking, and that in other parts of the school there were a large number of English-speaking children. No formal method was followed in the

teaching, and grammar was never mentioned. The teacher spoke to them in simple, but perfectly normal, idiomatic English. The result obtained seems almost miraculous. After nine months these children had, so far as speech was concerned, become English. During school hours, in class, in the playground, and at lunch, only English was used, and there was no sign of mental translation or any kind of mental strain. In their homes these children would go on speaking their several languages, but in school they would with equal or perhaps greater ease speak English.

If the word 'bilingual' is to mean anything at all, it must be applied to those children. But, as I have already hinted, it is possible, and even probable, that one of the two languages will be somewhat stronger, somewhat more familiar, than the other. This is often the case with bilingual persons, and yet the name 'bilingual' is the best we have. The only definition that is possible is 'a person who knows two languages with approximately the same degree of perfection as unilingual speakers of those languages'. But perfection in a language is a difficult thing to assess; it has been suggested by some that bilinguals never reach perfection, 100 per cent. efficiency, in either language, and it is certainly true that they are often a little more at home in one than in the other. In fact, there are many kinds and grades of bilingualism. Often one language is more closely associated with certain aspects of the person's intellectual or emotional life. A bilingual person once confessed: 'I count in Dutch and make love in English.' Again, a person may have two languages, but may be literate in only one of them. If, for instance, the parents of those children in Istanbul did not bother to teach them to read and write their own languages, the result might well be that the children would remain illiterate in the mother tongue—or the original mother tongue—and become literate in English.

Another thing that emerges from what I have said is that a bilingual person's two languages need not have been acquired at exactly the same time. There may be a gap of several years between them. After early youth, however, most people lose the ability to learn a foreign language perfectly. A linguistic 'crystallization' sets in: their speech organs become fixed in certain grooves, and their thoughts become inseparably linked with the words of their mother tongue. But there are exceptions, and I want to say a few words about these, because they throw some light on bilingualism.

There are people, long past adolescence and early manhood, who have preserved what has been called their 'linguistic virginity', the

power to make their minds a blank, linguistically speaking, to retire into the inarticulate and emerge again in the foreign language they are learning. An explanation has recently been suggested by J. G. Weightman in his book 'On Language and Writing'. The explanation is based on psychological introspection, which is not an infallible method, but we have very few infallible methods in this kind of psychological research. Weightman believes that the normal unilingual person rarely thinks except by means of language. But the linguistically 'virginal'—or, as Weightman terms him, 'unstabilized'—person thinks in the first place without language. 'His thought is a kind of indefinable mental substance, made up of images and feelings and an almost spatial sense of the links between ideas.' Language to him is merely an instrument which he uses to communicate with other people or to pin down his thoughts for his own satisfaction. This applies to his mother tongue as well as to any other language; he consequently changes his language according to his surroundings, and, says Weightman, 'if he lived for a long time in solitude he would no doubt cease to be able to use language at all'. 'To some extent,' Weightman goes on, 'this initial breach between his mental processes and language is a disability; even in his mother tongue, he does not have that automatic command of speech which can be such an asset to the linguistically stabilized person in circumstances demanding a rather superficial readiness of response. But there is no reason to believe that he is intellectually handicapped, and undoubtedly, as regards the particular technique of learning foreign languages, he enjoys an advantage, because he is established in a central position—in the inarticulate—from which he can branch out into any language he has occasion to learn. His mother tongue does not bother him, because he instinctively assumes that it is only one of many possible ways of exploring reality. He sees each foreign language as being in many respects a fresh vision of things, as indeed it is.'

Weightman's division of people into groups—and there are more groups than those I have mentioned—may seem rather fanciful and far-fetched, and he himself admits that there are no pure human types: an unstabilized speaker may display many of the characteristics of a stabilized one. But the theory does help to explain certain peculiarities of bilingual speakers. As one such person himself confesses: 'The first consequence of bilingualism in myself is that it appears to have greatly reduced my capacity for memorizing literally. . . . [My memory] has in fact become a factual memory . . . the experience tends to be stored up in image form, something like a film,

leaving the expression to whatever linguistic form will be needed at the time of telling. Such is the chameleon nature of bilingualism that it tends to make me use sense memory rather than reduce experience at once to the conscious articulate level. Keeping experience thus stored at the level of image memory preserves its unity. The language medium mostly occurs in response to outside stimuli and its nature depends on the linguistic surroundings.'

This explanation, that a bilingual person's mental processes are not immediately linked with either of his languages, will account for that hesitancy of speech that one sometimes notices in bilinguals. Their response is not as immediate and as quick as unilingual people's. Each linguistic utterance involves a choice, first of medium—but that is usually a reflex action conditioned by the stimulus—and then of words and phrases, since the thoughts are not stored up in the memory in linguistic form. One may almost say that it is part of the definition of a bilingual person that his mind should work in this way. A bilingual does not normally translate from one of his languages into the other. As a matter of fact, bilinguals cannot always translate well; their two languages are kept in separate compartments in the mind, and the link between them has to be established by a conscious and sometimes difficult process. With his background, a bilingual person has the makings of a good translator, but the art has to be learnt specially.

If, then, a person tries to learn a second language by the old method of establishing a link between each word in his mother tongue and one in the foreign language, he will never become bilingual. The second language will be merely a superstructure built on top of his mother tongue. If his mother tongue were to disappear—supposing, for instance, that he forgot it—his second language would collapse as well, or, at any rate, the most that would remain would be a vocabulary manipulated according to the semantic, and perhaps even the grammatical, rules of his mother tongue. This, in fact, does happen fairly frequently. There are many cases of people who forget their mother tongue before they acquire a new one. Immigrants, for instance, will often go on to the end of their days speaking a most broken sort of language, although they have long since forgotten, or almost forgotten, their original tongue. A bilingual person, too, may forget one of his languages, but in that case the other language will remain as an independent and perfectly normal medium of expression.

If, on the other hand, a person is able to establish a direct link between his thoughts and a second language that he is learning, then he may be on the way to becoming bilingual. Perfection in a language,

as I have said, is a most difficult thing to measure, and we have to reckon with various degrees of bilingualism. Moreover, one and the same bilingual person may not at any time be equally proficient in his two languages. He may even, as I have said, forget one of them, if for a long period he has no occasion to use it, although he is generally able by a conscious effort to keep it alive or to revive it.

This leads me to a consideration that I have already touched on. A bilingual person is more conscious of his two languages than a unilingual person is of his, and the process of speaking and writing means for him a greater mental effort than it does for unilingual people. This is not very noticeable in the everyday use of language, but if the person is well educated, he will probably not be content with less than 100 per cent. efficiency in each of his two languages. He may never reach that figure, but he will try to get as near to it as possible. Now knowing two languages perfectly means, among other things, remembering two words or phrases for every little detail of life. Moreover, the vocabularies of two languages never correspond word for word, which makes it still more complicated. We have all had the experience of not being able to recall a certain word in our mother tongue. That experience is undoubtedly more common among bilingual people.

Among my students at Copenhagen University I had a girl of twenty-six who had spent the first twenty-four years of her life in England. She was born of Danish parents in London and went to school there. She had a normal English education, but at the same time her parents insisted on her learning Danish. They always spoke Danish to her at home, and the mother taught her to read and write Danish and gave her some grounding in Danish literature. So when she left school, she was as bilingual as anybody can be. If either of her languages could be said to be the stronger, it was English, because most of her friends were English. Her parents had always intended to give her a Danish university education, and after the war, in 1946, she matriculated at Copenhagen University. I spoke to her a few months ago, after she had been in Denmark for two years and in the meantime had married a Dane. One of her remarks was, 'You know, I am sometimes afraid of forgetting my English'. She was actually reading English at the University, but had little chance of speaking it. All her husband's friends were Danish and preferred to speak Danish. What she was afraid of was that she would forget English words and phrases; they did not seem to come into her mind so readily as before. She was afraid, too, that she might mix up Danish and English idioms;

her feeling for what was good English had become somewhat blurred, she said.

Now what seemed to be happening in her case was not that she was forgetting her English, but that English was shifting from first to second place in her mind. This is a frequent phenomenon with bilingual people. The balance between their two languages is rather precarious. If the languages are kept level, neither will probably reach more than 95 per cent. efficiency. If the emphasis is shifted on to one of them, it may reach 100 per cent., but the other language will automatically drop a considerable distance, perhaps to 85 or 70, or even lower.

Strange as it may seem to anyone struggling hard to learn to speak a foreign tongue, the thing that a bilingual person is least likely to forget or to mix up with his other language is the accent. The reason is clear: the accent, the pronunciation of the language, is an automatic thing, governed by reflexes, not by the brain itself. The bilingual speaker is not normally conscious of the various adjustments of his speech organs. It is the same with riding a bicycle: when once you have learnt to balance on a bicycle you never forget it completely; you may get a little out of practice, but the ability remains. The intonation, the speech melody, which is the part of the pronunciation that is most closely linked with one's emotional life, does indeed sometimes suffer; but here, too, it seems not very difficult to keep the two languages apart.

The variation in a bilingual person's language efficiency at different periods of his life may be due to other causes than a change of surroundings. It may be caused by something within himself, by a change of attitude or sympathy. I said earlier that a bilingual person's mental processes are independent of his linguistic media. This is in point of fact only partially true. Nobody can know a language perfectly without associating himself to a large extent with the people who speak it. Nobody can learn to speak English like an Englishman without becoming himself in part an Englishman. If, then, a person has two languages, he belongs *ipso facto* to two different language communities. But he may not be equally in sympathy with both these communities, and this tends to affect his language.

A language is far more than a medium for the expression of intellectual ideas; it embodies a community's general mode of thought, its code of behaviour, its emotional attitude to things, its temperament so to speak. There is such a thing as an English temperament, and if one has not the English temperament, English—or at least the

conventional form of English—is not a suitable vehicle for the expression of one's personality. There is a wide range of possibilities within the English convention, but some temperaments fall outside. Now the English language is of course used by other nations than the English, and some of them—for instance, the Irish—differ greatly in temperament. But then Irish English is different from the English spoken in England. In order that a person may be said to speak English like an Englishman he must behave like one; otherwise he will 'give himself away'. Language, then, is linked with the question of personality. If a person has two languages belonging to communities with widely differing temperaments, he must himself to some extent have those temperaments; it seems that he must have two personalities.

This is indeed a serious problem for bilingual people: they lead in a sense two lives. To quote a man called Lagarde-Quost, who is himself bilingual: 'The bilingual individual . . . has, in fact, to correlate himself consciously to two worlds and establish not only outward links with them but, within himself, between them.' And Lagarde-Quost doubts how far this integration within oneself of the two worlds is possible. He goes on to say: 'The man who, to all appearances, has achieved complete adaptation to both linguistic surroundings to the extent of being the equivalent of a native in each, has either acquired two personalities or reduced his two worlds to one. His friends and acquaintances in each of his linguistic worlds know one man, but the real question is whether this man is one and the same or whether his reactions are different according to the language surroundings and corresponding modes of thought and experience.'

Lagarde-Quost goes so far as to say that 'there is . . . in most bilinguals a latent schizophrenia, or split personality, and this may be the psychological key to the problems of minorities'. He means by this that the split personality explains 'the accusation so often brought up against frontier people or linguistic minorities: that they are "unreliable", "untrustworthy", "unpredictable"'. And well they may be, for each of them is often unpredictable to himself unless he has deliberately analysed his two modes of thought and retained as pertaining to him only what is common to both and therefore stable and latent.

Although Lagarde-Quost may have exaggerated somewhat, there can be no doubt that most bilingual people have felt this pull in opposite directions which threatens the unity of their personality. The difficulty is especially great if the two communities are hostile to each other. A war will often afflict a bilingual person particularly

severely because it may be to him almost a civil war. The difficulty grows less, of course, if the opposition between the two groups lessens, and, at least theoretically, it should disappear if the two groups are or become identical.

It appears, then, that a bilingual person labours under three disadvantages: (1) the danger of a split personality, (2) the greater mental effort required in handling two linguistic media, and (3) the risk of considerably reduced efficiency in both languages. Now strictly, one may say, the first of these difficulties, that of a split personality, is not inherent in bilingualism itself, but is due to external circumstances, and its solution may have to be sought outside the sphere of languages. Exactly the same difficulty is encountered elsewhere, for instance, when a person gets on in the world and moves from one social level to another: to be true to himself he must try to reach some compromise between the two different spheres, some integration of the two backgrounds. Turning now to the other two difficulties: are the advantages all on the side of the unilingual person, or is there something to compensate the bilingual? Can one, in fact, call bilingualism a desirable thing?

Many people talk in glowing terms of the ease with which children pick up a new language, and compare it with the clumsy and laborious attempts of adults to learn a foreign tongue. If we could all learn foreign languages early enough and by the right method, much time and energy would be saved, they say. Children would, of course, have to be taught by some form of the Direct Method, by being placed in surroundings in which one foreign language and nothing but that language was spoken, and at the same time one would have to see to it that the children did not forget their first language. Now a lot depends on the way this is carried out. Experience in Wales and elsewhere seems to show that bilingualism may retard a child's development. Some people maintain that this need not happen; provided the teaching of the second language is left till the mother tongue has become firmly fixed in the children's minds, the new language need have no deleterious effect. Undoubtedly, in many cases the effort required to master two languages instead of one does indeed diminish the child's power to learn other things. But is not the gain so great that it is worth even a year or two's retardation? Many of the most valuable citizens reach maturity fairly late. Moreover, it must be remembered that an early start with languages may save the adult person years of laborious work later on, at a period when his energy and time could be put to better use.

I do not on the whole think that the argument against bilingualism in childhood is very strong, but another and more powerful objection is that the grown-up person never reaches the same degree of perfection in either of his two languages as the unilingual person in his one language. The Austrian philologist Schuchardt said that if a bilingual man has two strings to his bow, both are rather slack. There is undoubtedly something in this, although the argument in my opinion has been given undue preponderance. It must be remembered that the balance between a bilingual person's two languages is not something absolute and static: it may change from period to period of his life. It can be changed by an effort of will. If a bilingual person decides to concentrate on one of his languages and let the other one drop, he can achieve 100 per cent. efficiency. And he will still have an advantage over the unilingual person in the wider background that his other language has given him.

Jespersen in his book on 'Language' asks, 'Has any bilingual child ever developed into a great artist in speech, a poet or orator?' The question is rhetorical and not meant to be answered, but I intend to answer it. Yes, there are many examples of bilingual people who have become great writers. In the English-speaking world, the name that first springs to one's lips is Conrad. Strictly, Conrad was not bilingual as a child: he was seventeen before he ever set foot on English soil, and although he had read a good deal of English literature, the language was up till then a foreign tongue to him. But he made it his first language and partly dropped his Polish mother tongue. If we want an example of a bilingual child, there is Hilaire Belloc, who was educated partly in France and partly in England, and who decided to settle in England and concentrate on English, in which he wrote both prose and poetry. Further afield, there is Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote chiefly in Bengali, but translated some of his own works into beautiful English. It is not irrelevant to mention here the Scottish and Irish writers who use both English and Gaelic and the Welsh writers who use English and Welsh as their media. Nor is it without interest in this connection that Milton, although he was hardly bilingual or trilingual in our sense, wrote poetry in English, Italian and Latin, and that the medieval poet Gower wrote poems in English, French and Latin.

The list could without doubt be increased considerably. Even so, it may not appear very impressive, but it must be remembered that the number of bilingual persons in the world is only a tiny fraction of the number of unilingual people. On the whole, the

bilinguals have probably got more than their fair share of great writers.

To counter the contention that bilingualism retards a person's development the American philologist Bloomfield remarks that one frequently meets bilinguals among artists and men of science. Others have made the same observation and have pointed to the individualism, extreme sensitiveness and artistic temperament of the Celt, which they attribute to bilingualism. One of the explanations given is that the choice that a bilingual person is faced with between two linguistic media may lead to escapism from word-bondage and cause him to take up other media of expression, such as painting or sculpture.

This must remain an unproved hypothesis, but certain it is that a bilingual man is in a better position to escape from word-bondage than a unilingual person. The latter thinks very largely in words, and words can be a bond and a snare. Stuart Chase, the American economist, a few years ago wrote a book called 'The Tyranny of Words', pointing out the many fallacies into which we are led through wrong use of language. We are apt to think that if we give a thing a learned name we have thereby explained it. We are inclined to believe that if two groups of things or people have different names they must of necessity be different, that by calling somebody an 'Imperialist' and somebody else a 'Marxist' we have fully accounted for them and put them in their proper pigeon-holes. Once we have uttered a sentence, the natural thing is for us to suppose that it has a meaning, both for ourselves and for the people who hear or read it; and, similarly we are apt to assume that anything uttered by other people, particularly if it is put in print, must of necessity have a meaning. It is this weakness of ours that is exploited by propaganda, that curse of the modern world. Language is a terribly dangerous weapon in the hands of the propagandist, but it is less dangerous when it is applied to bilingual people, because they are often able to detect the flaw in the argument. A bilingual person is less likely to be taken in by a specious plea with no meaning or thought behind it, because his own thoughts are often not couched in language.

Altogether the bilingual person is able to take a more detached view both of the speech and of the general behaviour of his surroundings. He will, as I have said, in many cases be a member of two different communities. Now although this may sometimes lead to unhappiness and lack of balance, it may, on the other hand, be a positive help to the person who intends to become a writer. A unilingual writer in search of material and inspiration often has to go and live for a time in a

different community to study their habits and way of life. To the bilingual person a knowledge of two different communities is given with his two languages. He may come to regard it as his mission to interpret one of them artistically to the other.

As an illustration of the way bilingualism affects people's speech, Jespersen points out that although it is common in Luxemburg for children to grow up to speak both French and German, few Luxemburgers talk both languages perfectly. And he quotes a Luxemburger as saying: 'Germans often say to us, "You speak German remarkably well for a Frenchman", and French people will say, "They are Germans who speak our language excellently".' But surely it is fallacy to think that this weakens the case for bilingualism. We know for a certainty that one and the same person *can* learn to speak both German and French with a perfect accent. As far as accents go, it is possible to achieve 100 per cent. efficiency in two languages, and the same applies to everyday words and phrases. It is in the higher reaches of vocabulary and phraseology that the difficulty sets in. A Luxemburger *could* learn to speak French to all intents and purposes like a Frenchman and German like a German; but that would entail for most people a prolonged stay in France and Germany, and why should a Luxemburger want to do that, seeing that he is neither French nor German? After all, French is spoken in several countries besides France and generally with a somewhat different accent, and the case is very similar with regard to German.

How absurd the Luxemburger's remark is becomes clear if we imagine instead an Englishman saying to a Scot, 'For a foreigner you speak English remarkably well'. A Scot is not an Englishman and normally has no desire to speak exactly like one. Both in pronunciation and in vocabulary and phraseology there are differences between Southern English and Scottish English. In the same way American English differs from the form of English spoken in England.

This leads me to the question of national policy in regard to language. For over 100 years now, a desire has been noticeable in many nations to assert their individuality through language. For instance, if a nation has a language of its own which seems on the point of dying out, efforts are made to preserve or revive it. Certain countries have gone further still and tried to create linguistic individuality where previously there was none, and some of the latter attempts have gone a little too far for my liking.

Noah Webster, the American lexicographer, was an ardent believer in the idea that the Americans should strike out on a course of

their own independent of the British standard of English. He himself introduced various changes in spelling, some of which have caught on. In one of his earliest books, published in 1789, he says:

Numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and sciences, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe, will introduce new words into the American tongue. These causes will produce, in a course of time, a language in North America as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another.

This was put forward by Webster as an objective statement, but it is obvious that he would very much have welcomed such a development. Fortunately it has not yet taken place.

One of Webster's contemporaries went a good deal further. He said to himself: we Americans certainly do want to have a language of our own, but why should *we* have to change *our* way of speaking? And so he put forward a proposal in Congress that the Americans should force the British to adopt another language.

In spite of Webster and his friends, British and American English are still mutually intelligible and seem likely to remain so. They differ somewhat, and that is not only inevitable, but perhaps even desirable. The problem for nations as for individuals is to find the right balance between self-assertion and self-restraint. We certainly do not want every individual and every nation to think and to act alike, but we could do with a little less disunity than there is in the world to-day. I believe—and I have seen nothing here to shake that belief—in the essential sameness of the human mind everywhere. And I believe that English, which is already, in slightly different forms, the language of many nations, can be used, alongside with the vernacular languages, to express also the spirit of Nigeria.

In order to serve that purpose English may have to be modified slightly, just as the Americans have modified it. But I should like here to issue a warning. Attempts by Europeans to correct speech errors made by Nigerians are occasionally met by the reply, 'But this is the way we say it', sometimes followed up by the remark, 'We are going to have our own English just as the Americans have theirs'. The sentiment is laudable, but the method is wrong. It is too early yet to think about creating a special form of Nigerian English; in fact, one should not think about it at all, because the thing will happen

whether we want it or not. Some few specially gifted individuals may be able to assimilate their speech so completely to that of Englishmen that no difference is noticeable; but the majority of Nigerians may safely model their language on Standard English: the result will be just different enough to give Nigerian English its special flavour.

In issuing this warning I have some particular cases in mind where a different practice has been followed. In wide circles in India a strange form of English is used—so strange, in fact, that it has been argued by philologists that it ought to be classed as a separate language. The sounds are Indian, not English, and although the words are mostly English, their meanings and the rules by which they are combined are often quite un-English. For instance, *No sooner I came at his, he assaulted me*, means 'No sooner had I got to his place (or house) than he assaulted me'. *Open the horse* means 'untie the horse'.

But it is at least possible to make out the meaning of Anglo-Indian when it is written down. With other so-called forms of English this is not so. I am thinking of some peculiar languages which have evolved in certain Negro communities in South America (Dutch Guiana). I have never heard these languages spoken, but I shall give an example of one of them reconstructed from phonetic transcription:

['kom na 'ini:sej. mi: sɛ 'gi: ju wan 'sani: fo: ju: de 'njam]
 'Come inside. I shall give you something to eat.'

In this case, the vernacular language of the community has been given up completely, and this caricature of a language has taken its place. The process is similar to what happens to individual people when they forget their first language before they acquire a second. Now the situation in Nigeria is of course not parallel, for there is no suggestion that Nigerians should abandon their vernacular languages in favour of English. If anything like that were ever contemplated, my advice would be that it must be done slowly, very slowly. It must be allowed to take several generations. There are three good reasons for this. Firstly, if it happens quickly the result may be something like this Bush-Negro English that I have mentioned. Secondly, a quick change will mean a violent break with the past and may lead to national self-extinction. Thirdly, the decision to change a nation's language is so momentous, linked as it is with national tradition, that no one generation should take the responsibility.

What can be done, and what is in the process of being done, is to make English the second language of Nigerians. Individual citizens may, if they wish, concentrate on English and make that their best language, but both English and the vernaculars will live side by side within the country. English will thereby in the course of time become part of the Nigerian tradition and will acquire a special Nigerian flavour. It will serve as a medium of communication between Nigerians of different tribes, it will serve for all Nigerians as a window on the outside world, and it may, and we hope it will, serve as a vehicle for a literature through which Nigeria will voice her individuality and make her contribution to a world civilization.

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