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General Symbols and General Studies

By Larry Tyler

An inherent difficulty in trans-disciplinary general education programs is the lack of a theoretical framework from which to display the points of unity and convergence between those uniquely human endeavors that, in slavish compliance to custom, are yet discussed as distinct and separate concerns such as science, art, mysticism, philosophy, and so on. This lack of a general theory makes all attempts at integration seem strained and artificial. However, clues, hints, and some significant beginnings toward such a framework do exist in the work of several writers. A synthesis of those sources seems, perhaps, in order.

As a point of departure, Suzanne Langer has suggested a "new key" to intellectual activity: that the frame of reference of an era is depicted by the questions that it asks and not by the answers it derives. Thus, "the intellectual treatment of any datum . . . is determined by the nature of our questions, and only carried out in the answers." (Langer, 1961, p. 16)

This relativistic approach implies that reality is unknown and that interpretations of reality are dictated by interest. At a different level, this is cogently expressed in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: that language defines as well as describes reality for its user.

Sapir has written that language "actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness and because of our unconscious projection of its implicit expectations into the field of experience . . . Meanings are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it, because of the tyrannical hold that linguistic form has upon our
orientation in the world.” (Sapir, in Hoijer, 1955, p. 93-94)

Though among the first to emphasize language as a determinant of cultural reality, this view is not unique to Sapir. Much earlier, Durkheim stated much the same thesis:

Thinking consists in arranging our ideas, and consequently in classifying them . . . But classifying is also naming, for a general idea has no existence and reality except in and by the word which expresses it and which alone makes its individuality. Thus the language of a people always has an influence upon the manner in which new things, recently learned, are classified in the mind and are subsequently thought of; these new things are thus forced to adapt themselves to pre-existing forms. For this reason the language which men spoke when they undertook to construct an elaborate representation of the universe marked the system of ideas which was then born with an indelible trace. (Durkheim, 1957, pp. 75-76)

Sapir stated categorically “that the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group.” (Sapir, in Hoijer, 1955, p. 558) This statement represents the essential core of thought around which has grown the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; which in turn is the basis of the theoretical orientations variously labelled ethnolinguistics, metalinguistics, psycholinguistics, or exolinguistics. This orientation is elaborated by Whorf in four essays: “The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language” (1939), “Science and Linguistics” (1940), “Linguistics as an Exact Science” (1940), “Language and Logic” (1941).

In “Science and Linguistics,” Whorf extends Sapir’s position:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds . . . and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, but its terms are absolutely obligatory; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf, 1956, pp. 213-214)

The significance of this dissection of nature by linguistic systems
is that each such discussion is valid only to the users of the particular linguistic system. This is in effect another "principle of relativity." It decrees that observers with different linguistic backgrounds will, from the same physical evidence, develop different interpretations of "reality." Though different, these various interpretations are equally logical. To a great extent, the same principle must apply to the users of disciplinary jargon and the modern specialists (from ethnomusicologists to aeronautical anthropologists) whose cant and rhetoric distinguish them and their world view from the layman who also has a universe of discourse all his own. The implication then is that science, for example, is simply the interpretation of reality derived by use of the language of science; and, as a result, has no prior claim over other interpretations as an approximation of reality.

Language is thus a reifying agent. It is the medium of conceptualizing reality. In his attempt to delineate a "sociology of knowledge," Karl Mannheim sought the social origins of men's thoughts. And he wrote that though thought is manifested in the minds of individuals, an emphasis on the individual and his thought will not yield the needed perspective.

Says Mannheim, the individual "thinks in the manner in which his group thinks. He finds at his disposal only certain words and their meanings. These not only determine to a large extent the avenues of approach to the surrounding world, but they also show at the same time from which angle and in which context of activity objects have hitherto been perceptible and accessible to the group or the individual." (Mannheim, 1936, p. 3)

The relation of language, thought, and reality was long the special interest of Ernst Cassirer. Language is the realization of man's propensity to symbolically conceptualize his thought and feeling. Though a highly sophisticated form of symbolic expression, its reliance upon metaphor and analogy in the process of naming makes language facilitate non-rational as well as rational thought. It was this mixture of the rational and non-rational in language that led Cassirer to his consideration of the relation of language to "theories of knowledge." (Cassirer, 1946)

It was Cassirer's opinion that the "theories of knowledge" (science and other forms) overemphasized "facts" and the development of orderly thought about "facts." This overemphasis of "facts" was accomplished at the expense of any attention being given to the non-rational or non-tactual aspects of mankind's thought. Non-rational thought was dismissed, from the study of knowledge, as being either mysticism or plain ignorance. In either case, it was not considered pertinent to the study of knowledge.

Cassirer, however, felt that a theory of "knowledge" should include a search for the reason behind this sort of "ignorance." While sci-
entists and logicians bemoaned the misconceptions bred by this "ignorance" and by language itself, Cassirer posited a question: Why should language, an instrument for conveying thought, deter and distort scientific thought?

If language distorts scientific thought, it must do so by giving preference and support to another form of thought. And since all thinking deals with phenomena as presented in immediate experience, there cannot be a way of thinking that is not true to the reports of the senses. And if language is incompatible with scientific reasoning, then it must reflect a system of experience that is different from the accepted mode of experiencing "scientific facts."

Language originated as a form of pre-scientific symbolism. As such, it, like myth, was developed to give expression to "values," not to "facts." Language, itself, developed from the process of naming and making metaphorical allusions to phenomena and experience. Names and metaphors are the essence of mystical symbols. To name an object gives you power over it and understanding of it.

Thus language and myth are two modes of thought, born out of the same evolutionary stage, which developed together as expression and conception, respectively, of the primitive man's world.

But whereas language, like myth and religion, originated as emotional expression, due to its syntactic structure language avails itself of reason as well as emotion. Because the units of emotional expression can be linked together to give further meaning, language facilitates logical thinking, i.e., reason. By the syntax of language the chasm between the symbolic expression of emotion and the discursive level of rational thought is bridged. But by the same token, our language, and ultimately our thought, no matter how disciplined, is pervaded with non-rational symbolism.

Language utilizes rational and non-rational symbols in the expression of thought and feeling. Science, as an idea system, uses both mathematical and grammatical language. To the extent that it avails itself of grammatical language, science contains elements of the non-rational. Some of the distinctions (and commonalities) between rational and non-rational symbolization can be represented by the following illustration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Symbolism</th>
<th>Non-Scientific Symbolism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(concepts)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Discursive mastery, by means of rules and procedures, of a world intuitively apprehended.</td>
<td>I. Intuitive elaboration of experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Expression of facts.</td>
<td>II. Expression of values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Science.</td>
<td>III. Art, Myth, Religion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dorothy Lee has discussed the reification of symbols in general. (Lee, 1954) She suggests that the symbol is only one part of a complex field which can be depicted as follows:

![Diagram](image)

- $O$ = individual
- $S$ = symbol
- $\square$ = thing
- $\rightarrow$ = process

For specific application to science, this is easily adapted to:

![Diagram](image)

- $O$ = individual
- $C$ = concept
- $\square$ = thing
- $\rightarrow$ = process

The "concept" is then part of a whole or system which includes: the individual or scientist, the thing (object in reality), the concept, and the conceptualizing process. Thus scientific concepts are part of a process whereby the discursive world is created out of the "real" world of undifferentiated physical phenomena.

The general system of conceptualization, by which the world of reality is shaped, is inherent in the use of symbols to derive order and meaning from experience. The conceptual process structures "things" out of an infinitely faceted reality. Once conceptualized, the "thing" and the word-symbol representing it are interdependent upon one another and the other components of the system.

This is evident in scientific, as well as literary and religious, tradi-
tions. The processual nature of scientific conceptualization is manifested in experimentation and repetition of tests. Only when the “concept” has been subjected to use or scrutiny in experienced situations does it acquire meaning. Scientific disciplines proceed on this assumption and systematically increase the meaning (or reliability) of their concepts through repeated testing. In the same manner the symbols of literature acquire specific meaning through repeated usage within the body of the literary tradition. Likewise, religious symbols (cross, crescent, Star of David, etc.) acquire meaning from ritualized ceremonial usage within the religious tradition.

The significance of this orientation is that meaning (whether literary, scientific, or philosophical) is derived in the various disciplines via substantively the same conceptual process. The concept gains or loses meaning through use in concrete situations. Once the situation is experience, by the scientist or artist or philosopher, through the utilizing of a concept, then that concept becomes the avenue for examination of this conceptualized situation. The concept is in process, containing and conveying the situational meaning. It acquires meaning (becomes reified) by repetitive empirical use. Thus the seemingly disparate views of reality offered by science and other disciplines are grounded within a common processual method of linguistic symbolization, meaning derivation, and object reification.

Such an interpretation is posed in the hope that from it, and/or consequent considerations, a transdisciplinary framework for integrated general studies might evolve.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


