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We Suggest

Eleanor Buelke

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Hoy, James F., and Somer, John

The Language Experience

New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1974. Pp. xix + 265.

Together, the readers and authors of *The Language Experience* join in a search for the nature of language—for pleasure, for intellectual stimulation, and for humanistic self-revelation. Written from a literary and humanly philosophic point of view, rather than a strictly linguistic and scientific bias, the selections are based on the thesis that “exploration of one’s own language—personal idiolect as well as native tongue—can help one discover his essence as a human being.”

It is generally accepted that one of the unique qualities of humans is the creative power of that language. Researchers have devoted years to the study of the nature of language; much more research is currently in progress. Implications of such studies have raised some intriguing questions and invigorated renewed dialogue among interested educators and experimentors. Does the world shape language, or does language shape the world? Is silence a language also, and can it, then, be made to speak? Just how does language influence the total psychological makeup of man? Can language serve to disguise as well as to clarify thought? Do the limitations of language make it an inadequate medium of expression, or do they become a challenge and the means of self-discipline? Has the transition from “Oldspeak” to “Newspeak” been progressing inexorably toward the completion date of 2050?¹ Are the fears and passionate upheavals that accompany new social, economic, and political conceptions inevitable because there is no language to express genuinely new ideas? These, and related mysteries of language, are probed in the first section of the book, “Language as Epistemology.”

One of these areas becomes the central focus of the second section, “Language as Politics.” Writers in this section are concerned with how language shapes, or misshapes, the world. Here, they discuss dangers inherent in language that does not do its work properly. The human mind, with its potentialities for reaching out to an awareness of things beyond its practical environment can become over-preoccupied with symbols and images. Rather than mediating between events and re-

¹ George Orwell, 1984. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949.

sponsive actions, it transforms or, possibly, distorts events into images for retention and contemplation. One's "stream of thought," or envisagement, then becomes a seat of weakness or peril to oneself and to others. A recent, very painful realization is the disastrous effect that political language can have upon the national scene. As cited in "Words from Watergate," the following abuses of language have become familiar to all frequent users of mass media: quibbling over nuances; vagueness; power not from persons, but from real estate; euphemisms to separate words from truth; and private jargon meant to mystify the outsider. Similarly difficult and distressful to face is the acknowledgement that the language of racism and sexism, and the acts of racism and sexism, are one and the same. Prejudicial terms, phrases, and clichés must be discarded before prejudicial acts can be eradicated. Educatores is also included in the indicted forms of language used as agencies for gamesmanship or, perhaps, even elitism.

The main theme of the third section, "Language as Experience," is the nature of language from the perspective of the literary artist. In it, some writers depict reverse social and existential snobbery. Others illustrate the complexity of the disciplines of language. Another upholds the theory that "total human experience is informed and structured by language." In some measure, they are all experimenting with the versatility and plasticity of "words, their sounds, their logic, their syntax, their rhythms, and, ultimately, their silence."

In this volume, some well-known writers in the field of education provide a critical rationale for its use. Neil Postman says:

The strongest defense any of us has against making idiots of ourselves is our knowledge of how language works . . . I recommend it not only to college teachers but to all those interested in shoring up their intellectual defenses.

Ronald and Beatrice Gross add this comment:

Innovative professors will find it a seed store of ideas for cultivating language-awareness and language-delight.

For any serious reader, "language-experiencing" with this text can be thought-provoking, profoundly shocking, or just pure fun!