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FROM THE PAGE TO THE MIND

Louis Foley

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A remarkable French book which deals comprehensively with the different aspects of reading is *La Lisibilité* by François Richaudeau, published in Paris by Denoël-Gontier in 1969. The title of this book immediately brings up a common problem in translation. Every serious student of language knows that very frequently the corresponding or supposedly equivalent words in different languages do not have quite the same meaning. While they may have considerable basic relationship, one may cover more or less ground than the other, and they do not come to the idea from the same angle of approach.

La Lisibilité is not satisfactorily translated by "readability." What the latter term suggests to us appears, for instance, in a review of the best-seller by Barbara Tuchman, *Stillwell and the American Experience in China*. The review is headed by the caption, "Writing readable history," and tells us in the first paragraph that the author "strives for readability." She believes that there should be "an element of suspense to keep a reader turning the pages."¹ So it is quite clear that, when we say a book is "readable," we mean the writing is lively and interesting, not dull or "dry." In other words it is not at all boresome.

Now that is not what is meant by *lisibilité*. Neither is the meaning represented by "legibility," though that idea is completely included. A book printed in any of various languages which use our alphabet may be perfectly legible, but if we know only English we cannot read it. Assuming one's natural acquaintance with the language in question, however, *La Lisibilité* is a profound study of the various elements entering into communication from the printed page to the mind of the reader.

In the Middle Ages (as indeed much later), reading was thought of as reading *aloud*; it was by *hearing* the words that one understood. When writing moved continuously without punctuation or spaces between words, and with frequent abbreviations, reading had to be done mostly by professionals. With conditions as they were in those days, the rapid visual sweep of the modern silent reader would have been hardly conceivable.

Speech operates according to laws which have their roots far back in long-lost prehistoric ages. When writing finally came into

1. *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 14, 1971.

existence, it was simply a means of preserving what was *said*. Naturally it was read aloud; reading was an imitation of the speaker whose words had been kept on a page of manuscript. Since then we have come a long way. The modern silent reader benefits from a really different method of communication. He is likely to read from three to six times faster. He can learn to read with real efficiency, reading selectively, hurdling redundancies and irrelevancies. Naturally the evolution of the process of reading has had far-reaching influence upon the way writing is done. A simple example of the change appears in the effect of repetition. Within a few seconds a speaker may repeat a word a number of times, in different tones, without attracting attention or seeming redundant, whereas in the neutral tone of print such repetition would be conspicuous and annoying to a silent reader. More or less like ordinary conversation, most of the writing of earlier centuries seems very loose and wordy compared to composition that would be called good writing nowadays.

Scientific investigation and experimentation have brought out some facts about the process of reading which may seem surprising. Outside of extreme cases, for instance, it appears that neither the sharpness of vision of the reader nor the size of type characters has much to do with speed of reading. There is a considerable part of the shape of any letter which is not necessary for it to be recognized. One "sees" the whole word, whether it is completely represented or not; many letters can be left out without making words unintelligible.

The word-by-word reader is acting as if words were equal units, when of course they are nothing of the sort. In any typical sentence, many words are determined by the structures of the language; they do not in themselves convey any original information. The rapid reader senses immediately the *pattern* of a clause or sentence as a whole, and recognizes the key words which carry the essential new meaning. He does not really *see* as individual items all the words that he "reads." As by instinct he makes a knowing selection. Since, as has been well said, "the whole page is true at the same time," it is understandable that a rapid reader is likely to grasp its message better than one who goes more slowly. The fact has been demonstrated by repeated experiments.

M. Richaudeau is convinced that the mere *length* of a sentence—a matter upon which Mr. Rudolf Flesch has so much insisted—is not an important consideration. What counts for far more in ease of reading is *structure*. Given a coherent plan as a whole, with subordinate clauses clearly joined by proper connectives, a sentence can

be very long and still be perfectly easy to read. If we took seriously Mr. Flesch's prescription of 17 words for a sentence, we should be limited to bare assertions of simple ideas. Such sentences are effective in their proper place, but are very limited in their scope.

A reader is continually guided by signs so well established that no one thinks of them unless they are badly used: capital letters at the beginning of sentences, spacing or indentation to indicate new paragraphs, punctuation to keep sentence-structure clear, italics for certain words, and hyphens to mark compounds. These are commonly quite distinct in grammar and meaning (as well as pronunciation) from the separate words of which they are composed; "to close up the gap" is entirely different from "a close-up photograph." A good arrangement for the page of a book is to have lines of ten or twelve words each, spaced sufficiently to avoid mistakes in going from one line to another.

Experimentation has shown that characters of the system of Garamond can be read at considerably farther distance than those of the system of Didot. It has been demonstrated that the eye follows a line of Garamond easily without obstacle, whereas with a line of Didot there is a tendency to make a sort of inspection, stopping on the characters instead of having one's mind entirely on the ideas. The reason for this difference is not far to seek. Garamond puts the strength of letters in the parts of their forms which distinguish them from each other, while Didot puts their strength in the parts which they share in general. Once we see this point, we understand why Old English or Gothic type is hard to read.

Knowing how to read is not a simple affair. Naturally it presupposes easy familiarity with the language in which one is to read. And reading in a certain language may be a considerably different exercise from reading in any other. Every language that a person really knows—in which he *thinks* comfortably with the true idiom—is a separate register of the mind, a world in which no one can enter without possessing that language.

Benjamin Lee Whorf, in his *Science and Linguistics*, brought out a profound truth about language which many people have been slow to realize: "The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas, but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old

sense, but is part of a particular grammar . . . We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every beholder in the face . . . 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 true throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

“Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience . . . It is also a self-contained, creative, symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience acquired largely without its help, but actually defines experience for us by reason of its formal completeness . . . (Meanings) are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it . . .”

The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century expression, “the great *book* of Nature,” M. Richaudeau points out, may be understood quite literally. Only slightly different was the term “the great book of the world,” used by René Descartes, the first of the great philosophers of the era of Gutenberg. For the thinkers of that time, Nature was to be deciphered and explained in the same way as one reads a text, proceeding by lineal logic from cause to effect. This new method of studying the universe produced extraordinary results. In five centuries man and his environment have evolved more than during all the hundreds of previous centuries. The diffusion of reading matter made possible by the printing press has been an essential cause of the scientific and technological development, as well as the psychological and sociological evolution, of Western man. This is what printed pages have accomplished in the last five hundred years.