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A LANGUAGE UNIT IN THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL.

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"THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE," ONE OF THE UNITS DEVELOPED BY THE PROJECT ENGLISH CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, WAS THE BASIS FOR LANGUAGE STUDY IN A JUNIOR-HIGH CLASSROOM. INITIALLY FOCUSING ON HELEN KELLER AND THE WAY IN WHICH SHE LEARNED LANGUAGE, THE STUDY FOLLOWED A PROCEDURE THROUGH WHICH THE STUDENTS DISCOVERED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORDS AND REFERENTS, THE CODE-LIKE NATURE OF LANGUAGE, THE UNITS COMPRISING THAT CODE (PHONEMES), AND THE RULES GOVERNING THE ORGANIZATION OF MORPHEMES INTO WORDS AND WORDS INTO SYNTACTIC UNITS. THE STUDY WAS THEN EXTENDED TO THE USES OF LANGUAGE BOTH AS A PERSONAL ACTIVITY AND AS A SOCIAL INSTRUMENT. STUDENTS EXAMINED FIGURATIVE AND LITERAL EXPRESSION, LANGUAGE IN BRAINWASHING AND PROPAGANDA, AND LANGUAGE AS IT ISOLATES SPEAKERS OF DIALECTS FROM THE REST OF SOCIETY. (SEVERAL SAMPLE ASSIGNMENTS BASED ON GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE ARE INCLUDED.) THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 56 (SEPTEMBER 1967), 858-62. (JS)

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A Language Unit in the Junior High School

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OF THE three primary areas of English education—language, composition, and literature, perhaps the most nebulous is language. Most often the main objective of language units is describing the parts of speech, whether the approach is traditional, structural, or generic-transformational. Occupying an equally important role is the prescriptive use of language, better known as usage. In most cases these two aspects of language study comprise the entire language curriculum. Any other studies of what language is, how it functions, and what can be done with it, have been bypassed or have atrophied.

With the cooperation of the University of Minnesota's Project English, language study in the junior high is taking on new and significant dimensions. Materials are being developed which add perspective to the entire English program. This article is based on the use of one of these units, 701 *The Nature of Language*.

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The most basic, yet vital aspect, of this language study is concerned with introducing what language is to junior high school students. This knowledge of the nature of language must be practical enough for junior high instruction yet theoretical enough to establish principles upon which a more complex analysis of language may be added later. Since to a great extent this examination of language for junior high school students depends upon direct experience, or reference to very practical evidence, I will include audio-visual materials which have been effective in illustrating basic principles.

The initial focal point of our study was Helen Keller. William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* was read as a class assignment and supplemented with excerpts from Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, and the remarkable film, *World of Helen Keller*. With these the students were able to experience the way in which we learn language, how this language operates, and how it works the way it does. We were also fortunate to have a student who could speak with his hands using the manual alphabet to communicate with his deaf and mute parents. From these various resources the students formed their first generalizations

about the nature of language: everything has a name, and each name gives birth to a new idea.

At this time I introduced some of the fundamental principles of Stuart Chase's semantic triangle from *The Tyranny of Words*. Now that the students realized their first experience with language was naming objects just as it was with Helen Keller, they could set up a relationship between the symbol (word) and the object (the referent). This led to another principle of language: as children we did not understand this relationship between word and referent; we imitated or mimicked others. In learning our language code we first associated words with concrete things.

AS WE re-examined how Helen Keller learned language, we noticed that before she could associate a sound with an object, she used an "alphabet spelling code." Working with this fact, the students began to examine other codes. The film, *Language and Communication*, provided numerous examples of signs, symbols, and all types of para-language. We then started organizing our own "Library of Codes." We made transparencies and 35 mm. slides of visual codes, such as signals used in baseball, basketball, football, and scuba diving. The examples of audible codes, such as the Morse Code, bells, and whistles we put on magnetic tape. Students also brought examples of Indian codes and horse markings as well as various cipher codes such as the prisoners of war used in World War II. Finally, we concluded our analysis of signs, gestures, and para-language by examining the film, *People of a City*, which uses no spoken language to convey its message.

While the students were gathering these various codes, we worked at discovering more generalizations about the nature of language. Since the purpose of all the codes is to communicate, they are similar to our spoken language in many ways. Our spoken language and the codes had this in common: they all consisted of a series of identifiable units which carried meaning when arranged in some agreed-upon order. This was proved very simply when our own student showed us he had learned to make signs with his fingers and hands which represented all the letters of the alphabet. From these letters he could construct words and arrange them in an order that not only his parents knew, but also all people who were part of that "in group" could understand. The second common factor we examined was that all codes consisted of a sender, a message, and a receiver. To climax the entire discussion about codes, the students studied the Braille alphabet, played with a deck of Braille cards, and examined several copies of the *Reader's Digest* written in Braille.

Once we knew what a code is and that our own language is a linguistic code, the next step was to study the identifiable units that comprised the code. Students began by identifying all the different sounds we make. At this time I introduced the word "phoneme," after which the students began the task of identifying the phonemes in their language. This search itself led to several discoveries. Not only could we identify many recognizable sounds, but also we could produce a storehouse of meaningless sounds. Students from the foreign language classes proved another fact of our language to us: we do not make use of all the possible sounds, rather we select. Students taking Spanish sounded trilled *r's* and double *ll's;* those studying French sounded nasal *r's;* and those studying German illustrated *ö umlaut* and *ich* which we don't employ. These students also helped to illustrate other interesting principles about the learning of language: as children we learn to imitate sounds; we accept some and reject others. As we grow older it becomes increasingly more difficult to learn new sounds. I used "The Click Song" by Miriam Mekeba

to summarize all the points regarding the units of our linguistic code. To summarize all the information about language discussed to this point and to prepare for further probing we used *The Alphabet Conspiracy* by Northwestern Bell Telephone Company.

ONCE we identified the phonemes, our next task was to join them together. To emphasize that there are more sounds in our language than letters of the alphabet and that letters stand for sounds, students experimented with the International Phonetic Alphabet. They made attempts to transcribe different dialects which were obvious to them. The films, *History of Writing* and *Alphabet (Milestones in Writing)*, gave us a brief history of letters and also provided a contrast between sounds, letters, and words. When the students had acquired an adequate facility with the written phonemes, they attacked the story of "Grip the Rat" as it appears phonemically written in W. Nelson Francis' *The Structure of American Language*.

In the process of combining sounds, the students discovered another fact of language: there are rules governing the organization of sounds to form words; there are patterns for organizing sounds. We tried various combinations of sounds at the beginning and the end of words. By checking the dictionary we attempted to form rules for combining sounds. Often what they considered to be impossible combinations actually existed.

After these experiments in word formation, I introduced the term "morpheme." First we examined free morphemes. Then we read several passages of nonsense words, most of which contained inflections. Next we categorized the morphemes as free or bound and organized those bound morphemes into several different categories. For a guideline in our study in morphology we relied primarily on the Nebraska Project English materials.

The final step in forming any linguistic code is, of course, arranging the words in some order which makes grammatical sense. We chose a very simple sentence, scrambled the words, and then tried to arrange them in as many combinations as possible. It wasn't very long before everyone understood syntax and meaningful word order.

These basic principles established a framework for further examination of the nature of language. Now it was time to examine how language is used as a personal activity and as a social instrument. We considered how we as individuals or as members of society manipulate our linguistic code. Again we relied upon literature to provide us with a common experience. Together we struggled with Helen and George Papashvily through their autobiography, *Anything Can Happen*. We saw language used as a means of fraud and deception, manipulated to exploit ignorance, and twisted to betray personal integrity. We also saw the power of language to isolate and segregate as well as unify. George Papashvily's experiences provided us with a framework for examining language as an evocative and provocative force in our society. Students who were captivated with the Papashvilys also found great delight in Hyman Kaplan's escapades with the English language.

NOW the floodgates really began to open. Everywhere we turned we found materials to illustrate how language is employed as both a personal and social tool. We re-examined "The Man Without a Country," this time discussing the power and significance of literal and figurative expression. Next we played a game called "Metaphorical Extension." First we discussed the possibility of there existing a one-to-one relationship between the symbol and the referent. Then we tried to accumulate a list of figurative terms which have arisen through metaphorical extension. To maintain con-

tinuity, words referring only to parts of the body were used. Here are a few of over 150: foot hills, running nose, head band, eye teeth, nose gay, shoulder blade, pigeon toes, foot of the bed, and arm chair. Now the artist in the class took over and sketched these ideas as he pictured them literally. When he finished there wasn't much doubt as to the difference between figurative and literal expression.

Students collected songs which illustrated our observations about language. "Carefully Taught" from *South Pacific* emphasized how we learned language as children and what we used it for. "Silent Night and the 7:00 News" by Simon and Garfunkle showed language as a blatant example of evocation. "Pick-a-Little" from *The Music Man* illustrated language being employed as a social instrument. "Ascot Opening Race" from *My Fair Lady* and "America" from *West Side Story* again showed language being manipulated as a social instrument.

It now seemed as if everything we read or examined related to our previous generalizations on the nature of language. Several students watched *The Manchurian Candidate* on television, and this triggered a discussion of Pavlov and conditioned reflexes. This led us to further analysis of how language functions in brainwashing and propaganda.

Perhaps the culmination to the entire study of the nature of language occurred somewhat accidentally as a lead-in to the study of John Steinbeck's novel, *The Pearl*. In order to examine several themes such as discrimination, isolation by economy, race, and culture, and man's inhumanity to man, the entire class agreed to be segregated for one week and become known as "Wanks." To isolate them as completely as possible, we created an "in group" language much as any other minority group would. Here was the opportunity to test all the principles of language we had studied thus far. We selected units of sound, gave them meaning, and agreed upon the words. The entire vocabulary was extremely limited, because we devised words only for those situations when a select vocabulary was necessary. As it resulted, most of our language centered around retaliatory remarks for insults made against the members of the class.

In place of the common greeting "Hi" or "Hello" we substituted "Tra La La Boom De Aye," and we replaced "goodbye" or "so-long" with "Last Train to Clarksville." The principal became known as Rolls Royce, the assistant principal as Cadillac, and all other teachers were called Chevrolets. Seventh-graders were "morts," eighth-graders "merts," and fellow ninth-graders became "glirts." "Cut the apple" replaced "shut-up." Most of the expressions, however, consisted of derogatory expressions. "Simon and Garfunkle" meant "You're ugly." "Insect world" replaced "You're buggin' me." "You make me sick" was replaced by "Mamas and Papas." Finally the most figurative retort, "Yellow Submarine," meant "Take a long walk to the land below in which the fire never goes out."

With this limited but highly effective language, the members of the "in group" managed to maintain their identity. Some were physically threatened to "stop talking to me like that, or else." Needless to say, it certainly proved language is a personal and social instrument. Primarily, however, the experiment by the "Wanks" illustrated that language is a code which can be created and manipulated by its users.

ALTHOUGH the primary emphasis of this unit is to introduce several generalizations about the nature of language, many specific assignments based upon these generalizations are possible. These are several undertaken by a group of ninth-graders:

1. Examination of the language of advertising using *Hidden Persuaders* as the primary reference. What aspects of evoc-

ative and provocative language are employed? Provide a scrapbook of examples. Tape examples from radio and television.

2. Build a scrapbook of language which has an affective appeal and uses words which connote a qualitative degree. Examples of this would be British Sterling, Yardley Lip Polish, and Evening in Paris.

3. Write dialog used by a teenager to explain a hypothetical situation. How would he explain the same incident to his parents, to the family priest, rabbi, or minister, to the principal, and to his best friend?

4. Interview third- and fifth-grade students and question them about the nature of language. Some questions suggested by the interviewer were as follows: Could the sun have been called the moon? Which is the best word for this object: *pen*, *plume*, *feder*, *stylo*, *stylus*? What name would you like to have if you could change it?

5. Write a list of twenty highly connotative words. Put them into questions and record responses. For example, "We should hang all those commie rats, shouldn't we?"

6. Write the same situation as a report and as a slanted article supplying inferences and judgments.

7. Examine the language of teenagers in three novels.

8. Build a scrapbook of "snarl" and "purr" expressions as they are found in editorials, letters to the editor, and spoken conversation. Who made them? What were the circumstances?

9. Build a scrapbook of generalizations, inferences, and rhetorical questions found in magazines, newspapers, radio, and television.

10. Compile a dictionary of slang expressions.

11. Compile a scrapbook of rhyme and alliteration used in advertising.

12. Construct a model city. This can be used to examine the degree of specification students employ in giving direction.

13. Tape various radio and television shows to examine how language varies by sex, age, interest, education, and other various factors.

14. Write short stories employing the interior monolog much the same as "The Waltz" by Dorothy Parker.

15. Examine the evocative and provocative force of language in speeches and music.

We began our study of the nature of language by examining how Helen Keller learned to speak. From her, we learned how each one of us learned language, how our language operates, and how it works the way it does. As our interest and fascination with language grew, so did our admiration for her.

Before we could conclude our unit on language study, we realized we had one more goal—to speak to Helen Keller. Not only did we want to speak to her, but also we wanted to hear her speak to us. To do this we decided to use the tape recorder, ask our questions, and allow space for her reply. One student introduced the class and presented a summary of what we were studying; then several of the students asked her questions about language and about herself.

Recently we received word from Clara Thompson, Helen Keller's secretary, that Miss Keller's age and poor health prevented her from answering our questions. Naturally everyone was disappointed that she could not speak to us. However, one of the students best expressed the feelings of the entire class: "This whole study of language was exciting, but now that our tape and voices are placed in the Helen Keller archives, we have become part of the whole language story."