

LANGUAGE AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

All languages share certain categories of expression which seem to correspond to a constant model. The forms which these categories assume are listed and classified in linguistic description, but their functions become clear only when they are studied in action—in the practice of language and the fabrication of discourse. These categories are fundamental, independent of all cultural determination. They reveal the subjective experience of speakers who establish and situate themselves in and by language. Our effort here will be to clarify two basic and necessarily associated categories of discourse, that of person and that of time.

Every man taken as an individual sets himself as *me* in relation to *you* and *him*. This behavior may be considered as “instinctive;” we should realize, however, that it reflects, in reality, a structure of linguistic oppositions inherent in discourse. He who speaks always refers to himself, the speaker, by the same label: *I*. For the listener, the act of discourse enouncing *I* will seem to be the same each time it takes place. Yet for the speaker the act is always new, be it repeated a thousand times, for each time the result is that the speaker is introduced into

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a new moment of time and a different texture of circumstances and discourse. In all languages and at every moment he who speaks takes possession of this *I*. In the inventory of linguistic forms *I* is simply another lexical datum, but placed in action in discourse it introduces in it the presence of the *person* without whom no language would be possible. As soon as the pronoun *I* appears in a statement it evokes, explicitly or implicitly, the pronoun *you* and the two together evoke and confront *he*. In this moment a human experience is relived, revealing the linguistic instrument on which it is founded and the contrast—both minute and immense—between the material data and its function. These pronouns are there, recorded and expounded in grammars, made available for man's use like all other signs. Yet when one single man pronounces them they become his own. The pronoun *I* is transformed from an element of a paradigm into a unique designation which produces a new person each time. This process is the actualization of a basic experience for which no language can conceivably fail to provide the instrument.

Such is the central experience which permits the very possibility of discourse. Although it is new-born each time, its linguistic form is necessarily constant; if a new expression had to be invented for each speaker every time it was put into words, language would be impossible. This experience is not described but is simply there, inherent in the form which transmits it. It constitutes the person within the discourse and, consequently, each person as soon as he speaks. Moreover this *I* changes its status alternately in the process of communication: he who hears it takes *I* as the unmistakable sign of the *other*, but when it is his turn to speak he adopts it on his own account.

This subjectivity springs from a remarkable dialectics. Language provides the speakers with a single system of personal references which each one appropriates by the act of language and which, as soon and as long as the speaker employs it, becomes unique and unparalleled, never to be produced twice in the same manner. Outside of actual discourse, however, the pronoun is simply an empty form which cannot be associated with any object or concept. Discourse alone imparts its reality and its substance.

The personal pronoun is not the only form of this type. It

shares its qualities with other indicators, particularly the series of deictics. In pointing out objects the demonstratives organize space around a central point, Ego, and according to variable categories: the object is close to or far from me or you, it is placed in such or such a position (before or behind me, above or below), visible or invisible, known or unknown, etc... The system of spatial coordinates is thus able to localize any object in any field, once the organizer has designated himself as the central point of reference.

Of the linguistic forms which reveal subjective experience, none has a richer content than those expressing *time*. These forms are also the most difficult to investigate, subject as they are to preconceived ideas, illusions of "common sense" and psychological snares. We would like to show that the notion of time covers a series of very different conceptions, each corresponding to a different image of the concatenation of things, and that language and reflection conceptualize time in two totally contrasting fashions.

One widespread misconception is that certain languages are unaware of time, since they do not belong to the family of inflected languages and do not seem to have verbs. The underlying assumption here is that only verbs can express time. This argument contains a number of misconceptions which must be exposed. The verb-category can be recognized even in non-inflected languages, and time can be expressed in all types of linguistic structures. The paradigmatic organization particular to the tense-forms of certain languages, especially the Indo-European languages, cannot claim, either in principle or in reality, the unique privilege of expressing time.

More general and more understandable is the misconception, nourished by man's propensity to regard language as the faithful mirror of reality, that the temporal system of a language reproduces the nature of "objective" time. What languages offer us in fact is only diverse constructions of reality, and it is perhaps precisely in elaborating a complex temporal system that languages diverge most radically from each other. We must ask ourselves at what level of linguistic expression we can reach the notion of time which necessarily imbues all languages and how this notion can be characterized.

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Language has its own specific time, but in order to seize it we must first pass through two stages and define—so as to transcend—two distinct notions of time.

The *physical time* of the world is a uniform, linear, infinite and infinitely divisible continuum. Within man it corresponds to an immensely variable duration which each individual measures according to his emotions and the rhythm of his inner life. This is a well-known contrast and it is surely not necessary to dwell on it here.

Physical time and its psychic correlative, interior duration, must be carefully distinguished from *chronic time*,¹ the time of events, which includes also our own lives as successions of events. Both in the world as we see it and in our personal existence this is the only kind of time which exists for us. We must try to define the structure of chronic time and to characterize our conception of it.

Time as we live it flows on without end and without reversion. We can never rediscover our childhood, nor the yesterday which seems so near, nor the instant which has just melted away. Yet our lives comport certain points of reference which we situate with precision in a universally recognized scale and to which we connect our immediate and our remote past. This apparent contradiction harbors one of the essential properties of chronic time.

Each of us can glance over past events and can review them in two directions, from the past toward present or from the present toward the past. In this sense chronic time, immobilized in history, is subject to a two-way examination, while we imagine our own lives as running on in a single direction. The notion of event is essential in this context.

In chronic time what we call "Time" is the continuum in which a series of distinct blocs, or events, are situated. Events do not constitute time; they are located *in* time. Everything is in time, except time itself. Now like physical time, chronic time comprises both an objective and a subjective version.

All forms of human culture in all epochs have tried to

¹ The author has suggested "chronic time" as the most apt translation of the French *temps chronique*. The expression is a neologism created by the author.

objectify chronic time. This is a necessary condition of the life of societies and of the lives of individuals in society. The socialized time is that of the calendar.

All human societies have established a system of computation or division of chronic time based on the recurrence of natural phenomena: the alternation of day and night, the visible path of the sun, the phases of the moon, the movements of the tides, seasons or climate and vegetation, etc...

All calendars share common characteristics which identify the basic conditions which they must fulfill.

They take off from an axial moment which provides the zero point of the computation: an event of such importance that it is considered to have ushered in a new order (the birth of Christ or Buddha, the succession of a certain sovereign, etc). This first condition we call *initiating*.

The second condition, *directing*, follows from the first. It is expressed in the opposing terms "before... / after" in relation to the axis of reference.

The third condition can be called *measuring*. A repertory of units of measurement is designed to identify the constant intervals between the recurrence of cosmic phenomena. Thus the lapse between the appearance and the disappearance of the sun at two different points on the horizon will be called a "day;" the interval between two conjunctions of the moon and the sun will be a "month;" the interval delimited by a complete revolution of the sun and the seasons will be a "year." Other units could be devised at will, those which group (week, fortnight, trimester, century) as well as those which divide (hour, minute...), but they are less common.

These are the characteristics of chronic time, the foundation of life in society. Taking off from the *initiating* axis, events are arranged according to one or the other *directive* sighting, either anterior or posterior to the central axis, and they are located in a division of time so that their distance from the axis can be *measured*: so many years before or after the axis, then a certain month and a certain day of the year in question. Each of the divisions (year, month, day) is aligned in an infinite series whose terms are identical and constant and exclude both disparities and gaps. The event to be situated is thus located with precision in

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the chronic chain according to its coincidence with a particular division. The year 12 A.D. is the only one which comes after the year 11 and before the year 13; the year 12 B.C. is also located after the year 11 and before the year 13, but in the opposite direction, which traces backward the course of history.

The points of reference described above determine the objective position of events and thus define *our* situation with regard to these events as well. They tell us *where* we are in the vast expanse of history, what is our place among the infinite succession of men who have lived and events which have occurred.

The system is obliged to obey certain internal necessities. The axis of reference cannot be displaced, since it is marked by something which really took place in the world rather than by a revocable convention. The intervals are constant on both sides of the axis. Finally, the computation of intervals is fixed and immutable. If it were not fixed we would be lost in a flux of erratic time and our mental universe would lose its moorings. If it were not immutable, if years and days could be interchanged or if everyone counted as he pleased, no reasonable discourse could be held and all of history would speak the language of folly.

It might thus seem natural that the structure of chronic time should be characterized by permanence and fixity. Yet, at the same time, it must be realized that these characteristics result from the fact that the temporal organization of chronic time is actually *intemporal*. This is not a paradox.

Time measured by the calendar is intemporal in virtue of its very fixity. The days, the months, the years are constant quantities which immemorial observation has deduced from the play of cosmic forces. Yet these quantities are units of denomination which, taken in themselves, do not participate in the nature of time and are devoid of temporality. By reason of their semantic specificity they can be compared to numbers, which do not possess the properties of the things they enumerate. The calendar is exterior to time. It does not flow on with time. It registers series of constant units, called days, which are grouped into larger units (months, years). Now since all days are identical, it is impossible to take any one day in the calendar by itself

and determine whether it is past, present or future. Only he who *lives* the time can place it in one of these three categories. "February 13, 1641" is an explicit and complete date according to the requirements of the system, but the date itself does not identify the time in which it is pronounced. We could thus assume as well that it is prospective, as in a clause guaranteeing the validity of a treaty signed a century earlier, or retrospective and mentioned two centuries later. Chronic time arrested in a calendar is foreign to and cannot concur with time as it is lived. Precisely because it is objective, the measurements and divisions it offers can situate events but cannot coincide with the categories of human experience in time.

What is *linguistic time* in relation to chronic time? To analyse this third level of time it is once more necessary to establish distinctions among different categories even, or above all, if one cannot avoid calling them by the same name. It is one thing to situate an event in chronic time and another to introduce it into linguistic time. The human experience of time is expressed in language, and linguistic time cannot be assimilated either to chronic time or to physical time.

Linguistic time is remarkable in that it is organically linked to the exercise of speech. It is defined and organized as a function of discourse.

This variety of time finds its center—both generative and axial—in the *present* of the speech-token. Each time a speaker talks of an event in the grammatical form of the "present" (or its equivalent), he identifies it as contemporary with the moment of discourse in which it is mentioned. Insofar as it is a function of discourse, this present obviously cannot be localized in a particular division of chronic time, since it is applicable to all and specifies none. The speaker situates in the "present" all that he implies is present by virtue of the linguistic form he uses. This present is reinvented every time a man speaks because it is literally a new, untouched moment. This—to say it once more—is an original property of language, distinctive enough to justify finding a separate term for linguistic time in order to distinguish it from the other notions lumped together under the same name.

The linguistic present is at the base of the temporal op-

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positions of language. This present, which remains the present even while advancing to keep pace with the discourse, constitutes the dividing line between two other moments which it engenders and which are equally inherent in the exercise of speech: the moment in which the event is no longer contemporary with the discourse, in which it has left the realm of the present and must be recalled by memory, and the moment in which the event is not yet present and looms only in anticipation.

It will be noted that, in reality, the present is the only temporal expression which language possesses and that this expression, distinguished by the coincidence of the event and the discourse, is by nature implicit. The act of making it formally explicit is simply one of the redundancies frequent in daily usage. On the contrary, the non-present tenses, the past and the future, which are always made explicit in language, are not at the same level of time as the present. Language situates them in time neither according to their own positions nor in virtue of some relationship which then should be other than the coincidence between the event and the discourse, but simply as points seen as behind or ahead *in relation to the present*. (Behind or ahead since man moves to meet time or time moves to meet man, according to our image of the process.) Language must necessarily organize time in reference to an axis, and this axis is always and only the immediate speech-token. The referential axis cannot be moved forward or backward, into the future or the past. It is impossible even to conceive of a language in which the starting point for the organization of time would not coincide with the linguistic present and in which the temporal axis itself would be subject to temporal variations.

The conclusion—surprising at first glance, but in deep accord with the real nature of language—is that the only tense inherent in language is the axial present of discourse, and that this present is implicit. It determines two other temporal references, which must obligatorily be made explicit. These, in turn, expose the present as the dividing line between that which is no longer and that which is not yet present. These two references do not refer to time, but to views on time, projected backward

and forward from the present point. This appears to be the fundamental experience of time, to which all languages bear witness after their fashion. Its imprint is found in all concrete temporal systems, and particularly in the formal organization of the various verb-systems.

Without entering into the details of these often highly complex systems, we will note a significant fact. Languages of all types invariably possess a past tense, and often two or even three. To express the past, the ancient Indo-European languages dispose of the preterite, the aorist and even the perfect forms. The French language still possesses two forms (traditionally the past definite and the past indefinite), and the writer instinctively takes advantage of this distinction to separate the domain of history from that of narration. According to Sapir, certain dialects of the Chinook language (spoken in the Columbia River region) have three forms of the past tense, distinguished by their prefixes:

ni—expresses a somewhat indefinite time past, and is used in speaking of events that happened less than a year or so ago, yet more than a couple of days ago.

ga—expresses time long past, and is always used in the recital of myths.

na—refers to recent time exclusive of today, more specifically to yesterday.

According to the context, "he went" could thus become *niyuya* (*ni* prefix + *y* "he" + *uya* "to go") or *gayuya* (prefix *ga* + *y* + *uya*) or *nayuya* (*na* + *y* + *uya*). On the contrary, many languages do not have a specific form to express the future. Often the present is used in combination with some adverb or preposition which indicates a future moment. The same Chinook dialect which possesses three forms of the past tense provides only one for the future. It is characterized by a redundant morpheme *a* which is attached both to the beginning and to the end of the verb, in contrast with the prefixes of the preterite. "He will give it to you" is thus *ačimluda*, analyzable in *a*-future + *č* "he" + *i* "it" + *m* "you" + *l* "to" + *ud* "to give" + *a* future. In languages where it can be applied,

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diachronic analysis shows that the future is often a recent creation, formed by the specialization of certain auxiliaries, particularly "to want."

The very prevalence of this contrast between the forms of the past tenses and those of the future is instructive. There is evidently a difference in kind between retrospective time, which can be situated at various points on the continuum of our past experience, and prospective time, which is not a part of our experience and is introduced into time only as a forecast of experience. Language places in relief an asymmetry which resides in the unequal nature of the experiences themselves.

One last aspect of this variety of time merits attention: the way in which it is introduced into the process of communication.

As we have noted, linguistic time owes both its potential existence and its actualization to its emergence into the speech-token. But the act of speech is necessarily individual: the specific token which produces the present is new each time. As a result, linguistic time, materialized in the intra-personal universe of the speaker, should be an irremediably subjective and incommunicable experience. If I relate what "happened to me," the past to which I refer is defined only by its relation to the present of my act of speaking. Yet since the act of speaking is mine and since no one else can speak through my mouth, any more than they can see with my eyes or feel with my senses, this "time" relates to me alone and is limited to my own experience. This reasoning, however, is faulty. Something remarkable intervenes, something very simple and infinitely important, and accomplishes what seemed logically impossible: the temporal context which is mine when it organizes my discourse is immediately accepted as his own by my interlocutor. My "today" becomes his "today," even though he himself has not introduced it into his own discourse, and my "yesterday" becomes his "yesterday." In return, when he replies I, the listener, will convert his temporal context into mine. Language here reveals what appears to be the condition of the intelligibility of language: although the speaker's temporal context is literally foreign and inaccessible to the listener, he identifies it with the temporal context which invests his own words when he in turn becomes the speaker. Speaker and listener are thus tuned in on

the same wave-length. The time of discourse is neither forced into the divisions of chronic time nor shut up in a solipsistic subjectivity. It functions as a factor of inter-subjectivity, rendering omnipersonal that which should be unipersonal. The condition of inter-subjectivity alone makes linguistic communication possible.

Linguistic time is specific in another way as well. It comports its own order and its own divisions, both independent of those of chronic time. Whoever says "now, today, at this minute" localizes an event as being simultaneous with his discourse. His "today" is the necessary and sufficient condition which allows his partner to share his representation. But if we separate "today" from the discourse which contains it and place it in a written text, it is no longer the indicator of the linguistic present, since it is no longer spoken and heard. It can no longer refer the reader to a specific day of chronic time, since it is not identified with a particular date or day of the calendar and is applicable to all. The only way to make it intelligible outside of the linguistic present is to attach it explicitly to a division of chronic time: "today, June 12, 1924." The same is true of an *I* taken out of the discourse which introduces it. It is then applicable to all conceivable speakers and does not identify its true speaker. It must be actualized by adding the name of the speaker: "I, so-and-so." Thus things which are designated and organized by discourse (the speaker, his position in time) can be identified only for the partners of the linguistic exchange. Outside of this context, intra-discursive references become intelligible only when they are linked to determinate points in a system of spatio-temporal coordinates. The junction between linguistic and chronic time is thus established.

Linguistic time is both sharply divided into its three distinctive articulations, and narrowly limited within each of them. Focused on "today," its liberty of movement forward and backward is limited to a distance of two days. It can move backward to "yesterday" and "day before yesterday," forward to "tomorrow" and "day after tomorrow." No more. A third gradation ("day before the day before yesterday," "day after the day after tomorrow") is rarely used, and even the second gradation does not really have the status of an independent

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lexical expression. "Day before yesterday" and "day after tomorrow" are simply "yesterday" and "tomorrow" carried to the second degree. "Yesterday" and "tomorrow," separated and determined by "today", are then the only original terms which mark temporal distances with relation to the linguistic present. Certain other modifiers should be viewed in the same perspective: like "yesterday" and "tomorrow," "last" ("last winter, last night") and "next" ("next week, next summer") do not comprise fixed and unique localizations. The series of inter-subjective designations is characterized by the fact that a spatial and temporal translocation is necessary in order to objectify them. Only the actual speech-token gives such signs as "this," "I," "now" a specific point of reference, and a point of reference which is new and different each time they are pronounced. This transfer reveals how linguistic forms slide from one plane to another according to how they are considered, on the one hand, in the exercise of discourse and, on the other, as lexical elements.

When pragmatic reasons oblige the speaker to extend his temporal range beyond the limits set by "yesterday" and "tomorrow," the discourse leaves its own domain and uses the gradation of chronic time, above all the enumeration of units: "eight days ago," "in three months." Yet "ago" and "in" are still indices of subjective measurement. In the context of an historical narrative they must be transformed: "ago" becomes "before" and "in" becomes "after, later," as "today" must become "that day." These operators carry out the transfer from linguistic time to chronic time.

Inter-subjectivity thus has its own temporal context, its terms, its dimensions. Language here reflects the experience of a primordial, constant, indefinitely reversible relation between the speaker and his partner. In the last analysis, human experience inscribed in language is always centered on the act of speech in the process of exchange.