

27 April 1963 (Saturday; the calendar fr
from the local drugstore says it has something
to do with General Grant)

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"Meow!" said the cat at 4 A.M. Another trip to the back porch to
let her out without letting out the kittens. Makes me wonder: Would
S&S have been written differently if AK had used "Puss" for his examples
rather than "Fico"?

The other night I phoned Milan Charles (frequent participant in
my creativity meetings when I had them; singer; nursing at hospitals
sometimes; bishop of the Church of One Brotherhood) that perhaps he
had a building to rent for his church services: the Normandie Avenue
Methodist Church was vacated just before Easter, and the sign says "The
congregation is now worshipping at St. Paul's Methodist Church, 1200 S.
Manhattan Place." Perhaps this could also be an opportunity for some
Humanist group to rent the building for meetings, since they are
registered as a religious organization. Or what about Dr. Conrad's idea
a few years x back about giving GS meetings a church format to cash
in on the many benefits and privileges this topsy-turvy culture offers
churches?

That real puzzler about all this is that some five years ago there
was a big ruckus in the newspapers about the spectacular failure to
integrate the congregation at this church. The white congregation re-
signed in a body. Is this move to 12th & Manhattan, not a colored neigh-
borhood so far as I know about, another attempt to force integration?

Recently, Ray Bright phoned me, and among other matters he told
me the subscription price to Chemical Abstracts had gone up. I thought
I had surely misheard the figure he quoted. I went to the library
Thursday and looked it up, and there it was: special reduced rate to
libraries and colleges, \$500 per year. I've heard of inflation, but
this is fantastic! Is information that valuable? And is that much
money being thrown around so freely? I think the rate used to be \$35,
so this new rate is more than a 14-fold increase!

In another part of the library I looked at the publication WORD
(Cercle Linguistique de New-York) and noted an article relevant to
a discussion of aspiration you had with me in 1958 or something like
that. (Nature of Greek ph, kh, th, you may remember, and the diffi-
culty for English-speaking persons in approximating Ancient Greek pro-
nunciation because initial p, t, k are always aspirated in English.)
Yet p, t, k in English sp-, st-, sk- are not aspirated. The A&S article
described tape-cutting experiments where the initial s- of such words
was cut out of the tape and listeners were asked to identify the
remaining consonant(s). Unaspirated p was heard as b, and so on--
one might then say that spit was really sbit--but it would be better
to make a more thorough analysis, as was done in the article and has
been done elsewhere. The usual idea is that the difference between
p and b is merely voice. The -p- after s- is unvoiced, but is also
unaspirated and lenis--and these last two factors cause it to be taken
for -b- in isolation, so that the characteristics of the sound which
cause us to decide between the categories (phonemes) p and b are NOT
those customarily supposed. This involves the human nervous system

and the abstracting process (categorizing and identification) in a fashion parallel to the "tempered tuning" problem I posed a while back. There might even be some correlation here.

The article went on to discuss such cases as sphere and svelte. Are the spirants different in these words? Then there is the question of the voicing of r in scrape, strike, try, and so on. In this case, there is no English categorical opposition between voiced and voiceless r.

Then the ultramodern phoneticians drag in information theory, binary oppositions, and redundancy. That is, the opposition p:b is made up of at least three binary oppositions:

fortis : lenis

p, t, k, &c. voiceless : voicedness b, d, g, etc.

aspirated : unaspirated

and not all three of these need ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ agree in order to put a given instance of a speech-sound into one or the other category. Binary opposition (either/or) is not my term. In actual speech, we can, and do, have semi-aspirated consonants, half-voiced, and degrees of energy of utterance both between and outside the extremes of the fortis: lenis standards.

I could have used up several pages in the introductory part of the Numano book by dragging in all these thorny problems, but instead I have, in effect, passed the buck to the voice-recognizing machine designers, if and when.

In many cases, the pronunciation of latter and ladder, medal and metal, shudder and shutter, putting and pudding, is such as not to distinguish one word of one of these pairs from the other word in the pair. A sound halfway between t and d is uttered, and only the context does the categorizing. Yet have you ever heard anyone complain of ~~xx~~ ambiguity in such instances?

Here is a process of abstracting that varies from one language to another, and from one dialect to another (British speakers make a very clear distinction between latter and ladder.) Spanish confounds b with v, despite the Academy's protests, but the phoneme "Spanish B&V" includes two varieties at least, a stop and a spirant, the use of which is governed by the preceding and following sounds. The stop/spirant opposition is never used to distinguish words, but the foreigner-to-Spanish who uses the stop where "an old Spanish custom" demands the spirant, or vice versa, is thought to be a little odd. The foreigner who insists on pronouncing B and V differently--well, that's another kind of odd or peculiar. (Just as we feel about the fellow who pronounces the e in pronounced, or the one who does not diphthongize the so-called "long o" when accented.)

This latter/ladder business is interesting all the more, because it involves overlapping phonemes: the T and D categories have strayed over onto each other's territory.

Let's digress a moment: What is a phoneme? The phoneticians and scientists and linguists disagree, so I don't know exactly myself. But the problem subsumed under the question, "What is a phoneme?", is an abstraction and consciousness-of-abstracting and sociological and psychological problem that has something to do with GS, or should (that is, I think it should) be the GSers' urgent concern. And I will drag in, concurrently, the problem of musical tuning temperament, in somewhat the manner I have already stated it in previous letters. One could, with equal propriety, drag in the article that appeared in the Journal of the Acoustical Society of Americallast Summer, where a bunch of experimenters and subjects tried to find out "What makes a synthetic sound 'piano' or 'non-piano' in quality?" and came to some conclusions, though not without ambiguities.

The spelling-reformers are hopelessly confused about "What a phoneme really is", so I will just leave them in their self-created morass of confusion--isn't that nasty of me?

The unconscious part of the abstracting process--that is, the fact that most of the abstracting of phonemes from speech-as-heard goes on unawares--makes us deaf to the finer sound-distinctions observed in our own language or dialect. The assignment of a certain sound-sequence to the category "latter" or "ladder" operates on a sort of game-rule basis: If enough words belonging to Semantic Category 2 have occurred, drop this word just spoken into the "ladder" box; otherwise, throw it into the "latter" pigeonhole. The process functions so smoothly that a deliberate mispronunciation is ~~is~~ carefully ignored: Try saying "the former and the ladder" or "the Ladder-Day Saints" or "climbing up the latter of success" or "he gave him a metal for bravery" on a few unsuspecting people and note how they ignore the mispronunciation. This is not the same as the confusion of sound intentional/intensional. The -ti- and -ci- and -si- assibilation is much older, whereas the latter/ladder confusion is perhaps a century or less old, and has not had time to spread all over the English-speaking territory. When I first found out that it occurred in my dialect, I was incredulous. That shows how efficient our ignoring-machine is.

One way of getting past the ignoring machine (a kind of Freudian censor?) is to play tapes backwards, whereupon the speech-sounds in reversed order no longer make words, and can be studied more objectively--indeed, some of the articles in these scholarly reviews tell about such experiments. Otherwise stated, we have to convert our own language into a foreign tongue by some such trickery before we can defeat the unconscious abstracting and ignoring machine.

Perhaps this will explain one of my peculiar attitudes--a certain impatience with discussions about English in English, or discussions which fail to incorporate some kind of meta-language device, however crude. Or the restrictions under which I have had to labor here--I cannot use phonetic symbols because no written symbol is is ever the sound, and no matter how precise the symbol is intended to be, it ignores characteristics--leaves them out.

Yours,