# The Dilemma of Contemporary Linguistics

**Infant Speech: a Study of the Beginnings of Language**
By M. M. Lewis. (International Library of Psychology, Philosophy and Scientific Method.) Pp. xii+335. (London: Kegan Paul and Co., Ltd., 1936.) 12*s*. 6*d*. net.

MR. LEWIS introduces his excellent study of infant speech somewhat dramatically by reminding us how, exactly half a century ago, Max Müller's saying "No thoughts without words" left linguistic studies somewhat in the air. To some, the aphorism went too far; to others not far enough. For the psychologist it was going too far, for obviously symbolic thought without words does occur. Linguistically it did not go far enough, for words mean more than ideas, and in their most important function they are as much a form of human action as any type of bodily behaviour.

To-day, linguists are faced by a similar dilemma. Once we recognize with Mr. Lewis that "language is a form of activity, a mode of human behaviour, perhaps the most important" (p. 5), the question arises: Can we treat language as an independent subject of study? Is there a legitimate science of words alone, of phonetics, grammar and lexicography? Or must all study of speaking lead to sociological investigation, to the treatment of linguistics as a branch of the general science of culture? If the earliest and most fundamental function of speech is pragmatic—to direct, to control and to correlate human activities—then obviously no study of speech except within the "context of situation" is legitimate. The distinction between *language* and *speech*, still supported by such writers as Bühler and Gardiner, but dating back to De Saussure and Wegener, will have to be dropped. Language cannot remain an independent and self-contained subject of study, once we recognize that it is only the general norm of human speech activities. Finally, we shall have to decide whether, with some recent German psychologists, we have to assign three separate functions to speech: the expressive, the evocative, and the representative; or whether we must be satisfied with the admission that speech has only one main function, that of pragmatic control, of co-ordinating human action; while all the other manifold uses and aspects of language are derivative.

The dilemma of contemporary linguistics has important implications. It really means the decision as to whether the science of language will become primarily an empirical study, carried out on living human beings within the context of their practical activities, or whether it will remain largely confined to deductive arguments, consisting of speculation based on written or printed evidence alone. The first view would insist on drawing the material of linguistics from the observation of infant speech, from the study of pathological phenomena in aphasia, from fieldwork on the actual use of language by the various strata of civilized society, and among so-called primitive peoples.

The grammarian and the lexicologist may have in future to abandon their comfortable, two-dimensional world of parchment and paper, and either go into the field, or else rely on material documented not only by words, but also by those aspects of human life, activity, and social organization by which the use of words is determined. The present reviewer, like most modern anthropologists, would plead for the empirical approach to linguistics, placing living speech in its actual context of situation as the main object of linguistic study.

Mr. Lewis is not too dogmatic in the excellent theoretical introduction to his book. He gives there an impartial summary of most modern theoretical work. He himself, however, takes the empirical view that "the main function of language in human life as the mediator between man and man" must be taken as the guiding principle in any linguistic inquiry.

A cavilling critic might note some omissions in his choice of authorities. The absence of any reference to the work of Philipp Wegener, one of the forerunners of the modern movement; or to the American psychologist, G. H. Mead, who perhaps was the first clearly to formulate the principles of pragmatic symbolism; the relatively small space given to the work of Jespersen and Piaget; and the omission of John Dewey's most important contribution, that is, of Chap. v in "Experience and Nature" (1925), might be remedied in a future edition. On one or two formal matters I should like to suggest also an amendment. Thus to state that "speech is an instrument, a tool" is not, as the author supposes, a useful simile, but, like all analogies, an unnecessary handicap. Speech, obviously, is not a tool, but a habit, a standardized type of activity of the human organism. It is, therefore, not to be classed with the material products of man, but rather with the other modes of active human adjustment to the

environment and to the mechanisms of culture. Again, Mr. Lewis speaks of "language as an institution". Whatever meaning be given the word 'institution', the label again brings language as a fixed product into the realm of material achievements and leads us away from the study of speech customs within the living context of human activities.

But these are minor criticisms, and they are found only in the theoretical preliminaries of Mr. Lewis's treatise. When he comes to work, and enters his empirical laboratory, all the minor misconceptions vanish. Throughout, he studies the child's speech habits within the circumstances in which they occur. He conducts, in fact, all his observations, in the only admissible manner: he investigates *speech* and not *language*; and investigates it, not as a detached, purely linguistic transfusion of meaning, but as a means of action on adults by the child and conversely the influence of speech and other activities of the grown-up on the child.

This makes the author recognize that to regard the child's spontaneous utterance as merely 'expressive' in its function is erroneous. In fact, through the whole range of the author's observation, the distinction between 'expressive', 'evocative' and 'representative' falls to the ground. Mr. Lewis's results show that the only correct treatment is to study the total situation: the vocal act of the child, which is linked up with the circumstances; and the reactions of the adults which respond to the child's pre-linguistic activity. The meaning of such a vocal act can only be defined as the change produced by the child's utterance in mobilizing its social environment, and making the adults obey its wishes. Obviously, an utterance like this is at the same time expressive, in that it corresponds to the child's feelings of discomfort or anxiety; it is representative, in so far as it is linked up with the situation; and it is evocative in so far as it makes the elders respond to the child's utterance. "Throughout all this the child will tend to use his cries more and more as an aid to the rest of his behaviour, and even as a substitute for it. . . ." In other words, from the very beginning, the human being uses his voice in prearticulate and later on in an articulate sense, in order to achieve, through the assistance given him by others, what he cannot do through his own bodily activity.

The work of Mr. Lewis is in many ways a great advance on all previous experimental studies on child speech and a valuable contribution to the theory of language. In his use of older sources, he is judicious, critical and comprehensive. In the setting of his own observations, he has taken his inspiration from the most scientific, that is, the most empirical point of view in modern linguistics.

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# Elementary Chemistry and its Presentation

**New Practical Chemistry:**
Fundamental Principles applied to Modern Life. By Prof. Newton Henry Black and James Bryant Conant. Pp. xi+621. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1936.) 7*s*. 6*d*.

**New Laboratory Experiments in Practical Chemistry**
To accompany Black and Conant's "New Practical Chemistry". By Prof. Newton Henry Black. Pp. x+193. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1936.) 5*s*.

THESE are welcome and important additions to the large number of text-books which deal with the fundamental principles of chemistry and their mode of presentation. Anyone still unconvinced that a knowledge of the fundamental principles of an ever-expanding science and some of their applications may not be a part of a general education might do well to make a detailed study of these books, one of the authors of which is a distinguished organic chemist, well known in Great Britain, and president of Harvard University.

Much difference of opinion exists among those occupied with the teaching of elementary chemistry concerning the method of presentation. Unlike the authors, some prefer to adhere, so far as possible, to a more or less historical method, and to leave any consideration of the developments of the subject during the last twenty-five or thirty years to a later stage of the student's training. This has the disadvantage that the student who does not continue the more detailed study of the science has little knowledge of the structure of the atom, by which the properties of the elements and the structure and properties of chemical compounds are more adequately explained.

The presentation of the fundamental theories and facts of chemistry by the authors is excellent. Perhaps, at times, it is too didactic, and formulæ