

## GENESIS 11: 1-9

Stanley Troup

Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of **Shinar** and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called **Ba'bel**, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.\*

The story, now told to show the Lord's judgment upon the continuing sin of mankind --- my interpretation being that the sin was man's presumptuous effort to reach the heavens, and by implication usurp the power of the Lord. Other, more informed interpretations exist and, I am certain, are still hotly debated. A recent book review by **Richard Lewontin** in the New York Review of Books illustrates the difficulty in gaining agreement by authority in such matters. Lewontin describes a version of a story in the Babylonian Talmud wherein four rabbis are walking in a field, engaged in a dispute over whether an oven of a particular design can be purified.

Three hold one opinion while the fourth has an opposite view. The lone holdout appeals to God asking that He send first thunder, then lightening, and then that the lightening strike a lone tree in the field. Although each request is granted, the three rabbis are not convinced. After all, thunder and lightening are natural phenomena and in a lightening storm what is more natural than that a tree standing in the middle of a field should be struck? In desperation the dissenter calls on God to speak directly to them. Sure enough a voice from above is heard proclaiming "IT IS AS HE SAYS." So, asks the dissenter "what do you three have to say now?" "All right," they answer, "that makes it three to two!"

The story of **Ba'Bel** was once used to explain the origin of languages. Linguists, not

surprisingly, are inclined to look elsewhere.

I am uncertain, even as I stand before you this evening, how I came to choose this topic and, indeed, the title of this presentation. I believe the strongest determinant was my progressive **unhappiness** with the language employed by both major political parties during the recent presidential campaign. Nearly four years of exposure to the oratory of George **W.** had not led me to confuse him with a West Texas **neo-Demosthenes**. Demosthenes, I have recently read, was involved in a complex and obscure affair involving money illegally taken by one of the lieutenants of Alexander the Great. That episode ended with Demosthenes in exile Any historical parallels are yours alone to construct..

Neither, I confess, have I succumbed to the blandishments of the National Review whose pages occasionally seem to confuse **Karl** Rove with Aristotle. To be sure, Aristotle tutored Alexander the Great for three years, and Alexander and his armies went on to conquer much of the territory where we now are struggling. Alexander fell from favor in Greece where he had executed Aristotle's nephew, a historian, and a certain amount of resentment arose in some of the Greek cities where Alexander had insisted that he be treated as a god. Of interest to me is that while Alexander certainly was one of the greatest generals of all time, he did not have time to shape the government of the lands he had taken. Sound familiar?

I have digressed from my expressions of dissatisfaction with the language employed by one party and do not want to neglect my view of the linguistic failings of the other. Here, it seems to me, we had failings of excess. Whole paragraphs were used when single sentences would have sufficed. The net result was ambiguity and lack of clarity over all. Perhaps this was by design.

At this early juncture I am compelled to insert a disclaimer or two. I do not intend for this to be an exercise in exegesis. Neither do I intend for it to be a political tract although I would understand if a listener or two found something of that in a few earlier sentences. I am a scholar of neither Old nor New Testament. Neither can I pretend to be a student of language, current or ancient. What I will assert is that in recent years I have come to love language and books and to appreciate how much richness they can add to our lives.

Even that disclaimer is not without its danger. The 18th century physicist and part-time satirist, **Georg Lichtenberg**, — — he was a great fan of Jonathan Swift - —wrote that "A book is like a mirror. If an ass looks in you cannot expect an apostle to look out."

**Clemens Wenzel Nepomuk Lothar Furst von Mettemich**, — - but you can call me Prince — — the Austrian conservative so prominent in the first half of the 19th-century and, I

have read, something of a model for Henry Kissinger, once wrote "One of the commonest uses of language is for the concealment of thought." Although a century removed in time, and much more removed in political philosophy, George Orwell, in an essay titled "Politics and the English Language", noted that "Language can corrupt thought."

Nothing is known of the origin of language and scientists generally hold that it has been so long in use that the length of time WRITING is known to cover (5,200 years at most) is trifling by comparison.

Since the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century linguists have shown increasing interest in the theory that, while no one is born with a predisposition toward any particular language, all human beings are genetically endowed with the ability to learn and use language in general. According to transformational (or generative) grammar, introduced by NOAM CHOMSKY in the 1950s, the grammatical conventions of any natural language rest on a foundation of "deep structures," a universal grammar underlying all languages and corresponding to an innate capacity of the human brain. This theory implies not only that there are constraints on what may constitute an intelligible human language, but also that, however numerous or striking, the differences between any two languages are less fundamental than their similarities.

One of the more amusing disputes that has raged among linguists and cognitive scientists for 25 years or more is the question whether certain chimpanzees can acquire human language skills.

One of the scientists at the language research center at Georgia State University was strolling through the Georgia woods with one other star pupils, when the pigmy chimpanzee named Panbanisha pulled her aside. The chimp grabbed a special keyboard of the sort used to teach severely retarded children to communicate and repeatedly pressed three symbols on the keyboard — — — "fight," "mad," and "Austin" in various combinations.

Austin was another chimpanzee at the research center. The scientist accompanying the chimp asked, "Was there a fight at Austin's house?" The chimp, by gesture, affirmed that there had been. The scientist rushed to the building where Austin lived and learned that earlier that day Austin and his mother had fought over who got to play with a computer used as a part of the training program. Austin, apparently in a brief **matricidal** moment, had bitten his mother. The scientist. Dr. Sue **Savage-Rumbaugh**, felt that the chimp, Panbanisha, was a snitch who had a secret she urgently wanted to tell.

Dr. [Savage-Rumbaugh](#) has reported data that her chimpanzees can demonstrate the rudimentary comprehension skills of two and 1/2-year-old children. She found this episode gratifying since the chimp seemed to be using the symbols not to demand food, which is usually the case in these experiments, but to pass on gossip. Dr. [Steven](#) Pinker, a distinguished cognitive scientist at MIT is not convinced that the chimps have learned anything more sophisticated than how to press the right buttons to get the hairless apes on the other side of the console to cough up [M](#) and Ms or bananas. Noam Chomsky, the MIT linguist who is viewed as the founder of the modern field of linguistics, says that attempting to teach linguistics skills to animals is irrational. The competing scientific views are not without their humor. The Columbia University psychologists named one of their more promising simian subjects [Nim Chimpsky](#). Unfortunately for them, they subsequently published a paper in the journal. *Science*, titled "Can an Ape Create a Sentence?" in which they reluctantly concluded that the answer was no. Anyone who has read an occasional column by Peter [Bronson](#) would conclude to the contrary.

Language has been defined as systematic communication by vocal symbols. This must be differentiated from communication, of which I would consider language to be a subset.

Communication in a variety of biological systems can be quite remarkable. It can range from the element, calcium which when added to a suspension of different colored sponge cells results in the joining together of the red sponge cells only with other red sponge cells and the tan colored sponge cells only with similarly colored cells. This is a form of communication but obviously does not fulfill the definition of language.

[Pheromones](#) represent a form of communication between members of the same species in the animal kingdom but do not qualify as language. The communication can be very specific but still does not qualify. To me, one of the more remarkable answers unraveled by biologists is the case of the [polyphemus](#) moth which will not mate unless red oak leaves are present. Talk about the requirements for setting the mood! It turns out that the red oak leaves give off a volatile substance that stimulates the female to release a male-attracting [pheromone](#). Good, but still not language.

Even closer, the celebrated Austrian zoologist, [Karl von Frisch](#), 80 years ago described the round and waggle dances of the honeybee. He demonstrated that round dances mean that food is nearby and waggle dances mean that food is at some distance. The straight component of the waggle dance points the direction and the duration of the dance suggests the distance. Incredible communication but still not language.

The question can be raised as to whether sign language used by the deaf can be

considered a language. I believe it is a language replete with symbols, albeit with visual symbols rather than written symbols.

How long has written language existed? An amusing question was raised by John Noble Wilford in an article in the New York Times just over five years ago. He asked, "When no one read, who started to write?" Archeological evidence strongly suggests that the Sumerians were the first to develop writing some 5200 or 5300 years ago.

It takes what I would describe as industrial strength Chutzpah on my part to even dare to discuss Sumerian writing with Samuel Greengus in the room. Professor Greengus is an acknowledged authority in this field and has provided significant scholarship in the area. With his forgiveness, I have read that commerce and its allied record keeping probably were the stimuli for the development.

The first clay tablets unearthed at the ancient city of Uruk in the southern portion of Iraq bore an early cuneiform script with pictorial symbols for the names of people, places and things helpful in governing and commerce. It has been estimated that another five centuries passed before the writing came to represent recorded spoken language. In my more hallucinatory moments I can imagine archeologists 2000 years or so hence digging in West Texas, say near the ancient buried community of Crawford, and trying to decipher the fragments of language discovered on shards of pottery, thought to be the remnants of chamber pots, that appeared to be the pronouncements of the governmental leader thought to have lived in the vicinity.

To hastily summarize the proposed development of written language one can say the following: the Sumerians are generally thought to be the first culture to produce written texts, dating back to about 3200 B.C. Nearly at the same time, perhaps a couple hundred years later, Egyptian hieroglyphics appeared on small clay tablets — — once again used to indicate payments for commodities. Around 2500 B.C. inhabitants of the Indus Valley in what is now Pakistan employed ceramic seals to indicate ownership or destinations for bundles of goods.

Perhaps 1000 years later, during the Shang Dynasty, from perhaps 1500 to 1200 B.C., the Chinese began to inscribe divinations on the underside of turtle shells and on ox bones. This would roughly correspond to the time when some Old Testament scholars believe that Genesis was written. Perhaps another 1000 years or so later, from 300 to 250 B.C. writing began to appear in Meso-America with the Mayans and Zapotecs among the first of many cultures to lead the way.

You may have taken note some five weeks ago of the death of Jacques Derrida. He was hailed in the Op-Ed section of the New York Times,, and by a distinguished scholar, as

one of the three most important philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#) and Martin Heidegger.

Despite a virtually unlimited personal supply of conceit I cannot pretend to begin to understand the applications of his root term, "[deconstruction](#)." Originally proposed, I have read, as a strategy for interpreting written works and visual forms of art, the term has been kidnapped and corrupted and has entered every day language.

Some interpreters of [Derrida's](#) work suggest that all written and spoken language carry deeper concealed meanings other than that which the reader or listener might initially recognize. [Superficially](#), this has strong Freudian overtones. This limited interpretation or application of [deconstruction](#) serves to make the reader or listener the author or the speaker.

If my understanding is anywhere near correct, the use of [deconstructive](#) analysis limits the ability of the author to communicate his thoughts to the reader or listener. There is a quality to all this that calls to my mind the response of [Humpty Dumpty](#) to Alice in Lewis Carroll's 'Alice's Adventure in Wonderland.' "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less". Reading this, it seems to me now that Alice was bolder than when she first encountered some of these strange figures, for she responded, "The question is whether you can make words mean so many different things.. "The question is" said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

In a strange sense, it seems to me that Lewis [Carroll's](#) Alice anticipated [Derrida's deconstruction](#) when she challenged Humpty Dumpty.

In turn, [Humpty Dumpty](#) provided a political answer that anticipated George Orwell's view of the politics of language. Orwell's rules for writing included saying everything in the shortest possible way and using concrete words rather than abstract terms. Realism was another key [Orwellian](#) factor. He disliked the Americanization of English culture because he believed it falsified reality. He once wrote about looking through an American magazine and noticing there were no references to gray hair, fatness, middle age or death. Everything was subsumed into a phony world of eternal glamour. His own determination was exactly the opposite, to strip off polish and give life back its actuality and [randomness](#).

One of Orwell's biographers described him as one of the first literary observers of the ordinary. He valued scraps of useless information and he hoarded details he observed that made the past come to life — —; a cab man bursting into tears in 1914 because the Army had commandeered his horse. He recalled from his days as an assistant in a

bookshop the salesmen from Christmas card firms calling on the shop and a phrase from one of their invoices stayed with him over the years — — "two dozen infant Jesus with rabbits".

Orwell was fundamentally a political writer who aspired to make political writing into an art. He once said that the thinking man was left wing by conviction but right wing by temperament. He was opposed to the notion of "art for art's sake" and to the idea that artists are exempt from moral responsibility. Art and literature, he believed, should make people morally better.

Of Ezra Pound he commented "one has a right to expect ordinary decency even of a poet." This latter comment appeared in the *Partisan Review* of May, 1949. Pound was awarded the **Bollingen** prize in poetry for 'The **Pisan Cantos**' which he published in 1948. The judges included **T. S. Elliot**, **W. H. Auden**, **Alien Tate**, Robert **Penn** Warren, **Katherine Anne** Porter and Robert **Lowell**. Orwell, it is fair to say, was quite willing to take on the judgment of this distinguished panel. The panel indicated that considerations other than of poetic achievement would destroy the significance of the award and would deny the validity of that objective perception of value on which any civilized society must rest. Orwell did not dispute that but argued that the judges had taken the position that aesthetic integrity and common decency are two separate things. That was unacceptable to Orwell. He argued that at least keep them separate and not excuse Pound's political career on the ground that he is a good writer. Orwell maintained that the opinions Pound had tried to disseminate by means of his works were evil ones and that the judges should have said so when awarding Pound the prize. All of the above is to say that Orwell demonstrated a clarity of thinking and expression and courage rivaled by few writers.

In his essay "Politics and the English Language," Orwell included a parody of what he thought modern English was descending to. He chose a well-known verse from **Ecclesiastes**. "I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance **happeneth** to them all."

Then, the translation into the contemporary English that Orwell despised; "Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account."

Orwell proposed in that essay the following rules: 1) Never use a metaphor, simile or

other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print. 2) Never use a long word where a short one will do. 3) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out. 4) Never use the passive voice where you can use the active. 5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an every day English equivalent. We can find echoes of Orwell's rules in that wonderful little book, "The Elements of Style," originally written by William Strunk and subsequently expanded by E. B. White. In a brief concluding chapter E. B. White describes an approach to style with a list of reminders. Where Orwell counselled against using a long word where a short one will do. White stated simply, "Avoid fancy words." Both strongly favored the active voice over the passive voice. Each advised against explaining too much. This is sound advice in writing but I had learned this lesson from my older brother years ago in another setting. I was trying to explain an error I had made while working for him in his gasoline service station. His advice was, "Don't explain. Your friends don't need it; your enemies won't believe it."

Orwell, at heart, was a moralist and his search and insistence on simplicity and clarity in language was directed at political writing. When I examine the work of critics in other disciplines, particularly the arts, to insist upon simplicity in language is to risk robbing them of their subtlety and nuance.

Whitney Balliet, for several decades the jazz critic for the New Yorker magazine, used language in ways that induced synesthesia on my part. By reading his descriptions of jazz performance, I could hear the music. Similarly, when reading certain food authors or critics I can taste the food.

In a piece titled, "New York Drummers," Balliet described the introduction of the "high hat" cymbals to the jazz drummers' set. These are two cymbals set in apposition on a three foot pole, usually at the drummer's left, and are opened and closed by a foot pedal. Balliet describes them as producing a variety of "whispers, shusses, splashes and whaps."

Describing the trumpet playing of the late Doc Cheatham, Balliet wrote, "listening to Doc Cheatham play is like looking at a Winslow Homer: there is light everywhere. Some of the light is reflected. — — the light in his improvisations brings up pure, soft colors, and the planes his solos are built of — - planes that ceaselessly turn this way and that — —are alizarin and taupe and ultramarine and viridian.. There is no silver or gold, no black or white. "Of Lester Young he wrote, "He had an airy, lissome tone and an elusive, lyrical way of phrasing that had never been heard before. He had a pale tone, a minimal vibrato, a sense of silence, and an elastic rhythmic ease. — — he used long phrases and

legato rhythms and often chose notes outside the chords, notes that italicized his solos." The pianist, **Errol** Gamer, probably was an authentic genius.. He started playing piano between the ages of two and three — — with both hands. At bedtime his mother would play records on an old **Victrola**. The next morning Errol would pull himself up on the piano stool and play exactly what he had heard the night before. Time does not permit description of the numerous signs of musical genius but of his mature playing, **Whitney Balliet** had this to say: "Gamer's sound was by turns robust and delicate, rococo and spare, sentimental, discordant and melodic, driving and lackadaisical. You knew certain stylistic flourishes would appear — — the on the beat left hand chords, the right hand tremolos; the stiff legged and staccato single note lines in the right hand; the startling dynamics; the spinning, funny, tantalizing introductions, the octave chords — — a delicate melodic chorus, an 18 or 20 bar arrhythmic passage, in which each hand spun out a different, almost atonal single note line, and pick up the melody again." That kind of descriptive writing required not only a fastidious ear but powers of language that could not be limited to simple declarative sentences

I choose to complete this presentation with a brief mention of my favorite 20th-century writer.

He was a master of metaphor who could write well about anything but about boxing he wrote superbly. His command of language and his powers of observation and description remain difficult to match. **Abbott** Joseph **Liebling** was born in 1904 and died in late December, 1963. He deserves a much fuller tribute than this brief mention but perhaps on a later occasion I can attempt to do justice to this artist. His sources ranged from **Ibn Saldun**, a 14th century Tunisian writer on boxing>through Pierce **Egan**, an 18th-century English authority and he frequently quoted the boxing trainers, Freddy Brown and **Whitey Bimstein**. He once described the venerable fighter, Archie Moore, in this manner: "Moore is of an agreeably ordinary appearance, being neither very tall nor very short - — — his silhouette has no exaggerated tapers and he has no obtrusively over developed muscles; his body looks as if it would consider them vulgar. **Phrenologically**, he is an egghead with the large end up, and his pencil mustache and imperial beard accentuate the ovoid quality. When his face is in repose, they seem to have been drawn on a tan Easter egg."

In one of **Muhammed Ali's** early fights Liebling described his attire:" He was wearing a gay white robe with red tabs, white trunks, and white kid ring boots; he looked like a flower jumping out of the ground."

In the past 35 or 40 minutes I have skipped **superficially** from prehistory to old

Testament, skated rapidly across the thin ice of language development and theory and called attention to several favorite writers who, in my judgment, have skillfully applied language to description and criticism. I hope I have not violated Voltaire's aphorism, "The secret of being a bore is to tell everything."

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