

A terminological *jeu d'esprit*

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The following *jeu d'esprit* is intended to show that it is highly dangerous to quote putatively seminal texts, or extracts from these texts, in an attempt to prove the validity of some new proposition. They may only encapsulate a truism that has not yet been recognized. In that regard, the expression 'wood fire in a wooden stove' has, so far as I can see, been saved from the fate of many such commonplaces, for the simple reason that it is so beautifully phrased that it cannot be misquoted or misrepresented to any degree.

Successful cases of productive commonplaces are, however, not unknown. One of the notable exceptions originates in the following verse from the Prophet Isaiah, later paraphrased by Saint Paul:

For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. (Isaiah 64.4, cited from the *Authorised Version* 1611)¹

The text also appears in the pre-socratic philosophers. An amusing version of St Paul's text can be found in Bottom's speech in *Midsummer-Night's Dream*.² It is also freely paraphrased with improvements by Malory when relating the reunion of Isolde with her lover Tristan.³

The image of a 'wood fire in a wooden stove' occurs in a discussion of the relation of meaning to memory by Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923), in a passage in his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, which once attracted considerable attention from the American structural-descriptive linguists

¹ Echoed by Saint Paul: "But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." (1 Corinthians 2.9 [The first epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians]).

² Bottom describes his dream thus: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was." (Shakespeare, *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, 4.1)

³ "And to telle the joyes that were betwyxte La Beall Isolde and sir Trystramys, there ys no maker can make hit, nothir no harte can thynke hit, nother no penne can wryte hit, nother no mowth can speke hit." (Malory, *Tristram de Lyones*, 17 § 4)

in the 1930's, anxious to avoid what they saw as the fallacy of trying to explain language by using language. Notable among them, the Germanist William Freeman Twaddell (1906-1983) wrote, in his monograph 'On defining the phoneme':

Such a definition [of the phoneme "in terms of mental reality", just enumerated (p 56b), not "physical reality" (p 56a)] is invalid because (1) we have no right to guess about the linguistic workings of an inaccessible 'mind', and (2) we can secure no advantage from such guesses. The linguistic processes of the 'mind' as such are quite simply unobservable; and introspection about linguistic processes is notoriously a fire in a wooden stove. Our only information about the 'mind' is derived from the behavior of the individual whom it inhabits. To interpret that behavior in terms of 'mind' is to commit the logical fallacy of 'explaining' a fact of unknown cause by giving that unknown cause a name, and then citing the name x as the cause of the fact. 'Mind' is indeed a summation of such x's, unknown causes of human behavior. (1935: 9 [cited from Joos 1957])⁴

I will first give Mauthner's original German text, which is clear enough, if difficult to translate literally, although I will try.

Wir nennen die deutliche Erinnerung an einen Sinneseindruck, eine Beobachtung (im Gegensatz zu der undeutlichen Erinnerung, dem Glauben), unser Wissen einer Sache. [Elaborate etymology of *Wissen* ('knowledge'), deriving it from *gesehen haben* ('to have seen'), and of *Wissenschaft* omitted.]

Was *Wissenschaft* [*sc Wissenschaft der Sprache*; linguistic knowledge is memory. DAR] vermag, ist doch immer nur einige Uebersichtlichkeit über die Erinnerungen herzustellen. Das Mittel der Uebersicht ist die Sprache, die ihrem Wesen nach klassifiziert und klassifizierend erinnert. Schlimm für den Menschen, wenn er die Sprache selbst zum Gegenstande einer Wissenschaft zu machen wagt; Gegenstand der Erinnerung und Zeichen der

⁴ W. Freeman Twaddell. 1935. *On Defining the Phoneme*. *Language Monograph* 16. Baltimore: Linguistic Society of America, 62 p. Reprinted by Kraus Reprint Corporation, New York, 1966. Reprinted, reset, in *Readings in Linguistics. Volume 1: The Development of Descriptive Linguistics in America since 1925*, edited by Martin Joos [1907-1978]. Washington DC: American Council of Learned Societies, 421 p.

Erinnerung, Stoff der Erkenntnis und Form der Erkenntnis fallen dann zusammen. Wie soll da das Gefäß den Inhalt fassen? Ist es nicht, als ob man ein Holzfeuer in einem hölzernen Ofen anzünden wollte? Muss das Innere nicht das Äußere zerstören? (*Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, Band I, S. 267).⁵

We call the clear memory of a sense-impression an observation (in contrast to unclear memory, belief), our knowledge of a thing. [...]

What science [the science of language] can do however is only always to establish a certain clarity of view over memories. The means of the overview is language, which depending on its nature classifies and by classifying remembers. This is unfortunate for the person who dares to make language itself into the subject of a science. The object of memory and the symbol of the memory, matter of cognition and form of cognition, fall then together. How shall then the vessel contain the contents? Is it not then as if one tries to light a wood fire in a wooden oven? Must not the contents destroy the container? [DAR]⁶

The idea of '[building] a wood fire in a wooden stove' then seems to have seized the imagination of those linguists who thought that

⁵ Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923), *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*. ('Contributions to a Critique of Language.') 3 Bände: 1. *Sprache und zur Psychologie*. 1901; XII + 657 pp; 2. *Zur Sprachwissenschaft*. 1901; X + 735 pp; 3. *Zur Grammatik und Logik*. 1902; VIII + 651 pp + Register (14 pp). Stuttgart und Berlin: J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung Nachfolger G. m. b. H. 1901-1902. Also later editions. Band II, chapter I. Was ist Sprachwissenschaft? (pp 1-32), pp 17-18. Mauthner's aphorism was later given new currency by the title of a 1980 conference on political discourse whose proceedings appeared as: *Holzfeuer im hölzernen Ofen: Aufsätze zur politischen Sprachkritik*, edited by Hans Jürgen Heringer. Tübingen: Narr, 1982, viii, 332 p. Second edition Tübingen: Narr, 1988.

⁶ In a freer, more modern version:

Unlike a fuzzy recollection — a mere 'belief', the clear recollection of a sense-impression is called an 'observation' — the certain knowledge of a thing.

The most that science can attempt is to impose a degree of supervisory control over memory. The means of supervision is language — the same language that classifies by its very nature and, in classifying, remembers. Unfortunately, making language itself into the object of scientific investigation destroys the boundary between the token of a memory and the memory itself, between the cognition of form and substance. How can the vessel hold its contents? Isn't it like lighting a wood fire in a wooden stove? Won't the inside destroy the out? [JNG]

linguistics was about the analysis of linguistic form, when it is formulated in natural language. How can this be possible? It was felt that Mauthner had put his finger on the problem, if not the solution.

But Mauthner was talking about *meaning*, and what he says, through the convoluted mode of expression, is eminently sensible. How do you talk about meaning without using words? Meaning is memory. It is no more possible to say what something means than it is to say what the memory of something is. Like the taste of a peach, its nature is ineffable. Words will not transmit the taste of a peach to someone who has never tasted one. Only those who have experienced the same cognitive event can know what you are referring to, and even this is not certain, as individuals differ, and sometimes greatly so, in their physiology of taste and smell.

Following Mauthner, we could say that the meaning of any distinct (clear) memory, and of any words referring to or naming or describing it, is what the memory means, and, consequently, what we personally know about it. As Chomsky once said in a talk he gave in University College London in *ca* 1969, rebutting the claims of the generative semanticists of that day: ‘There is no reason at all to suppose that the meaning of a word can be represented by a set of features. It might just be the answers to a lot of questions.’⁷

⁷ Cited from memory. On the issue of expressing formal semantic properties in natural-language terms rather than in abstract logical symbols, *cf* the following observation by Carnap:

The method of syntax which will be developed in the following pages will not only prove useful in the logical analysis of scientific theories—it will also help in the *logical analysis of the word-languages*. Although here ... we shall be dealing with symbolic languages, the syntactical concepts and rules—not in detail but in their general character—may also be applied to the incredibly complicated word-languages [*sc* natural languages such as German or Latin]. The direct analysis of these, which has been prevalent hitherto, must inevitably fail, just as a physicist would be frustrated were he from the outset to attempt to relate his laws to natural things—trees, stones, and so on. ... In the same way [as the physicist must proceed], the syntactic properties of a particular word-language, such as English, or of particular classes of word-languages, or of a particular sub-language of a word-language, is best represented and investigated by comparison with a constructed language which serves as a system of reference. (p 8)

by Amethe Smeaton (Countess von Zeppelin). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. Originally published without some of the material that appears in the English version (see Preface to the English Edition) as: *Die logische Syntax der Sprache*. Wien. 1934.

The following is an entertaining example of Carnap's truism. John Lyons told me that, at a lecture at SOAS ca 1969, J. R. Firth was asked what the name was of a certain prosody. Firth answered:

You can call it what you want.
You can call it 'tomato sauce'.

Whereupon his assiduous students faithfully transcribed 'You can call it tomato sauce'.