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BASIC

G. M. Young



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BASIC

[SHORTLY before his death in 1930, Robert Bridges, the Society's founder, had begun to inquire how linguistic barriers between peoples might best be overcome. As a result, two papers on artificial languages appeared in Tract XXXIV:—Professor J. A. Smith argued that attempts to make a strictly logical or practical language must fail, because language is essentially a free and natural means of self-expression. He would have more 'interpreters'—those who know other natural languages besides their own. Mr. T. C. Macaulay thought that hard facts stood in the way of an invented 'universal' language, particularly the facts of idiom, in which he comprised all those patterns, constructions and turns of phrase that are distinctive for any natural language and deep-rooted in the habits of those who speak it: every speaker would tend to impose his native idiom on an artificial language, since it lacks tradition or great literary models to form and maintain its own idiom. Mr. Macaulay suggested the general adoption of Spanish, which has strong practical claims, as a second language. Since he wrote, there has been a growing tendency for other nations to choose English as the second language in their educational systems, because it is the living language of two great nations and the key to an unrivalled literature.

Tract XXXIV did not deal with the special case of a mixed artificial and natural language like Basic, practical and not artistic in its purpose, limited in vocabulary to 850 words, dispensing with most verbs, and using abnormal devices to cover the gaps thus created. Clearly it does not profess to fulfil Professor Smith's ideals. Mr. Bridges, who conceded the possibility of an artificial language built for utility only, would have felt the danger that pure English might be confused and debased by contacts with Basic. Whether it succeeds in overcoming the practical difficulties raised by Mr. Macaulay can be proved only by the experience of foreigners, for whom it is primarily intended. Here English speakers must be on their guard against a kind of evidence which is fallacious: when somebody who knows English uses the Basic vocabulary to make a version which seems good to others who know English, both sides are applying their knowledge of the intricacies of English idiom and meaning, which the foreigner does not possess. On similar evidence, a Russian or Arab might convince himself that the problem of universality had been solved by Basic Russian or Basic Arabic. Mr. Young is fortunate in bringing to bear on this subject a knowledge of many languages.—Ed.]

WHAT is Language ?

Primarily, a system of sounds by which we convey to one another observations, warnings, and injunctions :

1. Look at that black dog.
 2. Mind that dog : he will bite you.
 3. Don't tease the dog.
1. He isn't black : he is dark grey.
 2. No he won't : he knows me quite well.
 3. I'm not teasing him : I'm only playing with him.

From which simple operations, by expansion and interlacing, proceed all narrative, all argument, all exhortation : that is to say, all history, philosophy, and rhetoric.

It follows that an ideal language would have :

(1) A name for every thing, and for every activity, which is likely to come under the notice of those who use the language. As the scirocco does not blow in England, we need no word for scirocco. As there are no sheep in Arctic lands, the Esquimaux have no word for lamb.

(2) Such a system of connecting usages as will enable the speaker to convey any relationship he may have in mind when he speaks about the things, or the activities. These relationships are either external and logical—between the things themselves : or else internal and emotional—between the things and the speaker,

The cat has killed that rat.

The cat *has* killed that rat !

The usages, therefore, are either syntactical, and easily recorded in writing : or else vocal—matters of emphasis and cadence—of which only a few, strongly marked and regularly recurring, can be so set down : by underlining, for example, or by notes of exclamation, interrogation, or quotation. But the greater part of them cannot be so registered, and must be supplied by the reader out of his general understanding of the context.

Now, since it may be assumed that all languages have names for most things and activities, it follows that the distinguishing element in any particular language is its system of connecting usages : and the richer, the subtler, the more flexible, this system is, the more adequate will

the language be. For example, it is an admitted poverty in English that we have no future for *can*; no good impersonal corresponding to *man* or *on*; and no neat way of distinguishing *oratio obliqua* from *oratio recta*. The classical languages and German can employ the accusative and infinite, or the subjunctive: a French newspaper can say:

Affreuse affaire! Curé aura mangé deux vicaires!

while we are constrained to use the periphrasis

Vicar alleged to have eaten two curates!

How diverse and intricate these connexions are, can be made clear by one simple observation. Take the world of spatial relations, represented in speech by prepositions. It might have been expected that all languages would have much the same system of registration. Yet the fact is quite otherwise. I cannot think of any preposition in one language which means the same as the nearest corresponding preposition in another, neither more nor less. What is the Latin for *off*? Or the French? What is the English for *apud* or *um* or *auprès de*? The prepositional system in Greek and Russian, both being highly inflected languages, has a remarkable general similarity. It is when you try to match *ἐπί* with *po*, or a compound in *περί* with one in *pere*, that the differences assert themselves. I think I could make a foreigner understand why to say of a man that he lives at London strikes us as comic. The reason is that we necessarily think of London as an extended area. Whether you say at Norwich or in Norwich depends on whether you see it as an area or a point. But we should all say: This train stops at Norwich, and the only reason why we don't ask whether it stops at London is, I suppose, that, as the porter said, there would be a hell of a bump, mum, if she didn't.

What is true of the spatial relations of things is equally true, I think, of the temporal and modal relations of activities expressed by verbs. Anyone who in his youth has grappled with Greek conditional and dependent clauses, or, later, with the aspects of a Russian verb, will have realized that even the logical attitude, so to speak, towards such seemingly elementary conceptions as past, present, and future, may differ widely in different languages. How

did the Romans contrive to rear the almost algebraical elegance of their sequences on an aorist which also had to do duty as a perfect? Why do French and German both use the perfect as an aorist? In an ideal language should we say

	I saw him yesterday
or,	I him have seen yesterday
or,	I have him yesterday seen?

It is a commonplace of linguistics that the English language has a uniquely rich and subtle verbal system: almost as if, by shedding its old inflexions, it had conserved its sap to grow new branches. I remember a conference on Anglistic some years ago, at which one of the speakers, a professor from, I think, Marburg, held up the sentence:

She was handed a chair:

as the last triumph, the limiting instance, of linguistic flexibility. I have often thought how difficult a foreigner must find it to frame his tongue or his mind to such conditionals as *If I hadn't missed that train, I might have been eating my supper now* as distinguished from *If I hadn't missed that train, I should be eating my supper now*. Or this: *Not but what he could have been seen slipping away, if anyone had been looking out for him*. But, as we know, children weave their way through these thickets as naturally as little Arabs pick up the three—or is it four?—gutturals, which hardly any adult European can acquire. These connecting usages are the common property of all ranks, the literate and the illiterate, those of large vocabularies and those of small. And that they really are felt to be the central strand in the language is shown by the energy with which English people impose them on a foreign tongue. Everybody must have heard some English traveller, with limited French, endeavouring to express himself in some such way as

Si vous n'étiez pas une bête, vous auriez été pouvoir savoir
que je serais κτλ.

Along with this, and perhaps psychologically connected with it, goes a remarkable facility and resourcefulness in creating verbs: to chair, to table, to field, to gate, to floor, to wall (I once heard to bonify, from bona fide pronounced bonifide and conceived as a past participle). Now it is,

I think, generally admitted that the advance of the noun at the expense of the verb is a sign of linguistic decay, and the reason is obvious. Verbs, as Aristotle said, are in time. Nouns are out of time. An excessive reliance on the noun, therefore, will in the end detach the mind of the speaker from the realities of here and now, from when and how and in what mood the thing was done, and insensibly induce a habit of abstraction, generalization, and vagueness. But vagueness and good speech are in the nature of things incompatible, since the final cause of speech is to get an idea as exactly as possible out of one mind into another: and its formal cause therefore is such choice and disposition of words as will achieve this end most economically.

By this arrangement, no one need mount more than two flights to reach his front door.

That is good speech, because, with a moderate but sufficient draft on the visual imagination, it gets the whole story across in familiar words. Nobody who heard it would ask for it to be repeated, and most people could carry it in their memories as a message should be carried, with nothing added or left out.

The object of this arrangement is to limit to two floors the height to which it is necessary to ascend in order to reach the front door,

is bad speech, because few of us could be quite sure, on a single hearing, of getting the meaning right—still less, of repeating the sentence correctly as a message.

If I can trust my own recollections, and such observations as I have been able to make, I should say that English children—those I mean who are brought up in homes where English is well spoken—begin by acquiring the system of syntactical connexions, the idiom, which with us is centred on the verb, and then fill it out as their vocabulary increases. One method of language-teaching, the Prendergast Mastery System, which had a considerable vogue in the later nineteenth century, was founded on this natural process: the pupil was made to begin with verbal phrases *Pourquoi n'avez vous pas voulu . . .* and to repeat them until they came as easy as *Why didn't you tell me that you couldn't wait?* or the like, comes to an English child. Whether this is a sound method with older pupils,

and particularly with adults, teachers of language must say. I certainly wish that it had been practised on me: I might have learnt, what I never shall, the proper order of words in a French negative question employing a compound verb. But surely it is clear that—when once the stage of mere naming is past: pussy, daddy, tummy ache—we proceed to phrases, and arrive at words by analysis and comparison. Recently I had a letter from a correspondent, unknown to me, which well illustrates the mischief of reversing this natural procedure. At his school, the order of the day was to learn Vocabulary I and then tackle Exercise I. This he could never do. Like most children (as I guess) he found it more natural to begin with the sentence *Columba volat super silvam* and then find out what it was that did what where. First the phrase, then the word. First the syntax, in time, then the vocabulary, out of time. But the unhappy child was made to feel that this was cheating.

‘In metaphysical inquiries egoism is the truest modesty’, and perhaps I may here relate a performance of my own childhood. I was, I am told, backward in learning to speak, passed very quickly through the phase of baby talk, and then surprised, and doubtless gratified, my parents by the wealth of my vocabulary. This is how I did it. Every night, tucked up, I used to assemble my Council, headed by my particular friend the butcher in his blue overalls. They questioned me minutely as to the doings of the day, and the rule of the game was that every night we agreed on certain taboo words, always verbs. Then they put questions ‘involving the use of’, as the grammar books say, the forbidden vocables, and I had to dodge them. Finally, to corner me, they would ask what I meant by the word I did use, and I would whip out something I had just picked up from the elders, and so break through the net.

All that I have been saying relates to natural language, which is constructed, progressively, by the conversation of those who have heard it from infancy; and imparted to foreigners by way of lessons. In such language, as we know, the vocabulary is constantly changing. Words fall out of use altogether, new words are coined or adopted, and what is even more important, the meaning and status of words changes: the colloquial becomes literary, the

literary becomes colloquial: words of excellent descent go down in the world:

porro aliud clarescit et e contemptibus exit;

the idiom of one generation may to another sound pompous, pedantic, affected, or vulgar. By natural acquisition we keep pace with these changes in the lexicon, just as we adjust our speech to the less noticeable changes in syntax. Down to the middle of the nineteenth century, *the house is being built* was hardly admissible: the elder generation would insist upon *the house is building*. Their children shook off the yoke, and the language was enriched by a present passive participle. We are to-day witnessing—however greatly some of us may deplore it—another change of syntax: the obliteration of that subtle distinction of *will* and *shall* which for generations was the mark of English birth, and which can only be observed by those to whom it is native.

The great objections to a purely artificial language are: first, that there is no general body of speakers by whom the acceptance and rejection of words and phrases can be decided: second, that the grammar cannot possibly anticipate the whole syntactical range of connecting usages which in practice may be found necessary. For all this I may refer the reader to Mr. T. C. Macaulay's paper, S.P.E. XXXIV, with which, and his conclusions, I am in very close agreement. Let it be granted that the artificial language has a word for seven, for eight, and for half. Do you then say half-past seven, as in English: seven hours and half as in French: half eight as in German, or half of eighth as in Russian? The simplest conceivable phrase, *le sel est sur le roc*, which opened my first French grammar, is subject to such idiomatic variation. It goes literally into English and German. But Latin has no article and Russian has neither article nor copula.

The artificial language, therefore, would be a system of symbols such as is used in various sciences and professions, where the number of logical relationships is limited, and the emotional relationships do not matter. An Italian railway manager, for example, once told me that he could dispatch a train from Reggio to Hamburg and, by chalk marks understood throughout the transport world, be sure

that various wagons would be detached at the right junction, and sent to Laibach, Innsbruck, Cracow, and Ostend, as the case might be. Where these limitations apply, where, that is to say, the communication is from one professional man to another on the subject of their common profession, it would not be difficult to construct an adequate code, with a central office to issue supplements from time to time as new things or new relationships need to be expressed. But the users of this code would translate it, mentally, each into his own language, and employ their own language in communicating with non-professionals.

Let us suppose now that instead of constructing an artificial code language, we take an existing language and try to make it serve the purposes of a code. In the first place it is clear that the attitude of the native speaker, and of the foreigner, to such a language will be entirely different. With a purely artificial language, like Esperanto or Novial, we all start level—with perhaps a certain advantage on the side of the Romance-speakers. If the groundwork of our natural-code language were, say, French, the Frenchman would begin with the great advantage of knowing all the words. But on the other side he would be heavily handicapped by the embarrassment of not knowing which of them were allowed, and which were improper. At every moment the native speaker of a natural-code language will have to remember, not only the 1,000 words, or whatever the number may be, which he may use, but the 12,000 or 14,000 which he may not. Perhaps as a feat of virtuosity some few people might acquire this curious accomplishment, and by practice, keep it in mind. But the great majority would always be spilling over into their natural speech, and, to that extent, would be unintelligible to the foreign speaker.

Assume this difficulty overcome, and the constricted vocabulary firmly impressed on our Frenchman's memory. Then, since ordinarily he wants, let us say 10,000 words, to make himself understood by, or to understand, his fellow countrymen, the 1,000 words of Basic French will have to do duty for all the others, by means of combinations which are wholly unnatural to him—if they were natural he would have made them himself. The result is

bound to be ludicrous, to the French ear or eye, just as the first efforts of a foreigner in our own tongue are ludicrous, and for a corresponding reason. We have to use the words we know, whether they are the right ones or not, to make up for those we do not know: like the Russian lady who once in my hearing spoke of the Swedish Guards 'in their winter clothes of mutton-fur'. And as everyone who has had the experience knows, the result very commonly is that we do not succeed in saying what we mean. We say what we have words for, which may be something quite different. The narrow path between high hedges takes us where it goes, and not at all where we want to go. And so far as I have observed, I think the tendency is to hop or scramble from noun to noun, blocking out some kind of meaning, using the verbs, more or less at random, as so many connecting particles, and giving to the whole the turn and colour of our native idiom.

The child learns his own language haphazard, what he is positively taught being only a small part of what he learns, by listening and experiment. His course is not set out or graded: he has no more difficulty in giving his address as 137 Wellingborough Avenue than in saying 1 Cat Street. He does not proceed from easy to difficult idioms, and, by six or seven, he finds it equally natural to say, *That is my ball* and *If I had known we should be going where we found the blackberries yesterday, I would have brought my pail.*

But the foreign pupil—whether young or old—has to linger over the phase of pure naming and has few opportunities of acquiring any idioms beyond those set down in his successive tasks. When, at 35, I began to study Russian I was warned that if I really acquired ten words a day, I should have done well, and I found by experience that this modest standard was not easy to reach, and maintain. But as soon as I was through the pussy-daddy stage, I certainly found that I made greater progress by plunging at once into whole sentences, and enlarging my vocabulary, both word and idiom, by the process I have called analysis and comparison, thus following, as I suppose, the course I had taken in learning English, making as it were a hypothesis as to the meaning of each phrase,

and then testing it by looking up the unknown word in a dictionary, or asking my elders what it meant. I remember, too, that when my last examination was behind me, and I sat down to read my favourite classics for fun, I was surprised by the unexpected clarity and vividness of the text, when I was no longer under the obligation of finding an English equivalent for each Greek or Latin word in isolation. To the limits of my knowledge, I was reading them as a Greek or Roman boy might.

Basic is an attempt to construct a code-language out of English. And its authors begin, one may say, by standing the real language on its head: or, perhaps, turning it inside out. The strength and the wealth of the natural language lies in the volume and variety of its verbal forms. Basic employs only 18 verbs, and makes good the defect by means of a system of verbal phrases consisting of an auxiliary verb or 'operator' and a noun.

Simon, son of John: have you love for me? Yes, Lord,
you have knowledge that I have love for you.

Plainly that is not English, any more than

Avez vous amour pour moi? Oui, vous avez savoir que
j'ai amour pour vous

is French: or

Habes amorem pro me? Sic: habes scientiam quod habeo
amorem pro te

is Latin.

For whom then is it intended? For foreigners, and for such English people as may have to converse with foreigners trained to speak Basic. Now, the foreigner whose intercourse is likely to be limited to English basic-speakers, will be a rare bird. Arrived at Dover, he will probably be able to make himself understood. But so do thousands of passengers who have not learnt Basic. And when he buys a paper and starts reading, the first article will show him how much he still has to learn. A great part of the vocabulary will be unknown to him.

That is of course a common experience with us all. Short of becoming bilingual, we never overtake the whole vocabulary of a foreign tongue. We learn mainly by reading, through a process of concentric acquisition just as a tree

adds rings to its girth each year. But the Frenchman sitting in the train to Victoria will soon find, as he reads or tries to follow the conversation of his companions, that he not only has much to learn: he has much to unlearn. What he has been taught is not introductory to what he still has to acquire. It is a system of dodges to avoid the difficulty of acquisition. And the more trouble he has taken to master the dodges, the more thorough and fluent his Basic is, the further he will be from ever speaking or understanding real English.

But I am taking a favourable case. I am assuming that my Frenchman has mastered Basic to the degree which makes an Englishman a 'good speaker' of German or Italian. Such a 'good speaker' falls very far short of the native in range, accuracy, and fluency of speech: in idiom and accent. But how many of us reach even that standard? By parity of reasoning it is safe to assume that for one 'good Basic speaker' there will be a dozen at various degrees of competence or incompetence. How can it be otherwise? In the nature of things they can have, out of school, very little practice: there will be no body of Basic speakers to whom they can refer (thus repeating the objection to all artificial languages); and most assuredly there can be no Basic literature (conceive, if you can, a literature with no word for *to ask* or *to know*). Now the relation between 'French'—fourth-form French—and 'good French' in that modest degree, which is as far as most of us can ever hope to get, is that the one can, with care, pains, study, and practice, be improved into the other: and in turn, though very rarely, 'good French' may be improved into a fair imitation of real French. But the best Basic can never be improved into real English, because it begins by cutting away the mainstays of our tongue—the verb and the verbal phrase. What sort of lingo then will the speaker of fourth-form Basic ever achieve? He will have a certain hoard of nouns, and the chances are, I should guess, a hundred to one that in practice he will link them in accordance with the idiom of his own language mixed up with what he remembers of the rules of Basic. Whether he ends up by saying, for 'I asked him',

I put question on him

or

I made question at him

really doesn't matter. Both are intelligible, and neither is English. We are in fact back at the code-language, which every speaker reads off in accordance with the idiom of his own tongue.

Now, as I have said, there is certainly a place for code-languages. Cut off from other aids to learning I once worked through a volume of Commercial Correspondence in Russian, introducing our Mr. Bobchinski to your good selves and hoping for a renewal of your esteemed favours. But at all events that was real Russian, and though the subject was uninteresting, I picked up idioms from it just as a child learns the phrasing and construction of a sentence from listening to a conversation between his father and his uncle on politics or business, the substance of which he may not understand at all.

There are therefore two questions. First, is Basic a good code? As I defined it above, a code is a system of communication between professional men on professional matters: and whether Basic is a good instrument for an English architect to use in explaining the replanning of Southampton to a Swede, or an Indian in describing the lay-out of a munition factory to a Chinese, architects must say. Clearly the Basic core of words would have to be greatly extended to cover the things which as architects they would observe and wish to convey. Another professional vocabulary would be required for doctors—another for geologists—another for chemists, and so forth: just as they now require their technical symbols.

But consider the architect who wishes to convey, not the statistics of a building, but its historic significance and aesthetic value. Here, I think, the case for Basic has been prejudiced by the outrageous claims of its own promoters. What are they? That a pupil who in two years, being of average ability, might be able to read straightforward narrative in French, will, by studying four little Basic books of 50 pages each, be able to 'discuss business and industrial organization, science and literature, history and politics'. With whom? With me for example? I spend a good deal of my time discussing administrative organization, history, and politics, for which purpose I need (so I am told: I have never counted) about 15,000 words. Of course,

among those 15,000 there are 850, or 1,000, or 1,500 which I use most frequently, among them being a very large number of verbs. But I cannot possibly restrain my thinking to 1,500 words: and there is one question I have always wanted to put to the exponents of Basic. Is it a language which you can and do think in? But you, I must further remark, presumably speak at least Higher Certificate Basic, perhaps Fellowship Basic. What about those others who shamble along in Fourth Form Basic, and they after all will be the multitude?

To put it another way. One can only think with the whole of the language available at any moment, which whole is constantly enlarged by opportunity of hearing and reading, and consolidated by opportunity of speaking and writing. I thus come to my second question. Is Basic a good introduction to the real English which my architect, for example, will require if he wishes to explain to his Swedish colleague the influence of Geoffrey Scott on modern architectural thought, or the place of Sir Edward Lutyens in architectural practice? When I wrote on this subject first, in 1941, I received many letters from teachers of language. All, without reserve, answered No: it is not a good introduction. Basic gives no opportunity of enlargement, and no inducement to enlarge. Having learnt

I have knowledge that you have love;

not knowing that to any English ear it is grotesque: but finding that it does convey a meaning: why should the pupil encumber his memory with a mass of verbs? But that mass of verbs, with their extraordinary range of syntactical manipulation, is the centre and strength of the language. That is what the pupil, ambitious to discuss 'industrial organization, science and literature, history and politics', must acquire. It is no answer to say that one or two experts who have nothing else to do but improve their Basic can produce a rendering of the Atlantic Charter into something which looks rather like English. A candidate in Honour Mods. could do it into something which to a Roman would have sounded about as much like Latin. But what would the Fourth Form make of it? A Chinese fourth form will inevitably fall back on Chinese idiom: a Bantu on Bantu. That they will be able to communicate

with one another on a limited range of subjects interesting to both their good selves, I do not doubt, though really I think they might do it better if they practised the idiom of Mr. Jingle in *The Pickwick Papers*. That, in any real sense of the word, they will be able to *discuss* them, I do most confidently deny.

Let us see at what conclusion we have arrived :

(1) Any speech which exaggerates the part of the noun at the expense of the verb, as Basic does, is, by definition, bad speech.

(2) The strength of English lying in the verb, Basic is in a peculiar degree a deformation of English speech.

(3) It will therefore give the pupil an altogether misleading notion of real English.

(4) Its inadequate syntax will drive the learner back on the syntax of his own speech, thus creating what might be called Fourth Form *prakrits*, and limiting its utility even as a code.

(5) Its narrow vocabulary makes it unserviceable as an instrument of discussion, outside a strictly limited range of professional or business communication. Even within that range it will need to be supplemented by special, or technical, vocabularies.

If that were all, Basic might be left to sink or swim, and, on one condition, I should watch its progress with interest and impartiality. But that condition is essential: to violate it might be deadly. It is—that English speakers should not be introduced to Basic until their own habits of speech are completely formed, and they can recognize Basic for what it is—a code composed by the constriction and deformation of the English language: a stunted acrobat, whose contortions may be excused, laughed at, or pitied, but are certainly not to be imitated by those who are born to the free enjoyment of their natural strength.

