THE TWO APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE
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In dealing with the subject, we must start at the very beginning and our beginning is a justification of the logical juxtaposition of the two words “Science” and “Language.” It is possible that some of you do not realize that there is such a thing as a science of language. Some of you may doubt if language could form the subject-matter of a science for the simple reason that in our University we have always studied languages as vehicles of literary compositions only. Nonetheless, there is the other much neglected approach to the study of language, and that is linguistics which concerns itself with the science of human speech. You can quite understand one speaking of the study of physics, chemistry, zoology and botany, but the science of language—well, that needs clarification before we proceed further. I am giving you the clarification you want.

We can approach the study of a language from two different angles: (1) from the literary angle, from which one looks upon language as the instrument of prose or poetry; (2) from the mere speech-facts angle, which is the subject matter of our lecture.

Under heading (1) we have the study of the classics, prose and verse, as works of Art, excelling in style and forcible self-expression satisfying competent literary taste, and under heading (2) we focus our study on an analysis of speech-facts as such, from which we deduce the linguistic laws that govern human speech.

The difference between the two approaches is obvious enough. In literature language is subjected to approved conventional canons of taste, whereas in linguistics, which is the modern name for the science of language, human speech-behaviour is treated objectively as a complex of so many speech-facts providing the material of an analytical science; in much the same way as the facts forming the subject matter of chemistry, and physics, provide the material of a science proper.

I do not think I need explain that the subject-matter of science is the study of facts, uncoloured by one’s imagination or by one’s particular tastes. In linguistics we face facts, in literature we establish taste and conventions. To illustrate the two approaches to the study of language I call your attention to the early writers, such as Chaucer in England, Jacopo da Todi in Italy and Vassalli in Malta. If in our study of these early writers we are concerned with the appreciation of their literary proficiency, such as command of language, verbal felicities of fresh imagery, and other virtues of rhetoric, our interest is purely literary or artistic and not scientific, because in this sense our judgments are controlled by canons of taste. If on the other hand the early writers interest us to illustrate the growth of their respective languages, the verbal decays that have occurred since and other changes in the language, then our interest is scientific, because in this case our judgments are based not on conventional canons of taste but on the results of facts, on conclusions at which we arrive by the deductive and descriptive method, as in the study of the natural sciences. Both approaches are important in two different ways. But I think it is very necessary not to let the two approaches get mixed up with each other in our mind. Even when they overlap, they remain essentially separate.

My students may remember how often I have insisted on this distinctness and separateness between the two approaches. And I have to insist frequently on this because being the first Professor of Maltese after M.A. Vassalli in the early XIXth Century, I have had to lecture on Maltese both as a medium of literary self-expression and as the subject matter of a science, i.e. Maltese linguistics. When I dealt with Maltese as a literary medium in the hands of Dun Karm, Duże Muscat Azzopardi or A.E. Caruana, I
made a study of their different styles, their imagery, command of language, forcible expressions and other stylistic qualities on which we base our literary judgments. On the other hand, when I dealt with Maltese as a linguist, I had to disregard canons of taste altogether, and based my conclusions on the exclusive study of speech-facts, speech-facts as we meet them in the man-of-the-street and not as coined by poets and prose-writers.

Occasionally some of the students get mixed up. A recent speech-fact, noticed since the outbreak of hostilities with Italy, is the appearance of words like xeifter, majnisjiet and rejdijiet which sound so funny to those who possess a knowledge of English. These words may or may not be tolerated by literary good taste, but the linguist cannot help noting them as recent products of a war-time society that, having no corresponding words of its own, took these words from English and unconsciously adapted them to Maltese phonetics and phonology. The teacher of Maltese may blue-pencil them in a student's essay as undesirable neologisms, but to the linguist to whom a language is a social product these words are linguistic realities, the heritage of the times.

As the first Professor of Maltese after M.A. Vassalli, I had to face the task of giving a literary and scientific status to the Maltese Language, a language that, unlike Gaelic in Eire, is not a resuscitated ghost but a living language as dynamically vital as the Maltese people who use it in their everyday conversations for their everyday purposes. In this lecture we are not concerned with the literary study of Maltese, strictly speaking we are not even concerned with the scientific study of Maltese but with the scientific study of languages in general and it is only by way of near illustrations that I give examples from our language. Having shown you that a language can form the subject-matter of a science, now I want to show you also that linguistics, i.e. the scientific study of human speech, is not only a science in the way physics is a science, but is also a social science in the way that political economy is a social science. It is a science in so far as it is based on a study of speech-facts and it is social in so far as these facts are studied in relation to the fact is spoken in question. Indeed, the history of linguistics is of the very stuff of social history. The words that we utter play a more or less important part in society — principally they help to maintain social intercourse. You cannot isolate words from society for they have no independent existence. A Word is the Thought made Sound, and the Thought-Sound combination virtually translates itself into Action. Where there is no speech, there is no social life, and where there is no social life, there is inaction. But this state of speechlessness is inconceivable in human society. As a matter of fact, we have always known man as a speaking animal. Speech has always been with him in every place and through all time. Man is indeed a talking, gregarious animal.

The distinction I have asked you to make between the two approaches to the study of language may raise the question whether these two approaches, namely, language as a medium of literary self-expression and language as a complex of speech-facts may not be mutually exclusive and irreconcilable. More specifically whether literary works of Art, judged by the criteria of linguistics, should be described as socially false and unreliable documents, produced exclusively by artifice. It is true that linguistics and literature, cover two separate fields, but that does not mean that they are mutually destructive. The basis of literature is aesthetics, the ground work of which is "feeling", and "feeling" is a psychological reality like fun, laughter and grief, of which the man of science is personally aware, just as he is aware of the reality constituting the subject-matter of his science. Naturally the scientist separates the two realities into two different orders, not in conflict with one another, not mutually destructive. He simply groups them according to their proper order. For a similar reason there is no conflict
between literature and linguistics. Applying the principles of linguistics we may describe Dante’s “Divina Commedia” and Shakespeare’s “King Lear” as socially artificial because at no time has man used the Italian or the English language as it has been used in the two classics mentioned. That is the judgment of linguistics; but that judgment is balanced by the equally important judgment of aesthetics, the instinct for formal beauty that is innate in man. Our science excludes such works from the social domain of its analysis, but it does not and it cannot advocate their destruction, any more than the science of anatomy can advocate the destruction of Rodin’s statues because they may not agree with the facts of osteology. All that we can say is that works of art can never directly constitute the subject matter of linguistics though they provide many indirect examples in support of it and that their domain lies within the wide frontiers of aesthetics, with which we are not concerned in this lecture.

Having answered this possible question, we may now ask, “With what kind of speech-facts are we concerned in the study of linguistics?”

In the study of our subject we concern ourselves with the study of human speech in general, languages in particular, their forms and classification, their structure and the changes that they undergo in different times and places; common and local languages as well as kindred subjects and questions arising from these studies. And in the study of language our science makes an important distinction between speech as such and language as a particularized form thereof. Speech is by its very nature universal. Nature has provided all men with the necessary apparatus for the emission of sounds and with a perceptive brain to invent these sounds with an intelligible meaning. But while speech is universal, languages in which it manifests itself are by no means so far, as you know, there are as many languages and subdivisions thereof as there are people — a veritable Babel wherein men do not understand one another directly.

To pull down the language barrier between one people and another in order to facilitate international understanding, many have advocated the adoption of a universal language. With this proposal however arises the question as to which particular language should be so adopted; and should the choice be made from the living tongues or should an artificial one be invented? Both methods have been proposed and tried. At one time Latin was used as a sort of lingua franca throughout Europe though its use was limited to the cultured classes, but it has since been disused. Now, there is much propaganda made in favour of the adoption of English, and especially that form known as Basic English, invented by Mr. Ogden of Cambridge who has reduced the bulky English vocabulary to a mere 850 words, ingeniously selected and devised such as to yield a number of intelligible derivatives. Basic English is now a topical subject, but it has not yet overcome the strong opposition ranged against it. As for artificial languages, several experiments have already been made such as Ladino, Ido, Volapuk and Esperanto, the last-named being the most successful, but none has taken root strongly enough to be considered a universal language. The reason for this failure is a complex one with which we cannot concern ourselves, but we can say briefly that the failure is in both cases psychological. Rightly or wrongly, some other people’s language is rejected for fear that this selected people might consider itself the world’s Herrenvolk, for nations, as we know, do not trust one another generously enough, and small and great alike hesitate to give up the smallest vestige or their political or cultural sovereignty. On the other hand, artificial languages have not taken root because, as such, they have not been backed by a considerable number of people or by political and literary prestige as in the case of a living language like English.

In this connection, the study of the possible origin of languages is very interesting. For a long time, and not long ago, Hebrew was considered as the parent language of
humanity. That blunder was based on the misunderstood evidence of the Bible, in the first book of which, that is Genesis, God (Jahwe) utters the creation command and speaks to Adam and Eve in Hebrew. But that obvious nonsense is now relegated to the limbo of discredited beliefs.

Biblical and linguistic studies have together clarified many obscure and hotly debated points that were once a source of puzzlement. Biblical studies have since established the principle that the Bible does not intend to teach men the essential nature of things of the visible universe, things in no way profitable unto salvation, but rather describes and deals with things in more or less figurative language or in terms which were commonly used at the time, and which in many instances are in daily use at this day, even by the most eminent men of science. Linguistics, working on an analogical behaviour of speech-facts, has established the principle that languages involve growth, expansion and decay, in time. From its study of analogical behaviour one can say that man's primitive language arose originally from very unpretentious beginnins like onomatopoeic utterances which with the help of graphic gestures, provided his first simple vocabulary, a vocabulary that in course of time developed more words by the inherent force of analogy, till, spreading from one country to another, shedding old forms and acquiring new ones, each in its own independent way, the early speech-forms differed so widely amongst themselves that it is now impossible to resuscitate the extinct primitive language common to them or even to establish enough bridging contact between two separate families of languages like the Semitic and Indo-European, though unsuccessful attempts to do so were, amongst others, tried by Trombetti, Baron Carra de Veaux and Moller. All that our science can say on the subject is (1) that speech is the universal attribute of humanity; (2) that different peoples speak different languages; (3) that linguistic differences do not necessarily correspond to ethnical differentiations; (4) that the different languages can be clas-
we are by no means members of the Arab ethnic group; likewise, the Phoenicians, who spoke a Semitic tongue ethnically belonged to the Hittite family. No more direct example can be supplied than that of the Hebrews or the Irish who, having lost their native tongue, adopted one that did not belong to their ancestors. This is all very obvious but it is incredible how touchy people, too touchy to be able to think dispassionately, confuse the two issues. In my lecture, RACE AND LANGUAGE, given at the British Institute, Ghawdex, in 1942, I dealt with this interesting subject in extenso and I quoted enough evidence to throw more light on the ethnic composition of the Maltese group.

In "The Times Literary Supplement" Mr. Ellul, now Commissioner General for Malta in London, supported by Sir Charles Bonham-Carter, one-time Governor of these Islands, wrote that the Maltese Language is a survival by oral tradition of the original Phoenician, in more or less its pure form, as spoken in the remoter parts of the Island, which statement goes against the most elementary evidence of comparative Semitic grammar. But modern Maltese — and we have no written evidence of a very different Maltese from the one we speak today — is a unique cross-breed of East and West with the marked individuality of a separate language, compounded of Semitic and Indo-European elements very much as other modern languages are likewise the product of various linguistic components. The Semitic element connects it with North-African Arabic, though this need not be taken as a proof of direct origin, and the Romance element connects it with Sicily and Italy. This broad description does not exclude the possibility that a comparative study of the substratum of the language may yield some evidence of a pre-Arabic linguistic layer.

The Romance element is strong mostly in the syntactical structure of the language and its many idioms, a propos of which for a study of comparative ethnography it is important to bear in mind that while morphology deals with a set of fixed patterns — forms still unmoved into action by thought — syntax deals with the mental order into which these Semitic patterns are arranged to express a set of ideas or, as we might say, a people's culture. For example, my novel "TAHM TLITT SALTNIET" (Under Three Rules) running into 400 pages, and Mgr. Psaila's translation of Ugo Possolo's "I Sepolcri", though both lexically largely Semitic, are syntactically largely un-Arabic in structure.

There is no intrinsic evidence in modern Maltese of a Phoenician origin, though such origin may be historically presumed, and the Phoenician words which Sir Charles Bonham-Carter said tally with modern Maltese ones must be common Semitic words. But though morphologically our language agrees with North-African Arabic, it is certainly wrong to describe it as an Arabic dialect, because the Semitic element after all is only one of the component elements of the language, and no grammar that excludes a study of the Romance element, lexical and syntactical, can be trusted as giving a complete description of Maltese. It is to fill up the gap that I have myself published a short "Comparative Study in Mixed Maltese" (1943), which, with my other study, "A Comparative Survey of Semitic Maltese" (1943), should cover the field of mixed Maltese linguistics against the historical background of our Islands. Not less unacceptable is the contention that the Maltese are an ancient people of Phoenician origin because in an Island like Malta, midway between Africa and Europe, a focus of several colonizations, it is hard to say when and where ethnic origins began or ceased. While it is true that the history of Maltese ethnography shows continuity from pre-Arabic days, it is no less true that the native Maltese have been since intermarrying with the foreign settlers of different nationalities.

Another question, very often raised in Malta, especially by those who favour the cultural and political prevalence of Italian, is whether Maltese is a "language" or just a "dialect".

Let us consult the ripe wisdom of "Linguistics" again. In every country there is one form of language that is
understood all over the place; it is French in France, Italian in Italy and English in England. The language that is understood all over the place is known as the “Common Language” of the country. Then there are other local speech-forms that are partly or not at all understood all over the place. These local speech-forms are known as dialects or argot or class-jargons. In the linguistic histories of civilized countries we see a continual struggle for supremacy on the one hand and survival on the other going on between the various dialects till eventually one speech-form is adopted by the élite of the society of the country, or by the governing classes and the best writers. That particular dialect, privileged by the attention it has received from a class of people socially influential, asserts its supremacy over the other rivals and becomes the established language of the Court, the language of literature and science. The other dialects remain confined to their particular areas struggling for survival against the ousting influence of the privileged dialect. This antagonistic struggle has been accentuated in our days with the introduction of compulsory education, the spread of journalism, easier social contacts and by traffic facilities not enjoyed before the advent of the ‘bus and the wireless, in the good old days of social and linguistic seclusion and self-sufficiency.

Now, what is the position in Malta? Can we, too, claim to have a Common language? Certainly. All over Malta and Ghawdex we use a language for our daily needs that is understood by all and sundry, and that language is certainly Maltese. Have we our dialects? We certainly have them. Listen to a man from Mosta and Gharb in Ghawdex, then to another from Valletta and you will note minor differences in pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax. That is the position, and that is the answer of Linguistics to the uninformed who ask whether Maltese is a language or a dialect. Maltese is the language of the Maltese as French is the language of the French. It has its dialects as French has its dialects in France. Or do these critics mean that because Maltese

must have originated from some other parent language therefore it must be considered as a dialect? I think these people think of language vs. dialect almost as an equivalent to the relation between a mother and a still unemancipated daughter. Actually, all languages as we know them today have developed from others by the process of historical evolution, and, as I have already pointed out, there is not one language of which we can say that it is even remotely entitled to be considered as the parent tongue. This goes also for the proto-Semitic and the proto-Indo-European or Sanskrit, which we take as the starting points of our comparative linguistic reconstruction in the Semitic and Indo-European groups, respectively.

Therefore, this mother-vs-daughter relationship between Maltese and its immediate parents does not hold water. All languages that do not stagnate in the state of dialects emancipate themselves socially as soon as they have established themselves as the current vehicles of social intercourse.

But it is possible that these critics use the word “dialect” to indicate a language whose social function is restricted or subjected, to the wider prevalence of another language which, in the case of Malta these critics say, is, or at least was, Italian. But even in this sense the critics of Maltese are mistaken because Italian was never the common language of the people of Malta and Ghawdex — Italian was, and still remains, though on a smaller scale, the cultural language of a class of people, but that social preference, while it elevates it to the status of a cultural language, can never entitle it to be considered the language of the Maltese, relegating the language actually spoken by us to the anomalous status of a dialect. I am afraid if Linguistics has anything to teach us it is that we must handle and appreciate the people’s speech-facts dispassionately and acutely. In science we are not allowed to play hide and seek with speech-facts — we must follow the evidences of facts all along the way to their utmost stretch and by no means
twist them to suit our prejudices. We have chosen Maltese in particular but the principles involved apply to any language. And most civilized peoples unfortunately are language-conscious.

Now let us deal with another point arising from the nature of language. You will remember that at the beginning of this lecture I stressed the social character of our science. Here is one important consequence too often sadly neglected by some of our writers. The consequence is this: because language is a medium of social intercourse its aim is essentially practical. As such it must serve to convey one’s meaning clearly and it must be the very language actually current. Otherwise we shall be using a pseudo-language that has no social value for contemporary society. I am not now thinking of belle-lettres which, as I said at the beginning, are subject to the conventional canons of good taste, but of non-literary compositions intended to convey some meaning in a language that society must not only understand easily but to which society’s sympathies must respond naturally, without effort and other psychological reactions which tend to obscure the full value of words and context. Mussolini did not use Jacopo da Todi’s Italian when he addressed his applauding Fascisti, nor Chamberlain Chaucer’s language when he addressed a tense House of Commons evoked. Indeed, if either had done so, he would have not ridicule but ridicule, such ridicule as is incurred by the man who wears in public a dress that has long ceased to be fashionable. A. Meillet, the famous French linguist, giving his first lecture on “L’Etat Actuel des Etudes Linguistiques Générales,” on the occasion when he succeeded Monsieur Breal as lecturer on Linguistics, said: “Le ridicule est la sanction immédiate de toutes les déviations individuelles, et, dans les sociétés civilisées modernes, on exclut de toutes les principaux emplois par des examens ceux des citoyens qui ne savent pas se soumettre aux règles de langage, parfois assez arbitraires qu’a une foi adopté la communauté.”

I think this condemns the exaggerations of the obstinate exponents of Malti Safi at all costs. These gentlemen cannot invoke the protection of our science and more often than not, not even the canons of good taste governing literary writing. The attempt to purify — so it is thought — the modern language of its foreign accretions is by no means exclusive to Maltese. The famous literary group known as “La Crusca” did the same for Italian, and in England there is a society for Pure English. For some uncanny reason the past exercises an unwholesome influence upon us — it is often a wicked fascination that some are unable to shake off. We not only love the departed, but we even worship on their graves. In imagination we exalt the venerable past and linguistically archaic habits are revived because they breathe the aura of ancientness, whereas modern speech-forms are neglected as unexciting intruders. In my library I have an interesting dictionary by the well-known scholar of Maltese, C.L. Dessoulay, Ph.D. (Paris), entitled “A Word-Book of the English Tongue” published by George Routledge in 1917. This Word Book contains “a few thousand loan-words” which can be replaced by “other good English words”, and the author’s purpose is “to shake off the Norman yoke that lies so heavy on their speech”. The work is well done, deserving the praise given it by the Press, because, as the Journal of Education said at the time “the task of finding (Anglo-Saxon) equivalents — no easy one — has been performed in a careful and scholarly way and the result is a convenient and interesting prospectus of the resources of the Teutonic part of our language”. But the purpose is the very condemnation of this otherwise interesting book. The modern Englishmen are no more Anglo-Saxons than the modern Maltese are Phoenicians or Arabs. And it is impossible for one ancient period to provide the vocabulary to describe new needs that arose long after, needs which very often originated in a foreign country from which we imported also their names. The fascinating study of words appeals to two different students of language, namely, to the etymologist and to the linguist.