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August 22, 1980

VERNACULAR VALUES

by Ivan Illich

Cuernavaca, April 12th 1980

3RD PART

Historians have chosen Columbus' voyage from Palos as a date convenient for marking the transition from the Middle Ages to modern times, a point useful for changing editors of textbooks. But the world of Ptolemy did not become the world of Mercator in one year, nor did the world of the vernacular become the age of education overnight. Rather, traditional cosmography was gradually adjusted in the light of widening experience. Columbus was followed by Cortéz, Copernicus by Kepler, Nebrija by Comenius. Unlike personal insight, the change in world view that generated our dependence on goods and services took 500 years.

How often the hand of the clock advances depends on the language of the ciphers on the quadrant. The Chinese speak of five stages in sprouting, and dawn approaches in seven steps for the Arabs. If I were to describe the evolution of *homo economicus* from Mandeville to Marx or Galbraith, I would come to a different view of epochs than if I had a mind to outline the stages in which the ideology of *homo educandus* developed from Nebrija through Radke to Comenius. And again, within this same paradigm, a different set of turning points would best describe the decay of untutored learning and the route toward the inescapable miseducation that educational institutions necessarily dispense.

It took a good decade to recognize that Columbus had found a new hemisphere, not just a new route. It took much longer to invent the concept "New World" for the continent whose existence he had denied.

A full century and a half separated the claim of Nebrija — in the queen's service he had to teach all her subjects to speak — and the claim of John Amos Comenius — the possession of a method by which an army of schoolteachers would teach

everybody everything perfectly.

By the time of Comenius (1592 - 1670), the ruling groups of both the Old and New Worlds were deeply convinced of the need for such a method. An incident in the history of Harvard College aptly illustrates the point. On the one hundred and fiftieth birthday of Nebrija's grammar, John Winthrop, Jr., was on his way to Europe searching for a theologian and educator to accept the presidency of Harvard. One of the first persons he approached was the Czech Comenius, leader and last bishop of the Moravian Church. Winthrop found him in London, where he was organizing the Royal Society and advising the government on public schools. In *Magna Didactica, vel Ars Omnibus Omnia Omnino Docendi*, Comenius had succinctly defined the goals of his profession. Education begins in the womb, and does not end until death. Whatever is worth knowing is worth teaching by a special method appropriate to the subject. The preferred world is the one so organized that it functions as a school for all. Only if learning is the result of teaching can individuals be raised to the fullness of their humanity. People who learn without being taught are more like animals than men. And the school system must be so organized that all, old and young, rich and poor, noble and low, men and women, be taught effectively, not just symbolically and ostentatiously.

These are the thoughts written by the potential president of Harvard. But he never crossed the Atlantic. By the time Winthrop met him, he had already accepted the invitation of the Swedish government to organize a national system of schools for Queen Christina. Unlike Nebrija, he never had to argue the need for his services — they were always in great demand. The domain of the vernacular, considered untouchable by Isabella, had become the hunting ground for job-seeking Spanish *letrados*, Jesuits, and Massachusetts divines. A sphere of formal education had been disembedded. Formally taught mother tongue professionally handled according to abstract rules had begun to compare with and encroach upon

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the vernacular. This gradual replacement and degradation of the vernacular by its costly counterpart heralds the coming of the market-intensive society in which we now live.

THE DECLINE OF VERNACULAR VALUES

Vernacular comes from an Indo-Germanic root that implies "rootedness" and "abode." *Vernaculum* as a Latin word was used for whatever was homebred, homespun, homegrown, homemade, as opposed to what was obtained in formal exchange. The child of one's slave and of one's wife, the donkey born of one's own beast, were vernacular beings, as was the staple that came from the garden or the commons. If Karl Polanyi had adverted to this fact, he might have used the term in the meaning accepted by the ancient Romans: sustenance derived from reciprocity patterns imbedded in every aspect of life, as distinguished from sustenance that comes from exchange or from vertical distribution.

Vernacular was used in this general sense from preclassical times down to the technical formulations found in the Codex of Theodosius. It was Varro who picked the term to introduce the same distinction in language. For him, vernacular speech is made up of the words and patterns grown on the speaker's own ground, as opposed to what is grown elsewhere and then transported. And since Varro's authority was widely recognized, his definition stuck. He was the librarian of both Caesar and Augustus and the first Roman to attempt a thorough and critical study of the Latin language. His *Lingua Latina* was a basic reference book for centuries. Quintillian admired him as the most learned of all Romans. And Quintillian, the Spanish-born drill master for the future senators of Rome, is always proposed to normal students as one of the founders of their profession. But neither can be compared to Nebrija. Both Varro and Quintillian were concerned with shaping the speech of senators and scribes, the speech of the forum; Nebrija with the language of the common man who could read and listen to readings. Simply, Nebrija proposed to substitute a mother tongue for the vernacular.

Vernacular came into English in the one restricted sense to which Varro had confined its meaning. Just now, I would like to resuscitate some of its old breath. We need a simple, straightforward word to designate the activities of people when they are not motivated by thoughts of exchange, a word that denotes autonomous, non-market related actions through which people satisfy everyday needs — the actions that by their very nature escape bureaucratic control, satisfying needs to which, in the very process, they give specific shape. Vernacular seems a good old word for this purpose, and should be acceptable to many contemporaries. There are technical words that designate the satisfaction of needs that economists do not or cannot measure — social production as opposed to economic production,

the generation of use-values as opposed to the production of commodities, household economics as opposed to market economics. But these terms are specialized, tainted with some ideological prejudice, and each, in a different way, badly limps. Each contrasting pair of terms, in its own way, also fosters the confusion that assigns vernacular undertakings to unpaid, standardized, formalized activities. It is this kind of confusion I wish to clarify. We need a simple adjective to name those acts of competence, lust, or concern that we want to defend from measurement or manipulation by Chicago Boys and Socialist Commissars. The term must be broad enough to fit the preparation of food and the shaping of language, childbirth, and recreation, without implying either a privatized activity akin to the housework of modern women, a hobby or an irrational and primitive procedure. Such an adjective is not at hand. But vernacular might serve. By speaking about vernacular language and the possibility of its recuperation, I am trying to bring into awareness and discussion the existence of a vernacular mode of being, doing, and making that in a desirable future society might again expand in all aspects of life.

Mother tongue, since the term was first used, has never meant the vernacular, but rather its contrary. The term was first used by Catholic monks to designate a particular language they used, instead of Latin, when speaking from the pulpit. No Indo-Germanic culture before had used the term. The word was introduced into Sanskrit in the eighteenth century as a translation from the English. The term has no roots in the other major language families now spoken on which I could check. The only classical people who viewed their homeland as a kind of mother were the Cretans. Bachofen suggests that memories of an old matriarchal order still lingered in their culture. But even in Crete, there was no equivalent to "mother" tongue. To trace the association which led to the term mother tongue, I shall first have to look at what happened at the court of Charlemagne, and then what happened later in the Abbey of Gorz.

The idea that humans are born in such fashion that they need institutional service from professional agents in order to reach that humanity for which by birth all people are destined can be traced down to Carolingian times. It was then that, for the first time in history, it was discovered that there are certain basic needs, needs that are universal to mankind and that cry out for satisfaction in a standard fashion that cannot be met in a vernacular way. The discovery is perhaps best associated with the Church reform that took place in the eighth century. The Scottish monk Alcuin, the former chancellor of York University who became the court philosopher of Charles the Great, played a prominent role in this reform. Up to that time the Church had considered its ministers primarily as priests, that is, as men selected and invested with special powers to meet communitary, liturgical, public needs. They were engaged in preaching at ritual occasions and had to

preside at functions. They acted as public officials, analogous to those others through whom the state provided for the administration of justice, or, in Roman times, for public work. To think of these kinds of magistrates as if they were "service professionals" would be an anachronistic projection of our contemporary categories.

But then, from the eighth century on, the classical priest rooted in Roman and Hellenistic models began to be transmogrified into the precursor of the service professional: the teacher, social worker, or educator. Church ministers began to cater to the personal needs of parishioners, and to equip themselves with a sacramental and pastoral theology that defined and established these needs for their regular service. The institutionally defined care of the individual, the family, the village community, acquires unprecedented prominence. The term "holy mother the church" ceases almost totally to mean the actual assembly of the faithful whose love, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, engenders new life in the very act of meeting. The term mother henceforth refers to an invisible, mystical reality from which alone those services absolutely necessary for salvation can be obtained. Henceforth, access to the good graces of this mother on whom universally necessary salvation depends is entirely controlled by a hierarchy of ordained males. This gender-specific mythology of male hierarchies mediating access to the institutional source of life is without precedent. From the ninth to the eleventh century, the idea took shape that there are some needs common to all human beings that can be satisfied only through service from professional agents. Thus the definition of needs in terms of professionally defined commodities in the service sector precedes by a millennium the industrial production of universally needed basic goods.

Thirty-five years ago, Lewis Mumford tried to make this point. When I first read his statement that the monastic reform of the ninth century created some of the basic assumptions on which the industrial system is founded, I could not be convinced by something I considered more of an intuition than a proof. In the meantime, though, I have found a host of converging arguments — most of which Mumford does not seem to suspect — for rooting the ideologies of the industrial age in the earlier Carolingian Renaissance. The idea that there is no salvation without personal services provided by professionals in the name of an institutional Mother Church is one of these formerly unnoticed developments without which, again, our own age would be unthinkable. True, it took five hundred years of medieval theology to elaborate on this concept. Only by the end of the Middle Ages would the pastoral self-image of the Church be fully rounded. And only in the Council of Trent (1545) would this self-image of the Church as a mother milked by clerical hierarchies become formally defined. Then, in the Constitution of the Second Vatican Council (1964), the Catholic Church, which had served in the past as the prime model for the evolution of secular service organizations, aligns itself explicitly in the image of its secular imitations.

The important point here is the notion that the clergy can define its services as needs of human nature, and make this service-commodity the kind of necessity that cannot be forgone without jeopardy to eternal life. It is in this ability of a nonhereditary elite that we ought to locate the foundation without which the contemporary service or welfare state would not be conceivable. Surprisingly little research has been done on the religious concepts that fundamentally distinguish the industrial age from all other epochs. The official decline of the vernacular conception of Christian life in favor of one organized around pastoral care is complex and drawn-out process constituting the background for a set of consistent shifts in the language and institutional development of the West.

When Europe first began to take shape as an idea and as a political reality, between Merovingian times and the High Middle Ages, what people spoke was unproblematic. It was called "romance" or "theodisc" — peoplish. Only somewhat later, *lingua vulgaris* became the common denominator distinguishing popular speech from the Latin of administration and doctrine. Since Roman times, a person's first language was the *patrius sermo*, the language of the male head of the household. Each such *sermo* or speech was perceived as a separate language. Neither in ancient Greece nor in the Middle Ages did people make the modern distinction between mutually understandable dialects and different languages. The same holds true today, for example, at the grass roots in India. What we know today as monolingual communities were and, in fact, are exceptions. From the Balkans to Indochina's western frontiers, it is still rare to find a village in which one cannot get along in more than two or three tongues. While it is assumed that each person has his *patrius sermo*, it is equally taken for granted that most persons speak several "vulgar" tongues, each in a vernacular, untaught way. Thus the vernacular, in opposition to specialized, learned language — Latin for the Church, Frankish for the Court — was as obvious in its variety as the taste of local wines and food, as the shapes of house and hoe, down to the eleventh century. It is at this moment, quite suddenly, that the term mother tongue appears. It shows up in the sermons of some monks from the Abbey of Gorz. The process by which this phenomenon turns vernacular speech into a moral issue can only be touched upon here.

Gorz was a mother abbey in Lorraine, not far from Verdun. Benedictine monks had founded the monastery in the eighth century, around bones believed to belong to Saint Gorgonius. During the ninth century, a time of widespread decay in ecclesiastical discipline, Gorz, too, suffered a notorious decline. But only three generations after such scandalous dissolution Gorz became the center of monastic reform in the Germanic areas of the Empire. Its reinvigoration of Cistercian life paralleled the work of the reform abbey of Cluny. Within a century, 160 daughter abbeys throughout the northeastern parts of central Europe were established from Gorz.

It seems quite probable that Gorz was then at the

center of the diffusion of a new technology that was crucial for the later imperial expansion of the European powers: the transformation of the horse into the tractor of choice. Four Asiatic inventions – the horseshoe, the fixed saddle and stirrup, the bit, and the cummet (the collar resting on the shoulder) – permitted important and extensive changes. One horse could replace six oxen. While supplying the same traction, and more speed, a horse could be fed on the acreage needed for one yoke of oxen. Because of its speed, the horse permitted a more extensive cultivation of the wet, northern soils, in spite of the short summers. Also, greater rotation of crops was possible. But even more importantly, the peasant could now tend fields twice as far away from his dwelling. A new pattern of life became possible. Formerly, people had lived in clusters of homesteads; now they could form villages large enough to support a parish and, later, a school. Through dozens of abbeys, monastic learning and discipline, together with the reorganization of settlement patterns, spread throughout this part of Europe.

Gorz lies close to the line that divides Frankish from Romance types of vernacular, and some monks from Cluny began to cross this line. In these circumstances, the monks of Gorz made language, vernacular language, into an issue to defend their territorial claims. The monks began to preach in Frankish, and spoke specifically about the value of the Frankish tongue. They began to use the pulpit as a forum to stress the importance of language itself, perhaps even to teach it. From the little we know, they used at least two approaches. First, Frankish was the language spoken by the women, even in those areas where the men were already beginning to use a Romance vernacular. Second, it was the language now used by Mother Church.

How charged with sacred meanings motherhood was in the religiosity of the twelfth century one can grasp through contemplating the contemporary statues of the Virgin Mary, or from reading the liturgical Sequences, the poetry of the time. The term mother tongue, from its very first use, instrumentalizes everyday language in the service of an institutional cause. The word was translated from Frankish into Latin. Then, as a rare Latin term, it incubated for several centuries. In the decades before Luther, quite suddenly and dramatically, mother tongue acquired a strong meaning. It came to mean the language created by Luther in order to translate the Hebrew Bible, the language taught by schoolmasters to read that book, and then the language that justified the existence of nation states. Today, "mother tongue" means several things: the first language learned by the child, and the language which the authorities of the state have decided ought to be one's first language. Thus, mother tongue can mean the first language picked up at random, generally a very different speech than the one taught by paid educators and by parents who act as if they were such educators. We see, then, that people are considered as creatures who need to be taught to speak properly in order "to communicate" in the modern world

– as they need to be wheeled about in motorized carriages in order to move in modern landscapes – their feet no longer fit. Dependence on taught mother tongue can be taken as the paradigm of all other dependencies typical of humans in an age of commodity-defined needs. And the ideology of this dependence was formulated by Nebrija. The ideology which claims that human mobility depends not on feet and open frontiers, but on the availability of "transportation" is only slightly more than a hundred years old. Language teaching created employment long ago; macadam and the suspended coach made the conveyance of people a big business only from about the middle of the 18th century.

As language teaching has become a job, it has begun to cost a lot of money. Words are now one of the two largest categories of marketed values that make up the gross national product (GNP). Money decides what shall be said, who shall say it, when and what kind of people shall be targeted for the messages. The higher the cost of each uttered word, the more determined the echo demanded. In schools people learn to speak as they should. Money is spent to make the poor speak more like the wealthy, the sick more like the healthy, and the minority more like the majority. We pay to improve, correct, enrich, update the language of children and of their teachers. We spend more on the professional jargons that are taught in college, and more yet in high schools to give teenagers a smattering of these jargons; but just enough to make them feel dependent on the psychologist, druggist, or librarian who is fluent in some special kind of English. We go even further: we first allow standard language to degrade ethnic, black, or hillbilly language, and then spend money to teach their counterfeits as academic subjects. Administrators and entertainers, admen and newsmen, ethnic politicians and "radical" professionals, form powerful interest groups, each fighting for a larger slice of the language pie.

I do not really know how much is spent in the United States to make words. But soon someone will provide us with the necessary statistical tables. Ten years ago, energy accounting was almost unthinkable. Now it has become an established practice. Today you can easily look up how many "energy units" have gone into growing, harvesting, packaging, transporting, and merchandising one edible calory of bread. The difference between the bread produced and eaten in a village in Greece and that found in an American supermarket is enormous – about forty times more energy units are contained in each edible calory of the latter. Bicycle traffic in cities permits one to move four times as fast as on foot for one-fourth of the energy expended – while cars, for the same progress, need 150 times as many calories per passenger mile. Information of this kind was available ten years ago, but no one thought about it. Today, it is recorded and will soon lead to a change in people's outlook on the need for fuels. It would now be interesting to know what language accounting looks like, since the linguistic analysis of contemporary language is certainly not complete, unless for each group of speakers we

know the amount of money spent on shaping the speech of the average person. Just as social energy accounts are only approximate and at best allow us to identify the orders of magnitude within which the relative values are found, so language accounting would provide us with data on the relative prevalence of standardized, taught language in a population — sufficient, however, for the argument I want to make.

But mere per capita expenditure employed to mold the language of a group of speakers does not tell us enough. No doubt we would learn that each paid word addressed to the rich costs, per capita, much more than words addressed to the poor. Watts are actually more democratic than words. But taught language comes in a vast range of qualities. The poor, for instance, are much more blared at than the rich, who can buy tutoring and, what is more precious, hedge on their own high class vernacular by purchasing silence. The educator, politician and entertainer now come with a loudspeaker to Oaxaca, to Trancore, to the Chinese commune, and the poor immediately forfeit the claim to that indispensable luxury, the silence out of which vernacular language arises.

Yet even without putting a price tag on silence, even without the more detailed language economics on which I would like to draw, I can still estimate that the dollars spent to power any nation's motors pale before those that are now expended on prostituting speech in the mouth of paid speakers. In rich nations, language has become incredibly spongy, absorbing huge investments. High expenditures to cultivate the language of the mandarin, the author, the actor, or the charmer have always been a mark of high civilization. But these were efforts to teach elites special codes. Even the cost of making some people learn secret languages in traditional societies is incomparably lower than the capitalization of language in industrial societies.

In poor countries today, people still speak to each other without the experience of capitalized language, although such countries always contain a tiny elite who manage very well to allocate a larger proportion of the national income for their prestige language. Let me ask: What is different in the everyday speech of groups whose language has received — or shall I say absorbed? resisted? survived? suffered? enjoyed? — huge investments, and the speech of people whose language has remained outside the market? Comparing these two worlds of language, I want to focus my curiosity on just one issue that arises in this context. Does the structure and function of the language itself change with the rate of investment? Are these alterations such that all languages that absorb funds show changes in the same direction? In this introductory exploration of the subject, I cannot demonstrate that this is the case. But I do believe my arguments make both propositions highly probable, and show that structurally oriented language economics are worth exploring. Taught everyday language is without precedent in preindustrial cultures. The current dependence on

paid teachers and models of ordinary speech is just as much a unique characteristic of industrial economies as dependence on fossil fuels. The need for taught mother tongue was discovered four centuries earlier, but only in our generation have both language and energy been effectively treated as worldwide needs to be satisfied for all people by planned, programmed production and distribution. Because, unlike the vernacular of capitalized language we can reasonably say that it results from production.

Traditional cultures subsisted on sunshine, which was captured mostly through agriculture. The hoe, the ditch, the yoke, were basic means to harness the sun. Large sails or waterwheels were known, but rare. These cultures that lived mostly on the sun subsisted basically on vernacular values. In such societies, tools were essentially the prolongation of arms, fingers, and legs. There was no need for the production of power in centralized plants and its distant distribution to clients. Equally, in these essentially sun-powered cultures, there was no need for language production. Language was drawn by each one from the cultural environment, learned from the encounter with people whom the learner could smell and touch, love or hate. The vernacular spread just as most things and services were shared, namely, by multiple forms of mutual reciprocity, rather than clientage to the appointed teacher or professional. Just as fuel was not delivered, so the vernacular was never taught. Taught tongues did exist, but they were rare, as rare as sails and silks. In most cultures, we know that speech resulted from conversation embedded in everyday life, from listening to fights and lullabies, gossip, stories, and dreams. Even today, the majority of people in poor countries learn all their language skills without any paid tutorship, without any attempt whatsoever to teach them how to speak. And they learn to speak in a way that nowhere compares with the self-conscious, self-important, colorless mumbling that, after a long stay in villages in South America and Southeast Asia, always shocks me when I visit an American college. I feel sorrow for those students whom education has made tone deaf; they have lost the faculty for hearing the difference between the dessicated utterance of standard television English and the living speech of the unschooled. What else can I expect, though, from people who are not brought up at a mother's breast, but on formula? — on tinned milk, if they are from poor families, and on a brew prepared under the nose of Ralph Nader if they are born among the enlightened? For people trained to choose between packaged formulas, mother's breast appears as just one more option. And in the same way, for people who were intentionally taught to listen and to speak, untutored vernacular seems just like another, albeit less developed, model among many. But this is simply false. Language exempt from rational tutorship is a different kind of social phenomenon from language that is purposefully taught. Where untutored language is the predominant marker of a shared world, a sense of power within the group exists, and this sense cannot be duplicated by language that is delivered.

One way this difference shows is the sense of power over language itself, over its acquisition. Even today, the poor in nonindustrial countries all over the world are polyglot. My friend, the goldsmith in Timbuktu, speaks Songhay at home, listens to Bambara on the radio, devotedly and with some understanding says his prayers five times a day in Arabic, gets along in two trade languages on the Souk, converses in passable French that he picked up in the army — and none of these languages was formally taught him. He did not set out to learn these tongues; each is one style in which he remembers a peculiar set of experiences that fits into the frame of that language. Communities in which monolingual people prevail are rare except in three kinds of settings: tribal communities that have not really experienced the late neolithic, communities that for a long time lived through exceptional forms of discrimination, and among the citizens of nation-states that, for several generations, have enjoyed the benefits of compulsory schooling. To take it for granted that most people are monolingual is typical of the members of the middle class. Admiration for the vernacular polyglot unfailingly exposes the social climber.

Throughout history, untutored language was prevalent, but hardly ever the only kind of language known. Just as in traditional cultures some energy was captured through windmills and canals, and those who had large boats or those who cornered the right spot on the brook could use their tool for a net transfer of power to their own advantage, so some people have always used a taught language to corner some privilege. But such additional codes remained either rare and special, or served very narrow purposes. The ordinary language, until Nebrija, was prevalently vernacular. And this vernacular, be it the ordinary colloquial, a trade idiom, the language of prayer, the craft jargon, the language of basic accounts, the language of ventry or of age (for example, baby talk) was learned on the side, as part of meaningful everyday life. Of course, Latin or Sanskrit were formally taught to the priest, court languages such as Frankish or Persian or Turkish were taught to the future scribe. Neophytes were formally initiated into the language of astronomy, alchemy, or late masonry. And, clearly, the knowledge of such formally taught languages raised a man above others, somewhat like the saddle lifts the free man above the serf in the infantry, or the bridge lifts the captain above the crew. But even when access to some elite language was unlocked by a formal initiation, it did not necessarily mean that language was being taught. Quite frequently, the process of formal initiation did not transfer to the initiate a new language skill, but simply exempted him henceforth from a tabu that forbade others to use certain words, or to speak out on certain occasions. Male initiation in the language of the hunt or of sex is probably the most widespread example of such a ritually selective language detabuization.

But, in traditional societies, no matter how much or how little language was taught, the taught language rarely rubbed off on vernacular speech. Neither the existence of some language teaching

at all times nor the spread of some language through professional preachers or comedians weakens my main point: Outside of those societies that we now call Modern European, no attempt was made to impose on entire populations an everyday language that would be subject to the control of paid teachers or announcers. Everyday language, until recently, was nowhere the product of design; it was nowhere paid for and delivered like a commodity. And while every historian who deals with the origins of nation-states pays attention to the imposition of a national tongue, economists generally overlook the fact that this taught mother tongue is the earliest of specifically modern commodities, the model of all "basic needs" to come.

Before I can go on to contrast taught colloquial speech and vernacular speech, costly language and that which comes at no cost, I must clarify one more distinction. Between taught mother tongue and the vernacular I draw the line of demarcation somewhere else than linguists when they distinguish the high language of an elite from the dialect spoken in lower classes, somewhere other than the frontier that separates regional and superregional languages, somewhere else than restricted and corrected code, and somewhere else than at the line between the language of the literate and the illiterate. No matter how restricted within geographic boundaries, no matter how distinctive for a social level, no matter how specialized for one sex role or one caste, language can be either vernacular (in the sense in which I here use the term) or of the taught variety. Elite language, trade language, second language, local idiom, are nothing new. But each of these can be formally taught and the taught counterfeit of the vernacular comes as a commodity and is something entirely new.

The contrast between these two complementary forms is most marked and important in taught everyday language, that is, taught colloquial, taught standardized everyday speech. But here again we must avoid confusion. Not all standard language is either grammar-ridden or taught. In all of history, one mutually understandable dialect has tended toward predominance in a given region. This kind of principal dialect was often accepted as the standard form. It was indeed written more frequently than other dialects, but not, for that reason, was it taught. Rather, diffusion occurred through a much more complex and subtle process. Midland English, for example, slowly emerged as that second, common style in which people born into any English dialect could also speak their own tongue. Quite suddenly, the language of Mogul hordes (Urdu) came into being in northern India. Within two generations, it became the standard in Hindustan, the trade language in a vast area, and the medium for exquisite poetry written in the Arabic and Sanskrit alphabets. Not only was this language not taught for several generations, but poets who wanted to perfect their competence explicitly avoided the study of Hindu-Urdu; they explored the Persian, Arabic, or Sanskrit sources that had originally contributed to its being. In Indonesia, in half a generation of

resistance to Japanese and Dutch, the militant fraternal and combative slogans, posters, and secret radios of the freedom struggle spread Malay competence into every village, and did so much more effectively than the later efforts of the ministry of Language Control that was established after independence.

It is true that the dominant position of elite or standard language was always bolstered by the technique of writing. Printing enormously enhanced the colonizing power of elite language. But to say that because printing was invented elite language is destined to supplant vernacular variety results from a debilitated imagination — like saying that after the atom bomb only super powers shall be sovereign. The historical monopoly of educational bureaucracies over the printing press is no argument that printing techniques cannot be used to give new vitality to written expression and new literary opportunity to thousands of vernacular forms. The fact that the printing press could augment the extent and power of ungovernable vernacular readings was the source of Nebrija's greatest concern and of his argument against the vernacular. The fact that printing was used since the early 16th century (but not during the first forty years of its existence) primarily for the imposition of standard colloquials does not mean that printed language must always be a taught form. The commercial status of taught mother tongue, call it national language, literary standard, or television language, rests largely on unexamined axioms, some of which I have already mentioned: that printing implies standardized composition; that books written in the standard language could not be easily read by people who have not been schooled in that tongue; that reading is by its very nature a silent activity that usually should be conducted in private; that enforcing a universal ability to read a few sentences and then copy them in writing increases the access of a population to the content of libraries: these and other such illusions are used to enhance the standing of teachers, the sale of rotary presses, the grading of people according to their language code and, up to now, an increase in the GNP.

Vernacular spreads by practical use; it is learned from people who mean what they say and who say what they mean to the person they address in the context of everyday life. This is not so in taught language. With taught language, the one from whom I learn is not a person whom I care for or dislike, but a professional speaker. The model for taught colloquial is somebody who does not say what he means, but who recites what others have contrived. In this sense, a street vendor announcing his wares in ritual language is not a professional speaker, while the king's herald or the clown on television are the prototypes.

Taught colloquial is the language of the announcer who follows the script that an editor was told by a publicist that a board of directors had decided should be said. Taught colloquial is the dead, impersonal rhetoric of people paid to declaim with phony conviction texts composed by others, who themselves are usually paid only for designing the text. People who speak taught language imitate the announcer of news, the comedian of gag writers, the instructor following the teacher's manual to

explain the textbook, the songster of engineered rhymes, or the ghost-written president. This is language that implicitly lies when I use it to say something to your face; it is meant for the spectator who watches the scene. It is the language of farce, not of theater, the language of the hack, not of the true performer. The language of media always seeks the appropriate audience profile that the sponsor tries to hit and to hit hard. While the vernacular is engendered in me by the intercourse between complete persons locked in conversation with each other, taught language is syntonic with loud speakers whose assigned job is gab.

The vernacular and taught mother tongue are like the two extremes on the spectrum of the colloquial. Language would be totally inhuman if it were totally taught. That is what Humboldt meant when he said that real language is speech that can only be fostered, never taught like mathematics. Speech is much more than communication, and only machines can communicate without reference to vernacular roots. Their chatter with one another in New York now takes up about three-quarters of the lines that the telephone company operates under a franchise that guarantees access by people. This is an obvious perversion of a legal privilege that results from political aggrandizement and the degradation of vernacular domains to second-class commodities. But even more embarrassing and depressing than this abuse of a forum of free speech by robots is the incidence of robot-like stock phrases that blight the remaining lines on which people presumably "speak" to each other. A growing percentage of speech has become mere formula in content and style. In this way, the colloquial moves on the spectrum of language increasingly from vernacular to capital-intensive "communication," as if it were nothing more than the human variety of the exchange that also goes on between bees, whales, and computers. True, some vernacular elements or aspects always survive — but that is true even for most computer programs. I do not claim that the vernacular dies; only that it withers. The American, French, or German colloquials have become composites made up of two kinds of language: commoditylike taught unquack and a limping, ragged, jerky vernacular struggling to survive. Taught mother tongue has established a radical monopoly over speech, just as transportation has over mobility or, more generally, commodity over vernacular values.

A resistance, sometimes as strong as a sacred tabu, prevents people shaped by life in industrial society from recognizing the difference with which we are dealing — the difference between capitalized language and the vernacular, which comes at no economically measurable cost. It is the same kind of inhibition that makes it difficult for those who are brought up within the industrial system to sense the fundamental distinction between nurture from the breast and feeding by bottle, between literature and textbook, between a mile moved on my own and a passenger mile — areas where I have discussed this issue over the past years.

Most people would probably be willing to admit that there is a huge difference in taste, meaning,

and satisfaction between a home-cooked meal and a TV dinner. But the examination and understanding of this difference can be easily blocked, especially among those committed to equal rights, equity and service to the poor. They know how many mothers have no milk in their breasts, how many children in the South Bronx suffer protein deficiencies, how many Mexicans — surrounded by fruit trees — are crippled by vitamin deficits. As soon as I raise the distinction between vernacular values and values susceptible of economic measurement and, therefore, of being administered, some self-appointed tutor of the so-called proletariat will tell me that I am avoiding the critical issue by giving importance to noneconomic niceties. Should we not seek first the just distribution of commodities that correlate to basic needs? Poetry and fishing shall then be added without more thought or effort. So goes the reading of Marx and the Gospel of St. Matthew as interpreted by the theology of liberation.

A laudable intention here attempts an argument that should have been recognized as illogical in the nineteenth century, and that countless experiences have shown false in the twentieth. So far, every single attempt to substitute a universal commodity for a vernacular value has led, not to equality, but to a hierarchical modernization of poverty. In the new dispensation, the poor are no longer those who survive by their vernacular activities because they have only marginal or no access to the market. No, the modernized poor are those whose vernacular domain, in speech and in action, is most restricted — those who get least satisfaction out of the few vernacular activities in which they can still engage.

The second-level tabu which I have set out to violate is not constituted by the distinction between the vernacular and taught mother tongue, nor by the destruction of the vernacular through the radical monopoly of taught mother tongue over speech, nor even by the class-biased intensity of this vernacular paralysis. Although these three matters are far from being clearly understood today, they have been widely discussed in the recent past. The point at issue which is sedulously overlooked is quite other: Mother tongue is taught increasingly, not by paid agents, but by unpaid parents. These latter deprive their own children of the last opportunity to listen to adults who have something to say to each other. This was brought home to me clearly, some time ago, while back in New York City in an area that a few decades earlier I had known quite well, the South Bronx. I went there at the request of a young college teacher, married to a colleague. This man wanted my signature on a petition for compensatory prekindergarten language training for the inhabitants of a partially burnt-out, high-rise slum. Twice already, quite decidedly and yet with deep embarrassment, I had refused. To overcome my resistance against this expansion of educational services, he took me on visits to brown, white, black, mostly single-parent so-called households. I saw dozens of children

dashing through uninhabitable cement corridors, exposed all day to blaring television and radio in English, Spanish and even Yiddish. They seemed equally lost in language and landscape. As my friend pressed for my signature, I tried to argue for the protection of these children against further castration and inclusion in the educational sphere. We talked at cross-purposes, unable to meet. And then, in the evening, at dinner in my friend's home, I suddenly understood why. This man, whom I viewed with awe because he had chosen to live in this hell, had ceased to be a parent and had become a total teacher. In front of their own children this couple stood *in loco magistri*. Their children had to grow up without parents, because these two adults, in every word they addressed to their two sons and one daughter, were "educating" them — they were at dinner constantly conscious that they were modeling the speech of their children, and asked me to do the same.

For the professional parent who engenders children as a professional lover, who volunteers his semi-professional counselling skills for neighborhood organizations, the distinction between his unpaid contribution to the managed society and what could be, in contrast, the recovery of vernacular domains, remains meaningless. He is fit prey for a new type of growth-oriented ideology — the planning and organization of an expanding shadow economy, the last frontier of arrogance which *homo economicus* faces. ■

left soft
vernacular hard
right industrial

Gov. Moonbeam Has Landed

By MIKE ROYKO

NEW YORK—I don't think many people noticed, but somebody finally made a highly intelligent speech to the Democratic Convention. It dealt with issues that haven't been talked about. It avoided most of the tired cliches that the speakers were tossing around the podium.

And it passed almost unnoticed, which is what usually happens to any thoughtful observation made at a political convention.

No, the speech was not made by Ted Kennedy. He specializes in grandiose spending plans, pie-in-the-sky social benefits and sentimental slop that dulls the mind.

Nor was it made by Jimmy Carter. Carter is capable of saying something smart, but the challenge of trying to keep Ted Kennedy from wrecking his candidacy and the Democratic Party is almost more than Carter can handle at one time.

The speech was made by Jerry Brown, governor of California, who is sometimes referred to as "Governor Moonbeam."

I have to admit that I gave him that unhappy label. I'm sorry I did it, because the more I see of Brown, the more I am convinced that he has been the only Democrat in this year's politics who understands what the country will be up against in the future.

That's been Brown's problem as a national candidate. He won't talk about creating millions of make-work jobs, spending billions of dollars, following economic policies that will lead to even higher inflation, and getting involved in a mad arms race that will probably blow us all up. He won't pandering to organized labor, tell a well-fed and materialistic America that it is deprived, or try to convince voters that only the federal government is capable of solving our problems.

So what did Brown talk about?

Strange things, by the political standards of this convention. You could tell they were strange by the way the delegates became glassy-eyed or drifted into conversational groups. And by the way the networks became itchy and looked for people to interview while Brown was talking.

The delegates didn't know how to react when Brown said:

"It is not the time for a candidate and party that believe the only long-term threat to our survival comes from one particular nation 5,000 miles away. Rather, it is time for a candidate and party which sense the profound change to be wrought by the addition of 2 billion new citizens to this earth within the next 20 years."

Some delegates appeared confused when he went on to say:

"It is time to redirect the vast pension funds of this nation to more socially responsible objectives. There are \$650 billion in deferred wages, earned by the working men

and women of this country. This is the single most significant source of investment capital for the decade of the '80s."

A few moments later, he said:

"As a small minority of the world's population, we must live by our wits, think better and work harder. We cannot sustain a way of life that uses one-third of the world's basic resources for but a few percent of its people. But we can invent new ways to live better. We can learn to place quality above quantity and caring above consumption."

People just don't talk that way at political conventions: Make do with less? Quality? Quantity? Less greed and selfishness? That's the way most of us have to live, but it isn't the kind of political rhetoric that brings standing ovations. Which Brown didn't get.

And he thoroughly confused most of his listeners when he went into this view of America's future:

"I share your dream that all Americans can advance together, but that we do so in a form of regional interdependence. I see a type of common market or economic community that will bring along with us our brothers and sisters who share this land of North America. Mexicans, Canadians, Native Americans—North and South—all are part of our destiny and it is time that we recognize that we are part of theirs.

"We are a country that is growing older and diminishing in size in relation to the exploding populations of Mexico, Africa, Asia and South America. We must see our challenge as not only East-West, capitalist-communist, liberty-tyranny. But also we must see the challenge as North-South, dark and fair skin, rich and poor, hungry and well-fed, equality and inequality.

"Even if the American people give Ronald Reagan his Kemp-Roth tax cuts, his nuclear bombs, his breeder reactors, and his superiority over Russian imperialism, I say it will be as verbal cellophane and an empty symbol when marshaled against the outraged enmity of the emerging one billion hungry people. Without hope, their last refuge will be revolution, anarchy and terrorism.

"In a world made small by jets and satellite communication, our oceans and our missiles will not protect us if we separate ourselves from the wider longing of humanity.

"Liberty for us? Certainly it is our most precious possession. But also justice for all, wherever on this earth. That can become the dream of tomorrow."

I hope Brown is still around in 1984. I think the moonbeam has landed with his feet on the ground. □

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