

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

S. I. HAYAKAWA

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH
ILLINOIS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY



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A STORY WITH A MORAL

ONCE upon a time (said the Professor), there were two small communities, spiritually as well as geographically situated at a considerable distance from each other. They had, however, these problems in common: both were hard hit by the depression, so that in each of the towns there were about one hundred heads of families unemployed. There was, to be sure, enough food for them available, enough clothing, enough materials for housing, but these families simply did not have money to procure these necessities.

The city fathers of A-town, the first community, were substantial businessmen, moderately well educated, good to their families, kindhearted, and "sound-thinking." The unemployed tried hard, as unemployed people usually do, to find jobs; but the situation did not improve. The city fathers, as well as the unemployed themselves, had been brought up to believe that there is always enough work for everyone, if you only look for it hard enough. Comforting themselves with this doctrine, the city fathers could have shrugged their shoulders and turned their backs on the problem, except for the fact that they were genuinely kindhearted men. They could not bear to see the unemployed men and their wives and children starving. In order to prevent starvation, they felt

that they had to provide these people with some means of sustenance. Their principles told them, nevertheless, that if people were "given something for nothing," it would "demoralize their character." Naturally, this made the city fathers even more unhappy, because they were faced with the horrible choice of (1) letting the unemployed starve, or (2) destroying their moral character.

The solution they finally hit upon, after much debate and soul-searching, was this. They decided to give the unemployed families "relief" of fifty dollars a month, but to insure against the "pauperization" of the recipients, they decided that this fifty dollars was to be accompanied by a moral lesson, to wit: the obtaining of the assistance would be made so difficult, humiliating, and disagreeable that there would be no temptation for anyone to go through the process unless it was absolutely necessary; the moral disapproval of the community would be turned upon the recipients of the money at all times in such a way that they would try hard to get "off relief" and regain their "self-respect." Some even proposed that people "on relief" be denied the vote, so that the moral lesson would be more deeply impressed upon them. Others suggested that their names be published at regular intervals in the newspapers, so that there would be a strong incentive to get "off relief." The city fathers had enough faith in the goodness of human nature to ex-

pect that the recipients would be "grateful," since they were "getting something for nothing," something which they "hadn't worked for."

When the plan was put into operation, however, the recipients of the "relief" checks proved to be an ungrateful, ugly bunch. They seemed to resent the cross-examinations and inspections at the hands of the "relief investigators," who, they said, "took advantage of a man's misery to snoop into every detail of his private life." In spite of uplifting editorials in *A-town Tribune* telling them how grateful they ought to be, the recipients of the "relief" stubbornly refused to learn any moral lessons, declaring that they were "just as good as anybody else." When, for example, they permitted themselves the rare luxury of a movie or an evening of bingo, their neighbors looked at them sourly as if to say, "I work hard and pay my taxes just in order to support bums like you in idleness and pleasure." This attitude, which was fairly characteristic of those members of the community who still had jobs, further embittered the "relief" recipients, so that they showed even less gratitude as time went on and were constantly on the lookout for insults, real or imaginary, from people who might think that they weren't "as good as anybody else." A number of them took to moping all day long, to thinking that their lives had been "failures," and finally to committing suicide. Others found that it was "hard to look their wives and

kiddies in the face," because they had "failed to provide." They all found it difficult to maintain their club and fraternal relationships, since they could not help feeling that their fellow citizens despised them for having "sunk so low." Their wives, too, were unhappy for the same reasons and gave up their social activities. Children whose parents were "on relief" felt inferior to classmates whose parents were not "public charges." Some of these children developed inferiority complexes which affected not only their grades at school, but their careers after graduation. A couple of other relief recipients, finally, felt they could stand their "loss of self-respect" no longer and decided, after many efforts to gain honest jobs, to earn money "by their own efforts," even if they had to go in for robbery. They did so and were caught and sent to the state penitentiary.

The depression, therefore, hit A-town very hard. The relief policy had averted starvation, no doubt, but suicide, personal quarrels, unhappy homes, the weakening of social organizations, the maladjustment of children, and, finally, crime, had resulted during the hard times. The town was divided in two, the "haves" and the "have-nots," so that there was "class hatred." People shook their heads sadly and declared that it all went to prove over again what they had known from the beginning, that "giving people something for nothing" inevitably "demoralizes their character." The citizens of A-town gloomily waited

for "prosperity" to return, with less and less hope as time went on.

The story of the other community, B-ville, was entirely different. B-ville was a relatively isolated town, too far out of the way to be reached by Rotary Club speakers and university extension services. One of the aldermen, however, who was something of an economist, explained to his fellow aldermen that unemployment, like sickness, accident, fire, tornado, or death, hits unexpectedly in modern society, irrespective of the victim's merits or deserts. He went on to say that B-ville's homes, parks, streets, industries, and everything else B-ville was proud of had been built in part by the work of these same people who were now unemployed. He then proposed to apply a principle of insurance: that if the work these unemployed people had previously done for the community could be regarded as a form of "premium" paid to the community against a time of misfortune, payments now made to them to prevent their starvation could be regarded as "insurance claims." He therefore proposed that all men of good repute who had worked in the community in whatever line of useful endeavor, whether as machinists, clerks, or bank managers, be regarded as "citizen policyholders," having "claims" against the city in the case of unemployment for fifty dollars a month until such time as they might again be employed. Natu-

rally, he had to talk very slowly and patiently, since the idea was entirely new to his fellow aldermen. But he described his plan as a "straight business proposition," and finally they were persuaded. They worked out the details as to the conditions under which citizens should be regarded as "policyholders" in the city's "social insurance plan" to everybody's satisfaction and decided to give checks for fifty dollars a month to the heads of each of B-ville's indigent families.

B-ville's "claim adjusters," whose duty it was to investigate the "claims" of the "citizen policyholders," had a much better time than A-town's "relief investigators." While the latter had been resentfully regarded as "snoopers," the former, having no moral lesson to teach but simply a business transaction to carry out, treated their "policyholders" with businesslike courtesy and got the same amount of information as the "relief investigators" with considerably less difficulty. There were no hard feelings. It further happened, fortunately, that news of B-ville's plans reached a liberal newspaper editor in the big city at the other end of the state. This writer described the plan in a leading feature story headed "B-VILLE LOOKS AHEAD. Great Adventure in Social Pioneering Launched by Upper Valley Community." As a result of this publicity, inquiries about the plan began to come to the city hall even before the first checks were mailed

out. This led, naturally, to a considerable feeling of pride on the part of the aldermen, who, being "boosters," felt that this was a wonderful opportunity to "put B-ville on the map."

Accordingly, the aldermen decided that instead of simply mailing out the checks as they had originally intended, they would publicly present the first checks at a monster civic ceremony. They invited the governor of the state, who was glad to come to bolster his none-too-enthusiastic support in that locality, the president of the state university, the senator from their district, and other functionaries. They decorated the National Guard armory with flags and got out the American Legion Fife and Drum Corps, the Boy Scouts, and other civic organizations. At the big celebration, each family to receive a "social insurance check" was marched up to the platform to receive it, and the governor and the mayor shook hands with each of them as they came trooping up in their best clothes. Fine speeches were made; there was much cheering and shouting; pictures of the event showing the recipients of the checks shaking hands with the mayor, and the governor patting the heads of the children, were published not only in the local papers but also in several metropolitan rotogravure sections.

Every recipient of these "insurance checks" had a feeling, therefore, that he had been personally honored, that

he lived in a "wonderful little town," and that he could face his unemployment with greater courage and assurance, since his community was "back of him." The men and women found themselves being kidded in a friendly way by their acquaintances for having been "up there with the big shots," shaking hands with the governor, etc. The children at school found themselves envied for having had their pictures in the papers. Altogether, B-ville's unemployed did not commit suicide, were not haunted by a sense of failure, did not turn to crime, did not get personal maladjustments, did not develop "class hatred," as the result of their fifty dollars a month. . . .

At the conclusion of the Professor's story, the discussion began:

"That just goes to show," said the Advertising Man, who was known among his friends as a "realistic" thinker, "what good promotional work can do. B-ville's city council had real advertising sense, and that civic ceremony was a masterpiece . . . made everyone happy . . . put over the scheme in a big way. Reminds me of the way we do things in our business: as soon as we called horse-mackerel tuna-fish, we developed a big market for it. I suppose if you called relief 'insurance,' you could actually get people to like it, couldn't you?"

"What do you mean, 'calling' it insurance?" asked the

Social Worker. "B-ville's scheme wasn't relief at all. It *was* insurance. That's what all such payments should be. What gets me is the stupidity of A-town's city council and all people like them in not realizing that what they call 'relief' is simply the payment of just claims which those unemployed have on a community."

"Good grief, man! Do you realize what you're saying?" cried the Advertising Man in surprise. "Are you implying that those people had any *right* to that money? All I said was that it's a good idea to *disguise* relief as insurance if it's going to make people any happier. But it's still relief, no matter what you *call* it. It's all right to kid the public along to reduce discontent, but we don't need to kid ourselves as well as the public!"

"But they *do* have a right to that money! They're not getting something for nothing. It's insurance. They did something for the community, and that's their prem—"

"Say, are you crazy?"

"Who's crazy?"

"You're crazy. Relief is relief, isn't it? If you'd only call things by their right names . . ."

"But, confound it, insurance is insurance, isn't it?"

(Since the gentlemen are obviously losing their tempers, it will be best to leave them. The Professor has already sneaked out. When last heard of, not only had the quarrelers stopped speaking to each other, but so had their

wives—and the Advertising Man was threatening to disinherit his son if he didn't break off his engagement with the Social Worker's daughter.)

This story has been told not to advance arguments in favor of "social insurance" or "relief" or for any other political and economic system, but simply to show a fairly characteristic sample of language in action. Do the words we use make as much difference in our lives as the story of A-town and B-ville seems to indicate? We often talk about "choosing the right words to express our thoughts," as if thinking were a process entirely independent of the words we think in. But is thinking such an independent process? Do the words we utter arise as a result of the thoughts we have, or are the thoughts we have determined by the linguistic systems we happen to have been taught?

The Advertising Man and the Social Worker seem to be agreed that the results of B-ville's program were good, so that we can assume that their notions of what is socially desirable are similar. Nevertheless, they *cannot agree*. Is it because of ignorance on the part of one or the other or both that they quarrel? This cannot be so, because, as the reader may verify for himself by reading controversies in newspapers, magazines, or even learned journals, well educated people are often the cleverest in proving that insurance is *really* insurance or that relief is *really* relief.

Quarrels of this kind, therefore, are especially bitter among social philosophers, lawyers, and publicists.

It will be the thesis of this book that disagreements of this kind—fundamental, doctrinal disagreements which seem to admit of no solution—are due not to stupidity or stubbornness, not even to an unscientific attitude towards the problems involved, but to an unscientific attitude towards language itself. In fact, a number of apparently insoluble problems which face us in our personal lives, in our society, and in our politics—and it must be remembered that these problems are formulated in *words*—may prove to be not insoluble at all when viewed through a clearer knowledge of the workings of language. It will be the purpose of this book, therefore, not only to acquaint the reader with some elementary facts about language such as are revealed by modern linguistics, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, literary criticism, and other branches of learning, *but also to change his very attitude towards language.*

Such a change of attitude, it is believed, will, first of all, make him a more understanding reader and listener than he was before. Secondly, it should increase the fruitfulness of whatever conversation and discussion he enters into, because, depending on our unconscious attitudes towards the words we hear and utter, we may use them either as weapons with which to start arguments and verbal free-

for-alls or as instruments with which to increase our wisdom, our sense of fellowship with other human beings, and our enjoyment of life.

P.S. Those who have concluded that the point of the story is that the Social Worker and the Advertising Man were "only arguing about different names for the same thing," are asked to reread the story and explain what they mean by (1) "only," and (2) "the same thing."