

# A DAY IN LINGUISTIC HISTORY

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The day begins like any other day. A few students straggle toward the Union in search of coffee and eggs. Delivery trucks come on the campus. At the entrance, the sign still reads SUSAN DOE UNIVERSITY FOUNDED 1894 NO SOLICITORS. This is it, the University, known affectionately by students and faculty as Sue Doe U.

8:00 In Babel Hall, which houses the Linguistics Department, the Psychology Department, the Philosophy Department, and a few rogue sociologists, Reilly, the janitor, goes from office to office emptying waste-baskets. The only sound is the sound he makes when he bangs the waste-baskets against his barrel. It's like an anechoic chamber, he reflects wryly, but incorrectly.

8:15 Maxine arrives. She is the secretary of the Linguistics Department. Her boss is B. A. Booper, I. A. L. (Internationally Acclaimed Linguist). She straightens out his desk. Then she takes a peek in the desk drawers. Same old pictures. You'd think he'd get some new ones.

8:45 In front of Babel Hall, Arnold Repoob parks and locks his Vespa. He is forty-five minutes late for his phonetics class. His students won't mind. They never have. Repoob carefully unties his folder of notes. On the way to work, several ideas have occurred to him. They could change the nature of linguistic theory. Repoob waves a greeting to his older colleague, Phil Allergy. Allergy waves back, his reverie over Indo-European verbs now completely shattered. His mood is broken, and it is apparent in his aspect.

9:00 The rest of the Syntax Team arrives: John Aspects, Mark C. Mantics, and Ellen D. Letion. Each carries an attache case with an NSF contract number on it. Together with Repoob, they are The Program. They all have long hair. Aspects sports a moustache, and Mantics an impenetrable beard. E. D. Letion is married to a man she never mentions.

9:14 John bursts into E. D. Letion's office. "Edy! I've just discovered that passivization is impossible in a grammar without lexical insertion!"

"Show me your proof," Edy responds.

John thrusts a wrinkled envelope under her nose. "There!"

"That's from the gas company."

"No, no. Turn it over."

She does. And in a moment nods slowly. The intercom buzzes.

Edy answers. "Yes, Arnold. It is? That's funny, because John has just proved that passivization is impossible in a grammar without lexical insertion."

She turns to John. "That was Arn. The comparative construction is a modal operator."

"My god!"

"You'd better tell Mark, so he can put it on the chart."

9:23 Mark enters the latest discoveries on a large chart in the Linguistics Department office. Booper hasn't arrived, he reflects wryly. These are discoveries 44 and 45. Not bad for the second week of the spring semester.

9:24 Reilly, the janitor, erases three months of Mark's thinking from the blackboard in 102.

10:02 Ladislwka Szkwxty arrives. He is an associate professor. They can't fire him. He is a phonetician, and makes a practice of correcting people when they use his name, in some detail.

"Good morning, Mr. Szkwxty," Maxine purrs.

"You alveys pronounce my nim wrang," Szkwxty articulates; "You must rroll the wowels more."

10:15 B. A. Booper arrives. He glances at the chart, grunts something to Maxine, and goes into the office. He peeks in the drawer.

10:25 John and Arnold are arguing about the cyclic nature of performative higher sentences. They get loud. Moe, a graduate student, turns to Joe, another graduate student:

"This could split up the entire university, pro and con."

"Can't you see the headlines?"

"Yeah. What they would be is 'Sue Doe cleft by linguistic argument'." Joe leaves.

11:07 Mark shows Edy how to get Deep Structure-less surface structures without transformations. She immediately becomes a lexicalist, and calls the painter to have the sign on her office door changed.

11:35 John and Arn rediscover Deep Structure.

11:45 Mark gives four more reasons why Deep Structure is impossible.

11:50 Arn gives four arguments to show that conjunctions are determiners.

11:59 Maxine closes the office, inadvertently locking in B. A. Booper. He calls maintenance, but they're out for lunch.

1:45 Maxine returns from lunch. She finds B. A. Booper looking at his pictures.

2:15 Arnold Repoob, in the course of preparing for Wednesday's class in phonetics, rediscovers the phoneme.

3:10 John and Arnold reabandon Deep Structure.

3:45 Edy Letion discovers Sanskrit. She shows Mark that Sanskrit is unique in being the only language in the world without surface structures. Mark doesn't believe it. Sanskrit, he reflects wryly, is not a natural language. It consists of nothing but transformations, with, of course, a very complex morphophonemic component. This is entered on the chart.

4:04 A deathly hush falls over the Department. In the air there is a crackle of expectation. Then, suddenly, it hits. An isogloss has shifted, cutting the Department in two. The shimmering subliminal dotted line runs between Arn's office and the men's room. At first no one notices. Then John steps over the line. Mark calls him from the end of the hall.

"John, where's your latest stuff on determiners?"

"Right over theah."

"Where?"

"Ovah theah. I left it on the chaih."

Mark frowns. "You're talking funny, John."

"What ah you saying, that I sound queah? That's not a nice remahk, Mahk."

Edy rushes out into the hall. "Don't move, John! Somebody call a Dialectician!"

"What is it, Edy?" Mark asks.

"I'm fairly sure it's a Slipped Isogloss. Look, if you turn your head just right, you can see it."

"Am I going to have to stay heah?" John asks.

"Oh, dear," says Edy, "It sounds like R-less, and that's a major one. John, try not to say any words with R."

"Trah not to say any wuhds with what?"

"R! R!" shouts Mark.

"It's not funny, Mahk," John shouts back. "When you laugh like that, you sound like a bahking dog."

Later Mark slips food across the Isogloss. John has a hahd boiled egg and a candy bah.

4:30 The Dialectician arrives. Edy explains the situation to him. He turns to her:

"How's your R's?"

"None of your goddam business," she snaps.

He consults his atlas. He informs the group that Babel Hall is located over a Linguistic Fault. He can repair the damage, but they should be prepared for another diaquake. He calls Cambridge.

"Hello, Cambridge? You hereby what? Oh, it's you. Listen, we've got a Slipped Isogloss over here. You know what to do? O.K."

In a few minutes the shimmering line begins to fade, and then with a moist popping sound disappears altogether.

4:35 Like any other day, the day ends. Maxine locks the Departmental office. Ladislwka Szkwxty marches off, practising implsives, and causing the townspeople he passes to reflect wryly. Arnold mounts his Vespa, worrying, not without cause, about nominalizations.

11:30 The halls are silent. Reilly arrives, takes off his coat and begins the long night. He goes to the men's room and cleans the mirror. It reflects Reilly.

## BERNSTEIN'S REVERSE DICTIONARY

For some time, Theodore Bernstein, consulting editor of the N. Y. Times and its linguistic watchdog, felt the need for a new kind of dictionary -- one which enables a writer to retrieve a half-remembered word from its definition. Obviously, a conventional dictionary is no help, for it lists words rather than definitions in alphabetical order. A thesaurus is better, but it often lists a large number of tenuously-related synonyms, leaving the reader to ferret out the mot juste among them. Synonym dictionaries carefully chart the nuances of meaning among closely-related synonyms, but are of no help if the word being sought has no close relatives (such as palindrome or kazatsky). And so Bernstein's Reverse Dictionary (Quadrangle Books, 1975; \$10) was born.

The dictionary consists of about 7000 target words of intermediate rarity, indexed by nearly 13,400 definition entries (about two per word, although some have as many as seven). For example, one has four chances to recover orotund -- under clear, full, pompous or rounded (voice) -- but none of these are the synonyms resonant, sonorous, ringing, resounding or vibrant given in Webster's Synonym Dictionary. This illustrates the chief drawback of the dictionary: the subjectiveness of the definition entries. When only a single definition entry is given, the problem is much worse -- for example, one cannot hope to retrieve cuneiform unless using an entering wedge.

Readers are advised to check unfamiliar words against more standard dictionaries, for errors are not unknown. For example, a cone or pyramid with the top sliced off is defined as a fulstrum, a frustrating word which appears in no standard dictionary. And did Bernstein really mean to use pellage instead of pelage as a target word for the fur or other covering of an animal? The former word, appearing in Webster's Second but not the Third, is much rarer than the latter. Finally, the target word list is execrably alphabetized, with dozens of words out of place; one hopes that the standard of proof-reading was higher in the main part of this book.