

Language switching

Switching between languages is extremely common and takes many forms. A long narrative may switch from one language to the other. Sentences may alternate. A sentence may begin in one language, and finish in another. Or phrases from both languages may succeed each other in apparently random order (though in fact grammatical constraints are frequently involved). Such behaviour can be explained only by postulating a range of linguistic or social factors such as the following.

- Speakers cannot express themselves adequately in one language, so switch to the other to make good the deficiency. This may trigger a speaker to continue in the other language for a while. An example from a Spanish/English study (G. Valdés Fallis, 1976): *Porque allí hay cashews. You don't like them?* (Because here are some cashews...). This tends to happen a great deal when the speaker is upset, tired, or otherwise distracted.
- Switching to a minority language is very common as a means of expressing solidarity with a social group. The language change signals to the listener that the speaker is from a certain background; if the listener responds with a similar switch, a degree of rapport is established. The same switch may of course also be used to exclude other people, who do not know the language, from the group.
- The switch between languages can signal the speaker's attitude towards the listener – friendly, irritated, distant, ironic, jocular, and so on. Monolinguals can communicate these effects to some extent by varying the level of formality of their speech; bilinguals can do it by language switching. If two bilinguals normally talk to each other in language X, the choice of Y is bound to create a special effect. A common example is for a mother to tell her child to do something in one language, and then, if the child fails to obey, to switch to another language, thereby showing her stronger emphasis or displeasure.

These are but some of the sociolinguistic functions that language switching can perform. The phenomenon is evidently a complex and subtle one, with speakers usually being totally unaware of the extent to which they have been switching in a conversation. If interrupted, they may even be unable to say which language they were using in their last sentence. Monolinguals often dismiss or satirize language switching, using such pejorative labels as 'Franglais', 'Spanglish', or 'Tex-Mex'. Perhaps because of this kind of criticism, many bilingual people come to be very self-conscious about their switching, and try to avoid it in talking to strangers or on formal occasions. But in informal speech, it is a natural and powerful communicative feature of bilingual interaction, which presents linguists with one of their most intriguing analytical challenges.

BILINGUAL VERBAL STRATEGIES

Language switching is a major feature of this conversation between two native Americans of Mexican ancestry. *E* is a university teacher, who is working as a volunteer in a day care centre where *M* is a social worker. The Spanish passages are translated in parentheses.

E: What do you dream in?

M: I don't think I ever have any conversations in my dreams. I just dream. Ha. I don't hear people talking: I just see pictures.

E: Oh, they're old-fashioned, then. They're not talkies yet, huh?

M: They're old-fashioned. No, they're not talkies yet. No, I'm tryin' to think. Yeah, there too have been talkies. Different. In Spanish and English both. An' I wouldn't be too surprised if I even had some in Chinese.

(*Laughter*) Yeah, Ed. *Dev-eras*. ('Really') (*M offers E a cigarette which is refused*)

Tu no fumas, verdad? Yo tampoco. Deje de fumar ('You don't smoke, do you? I don't either. I stopped smoking') and I'm back to it again.

...

M: An' – an' – an' they tell me, 'How did you quit, Mary? I di'n' quit. I – I just stopped. I mean it wasn't an effort that I made. Que voy a dejar de fumar porque me hace daño o ('That I'm going to stop smoking because it's harmful to me, or') this or tha', uh-uh. It just – that – eh – I used to pull butts out of the – the wastepaper basket. Yeah (*Laughter*) I used to go look in the (*unclear speech*). Se me acababan los cigarros en la noche ('My cigarettes would run out on me at night'). I'd get desperate, y ahí voy al basurero a buscar, a sacar, you know? ('And there I go to the wastebasket to look for some, to get some, you know?')

(*Laughter*) Ayer los (*unclear speech*) no había que no traía cigarros Camille, no traía Helen, no traía yo, el Sr. de Leon ('Yesterday there weren't any. Camille didn't have any, Helen, I, Mr. de Leon didn't have any') and I saw Dixie's bag crumpled up, so I figures she didn't have any, y ahí ando en los ceniceros buscando a ver onde estaba la – ('And there I am in the ashtrays looking to see where there was the –') I di'n' care whose they were.

The authors of this study point out that *M*'s language switching is not random. *M* is ambivalent about her smoking, and she signals this through her choice of language. Spanish sentences in this conversation reflect her embarrassment and personal involvement; English is used for more general or detached statements.

(J. Gumperz, 1970.)

BILINGUAL ACQUISITION

There is a widespread popular impression that the children of bilingual parents are linguistically at risk. It is said that their brains will not be able to cope, and that they will grow up 'semilingual', confused, or retarded. There is no justification for this pessimism, as is evident from the confident fluency displayed by millions of bilingual and trilingual children all over the world. By the time these children arrive in school, the vast majority have reached the same stage of linguistic development as have their monolingual peers.

But the process of learning two languages is not exactly the same as the process of learning one (Part vii). Three main stages of development have been noted:

1. The child builds up a list of words, as does a monolingual child, but the list contains words from both languages. It is rare for these words to be translation equivalents of each other.

2. When sentences begin to contain two or more elements, words from both languages are used within the same sentence, e.g. (from a 2-year-old German/English child) *ein* ('a') *big cow*, *from up in Himmel* ('sky'). The amount of mixing rapidly declines. In one study, at the beginning of the third year, nearly 30% of the sentences contained mixed vocabulary; by the end of the year, it was less than 5%.

3. As vocabulary grows in each language, translation equivalents develop. But the acquisition of separate sets of grammatical rules takes longer. For a while, a single system of rules seems to be used for both languages, until finally the two grammars diverge.

When bilingual children reach this stage, usually in the fourth year, they have become aware that the two languages are not the same. They typically use each language to the parent who speaks it, and not to the other. Indeed, if one

parent uses the language of the other to the child, there may be quite a reaction. The child may be surprised, embarrassed, fail to understand, think it funny, or become upset. An extract from a recent bilingual-acquisition study illustrates this last reaction. Lisa (nearly 4 years old) has an Italian father and a German mother. The father uses a short German sentence to her, to which she replies: *Lisa*: No, non puoi. ('No, you can't') *Father*: Ich auch – spreche Deutsch. ('I also speak German.') *Lisa*: No, tu non puoi! ('No, you cannot.') (V. Volterra & T. Taeschner, 1978.)

Not surprisingly, it is at this age that children try to play their parents off against each other. One child would always switch into French when he saw his English father approach him purposefully at bedtime!

EDUCATIONAL POLICY

One of the most important ways in which a country's language policy manifests itself is in the kind of provision it makes for the linguistic education of children. Which languages and language varieties are to be taught in schools, from what age, and for how long? These questions are only partly answerable with reference to the field of foreign-language learning and teaching (§62); far more fundamental are factors arising out of government policy and popular opinion, where a wide range of positions is found. Languages can be actively promoted, passively tolerated, deliberately ignored, positively discouraged, and even banned.

The results of active promotion are most clearly shown by the progress of English towards world-language status (§59). Many countries encourage the teaching of English in school, often at the expense of other languages: a recent case is Spain, where the early 1980s saw the widespread replacement of French by English as the first foreign language. At the other extreme, there are many examples of languages receiving official disapproval: a clear case is the reluctance of several countries to teach German since the Second World War (e.g. in France, Italy, Israel).

The fortunes of minority languages are closely bound up with the political aspirations of their speakers, and the extent to which the government of the day perceives these to be a threat. Again, the whole gamut of official attitudes can be found. There may be a strong local government policy of language maintenance (p. 362), as happens with the teaching of Welsh in Wales. On the other hand, there are many instances of languages being discouraged (e.g. Gaelic in 16th-century Ireland) or banned (e.g. Catalan in Franco's Spain).

Official attitudes today are generally sympathetic, with an increasing number of countries supporting (at least in principle) a bilingual or multilingual educational policy. In Europe, an early EEC Council Directive asked member states to promote the 'teaching of the mother tongue and culture of the country of origin' to all immigrants (p. 374). Progress varies greatly from country to country, however, with some countries (such as Britain) providing immigrants with relatively little by way of mother-tongue education, and others (such as Sweden) providing a great deal (p. 37). Conflict is never far away, as progress towards linguistic recognition inevitably proves to be too slow for some people, and too rapid for others. Vocal and vigorous objections to educational linguistic policies are thus commonly encountered all over the world. Regrettably, only the most violent tend to attract international attention.

BILINGUAL PROGRAMMES

There has been an extremely rapid growth in bilingual education programmes, with reference to minority languages, in recent years. Over \$1,000 million have been spent in this area in the USA alone. However, the reasons for introducing such programmes vary greatly. In some countries, the aim is to find a single language capable of unifying the nation (e.g. Bahasa Indonesia). In Russia, the teaching of Russian to speakers of regional languages has promoted ideological assimilation and national solidarity. The teaching of English in many African countries ensures greater access to world opportunities. The teaching of local African languages to minority groups in South Africa during the 1950s and 1960s was felt to be a way of consolidating the divisions within that society in relation to the Homelands policy of that time. In the USA, the primary concern is to guarantee the civil rights and equal opportunities of minority groups – rights that have been confirmed several times in the US Supreme Court since the 1970s. In all cases, it should be stressed, bilingual education is not simply a matter of *language* learning: it involves the acquisition of all the knowledge and skills that identify the minority culture.

Maintenance vs transitional

Bilingual programmes have always attracted controversy. Two main views are argued (with many variant positions). On the one hand, maintaining the mother tongue is said to develop a desirable cultural diversity, foster ethnic identity, permit social adaptability, add to the psychological security of the child, and promote linguistic (and perhaps even cognitive) sensitivity. To achieve this, bilingual instruction needs to be retained throughout the whole of a child's school career. On the other hand, it is pointed out that a permanent dual-language policy may foster social divisions and narrowness of outlook (through ethnocentric churches, media, schools, etc.); the children may become 'trapped' in their mother tongue, and fail to achieve in the majority language, thus reducing their access to prosperity; and where there is inadequate teacher preparation, timetabling, and materials, they may fail to achieve in their mother tongue also. They should therefore be educated in their mother tongue only until they are able to continue in the majority language. Although many bilingual programmes subscribe in principle to the former, 'maintenance' view of bilingual education, in practice the majority (in the USA and Britain, at least) are of the latter, 'transitional' type – though often accompanied by maintenance elements (e.g. in literature, music, dance) in a continuing parallel teaching programme.

POSITIVE POLICIES

In 1982, the Commission of the European Communities to the Council of Europe asked each EC member country to report on the progress it had made in providing education for the children of migrant workers. Several signs of progress were apparent. Special reception classes were being created in many countries, and a number of types of provision existed at primary level (there was much less at secondary level). In France, for example, the language and culture of origin was being taught to immigrant primary school children for three hours each week, under the heading of 'environmental studies', as long as they came from countries with which France had a bilateral agreement. In Belgium, when the number of immigrant children in a nursery exceeded 30%, the number of these children would be multiplied by two in order to establish the quota of nursery teachers required. (See also pp. 37, 371.)

The 7.44 from Mons to Brussels

Belgium has also taken up an idea first tried out on a commuter train from Brighton to London – language learning by train. In May 1984 the last carriage of the 7.44 a.m. Intercity train from Mons to Brussels (a French-speaking area) was reserved for passengers who wished to learn Dutch or English. They paid their normal fare plus a small fee for the tuition, given by teachers trained by the Belgian Centre d'Animation en Langues. The venture was at first extremely successful, and within a few years, there were four 'language trains' in operation. However, enthusiasm waned, and the venture did not survive into the 1990s.



These views about the nature of bilingual education continue to be emotionally debated, for they reflect fundamentally different conceptions of the kind of nation people want to see around them. Maintenance views anticipate a society that is characterized by cultural pluralism and linguistic diversity; transitional views look towards a culturally homogeneous society, characterized by minority assimilation and language 'shift' (p. 362). However, the issues are more complex than this simple opposition suggests, for there are many kinds and degrees of support for both positions, and compromise views have also been proposed.

Case studies show that the notion of 'language loyalty' is never a simple one. For example, within an immigrant group, some members may wish (with varying degrees of conviction) to have their children retain their linguistic identity; others may wish them to 'shift' to the majority language as quickly as possible in order to participate fully in the new society; and yet others may wish to have them use their new language in public, but to retain their mother tongue for a range of private occasions (e.g. home, church, club). There are many further possible positions, reflecting the different influences of racial, geographical, political, cultural, economic, religious, and other factors. Given the emotional and volatile state of mind with which people approach the problem, it is impossible to say whether a genuine 'integrated pluralism' can be achieved in modern educational programmes. But the need to counter this inherent subjectivity makes it even more desirable to carry out detailed and objective studies of linguistic attitudes, within the field of language planning.

LANGUAGE IMMERSION

In Quebec, in the 1960s, a new kind of bilingual education programme was introduced, which has since proved to be popular and successful. The proposal came from the English-speaking minority, who wished to make their children proficient in a second language, French, in order to cope with a society where the role of French was becoming increasingly dominant. The idea was to arrange for the whole of their children's first encounter with schooling to be in the second language (§62) – a programme of 'immersion'. The children would speak in their mother tongue to a bilingual teacher, who would reply in the second language. Gradually, the children would come to use the second language themselves. Then, at a later stage, English would be introduced into the classroom.

After several years of experimentation, two patterns have come to be established. 'Primary' immersion starts at kindergarten, entirely in French. Gradually an element of English is introduced, until by mid-primary level the children are taught 60% in English and 40% in French. 'Secondary' immersion usually starts in the first year of secondary school with a booster year in which all teaching is done in French. This is followed by a 'post-immersion' teaching pro-

gramme which follows the proportions of the primary school.

The approach continues to attract support. The children acquire a much higher level of competence than they would through traditional teaching methods (though this is still a long way from native-like proficiency, and doubts have been expressed over how effective the children's linguistic skills are outside of school). Their attitudes towards French-Canadian people tend to be more positive (though evidence is mixed on this point). And their mother-tongue abilities do not seem to suffer from the experience, but may even improve in certain respects. However, for this last outcome to be certain, there needs to be a supportive and strong first-language environment in the community. With speakers of minority languages where the home linguistic situation is weak or unstable, an immersion programme would be unlikely to result in maintenance, but would probably hasten the process of assimilation to the majority language.

A French immersion class taking place at a junior school in Montreal.



ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

Recent estimates of language populations (p. 286) suggest that half of the world's languages will become extinct in the 21st century, and that only 1,000 or so languages may remain by the 22nd. The speed of this decline is largely a consequence of the political and economic pressures which are motivating people to replace their traditional language by one which gives them access to the languages of more powerful cultures.

The publication in the early 1990s of major surveys of the world's languages (p. 287) has placed the facts before an increasingly concerned public. Bodies such as the UNESCO Committee on Language Endangerment, the Foundation for Endangered Languages (established in the UK in 1995), and the Linguistic Society of America's Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation are already handling many enquiries and fostering research initiatives. Information is gradually becoming available on the Internet - such as through the World Wide Web site of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. And a clearing-house for the world's endangered languages was established in 1995, at the request of UNESCO, in the University of Tokyo.

There are two aspects to the current concern. On the one hand, many communities are anxious to revive, maintain, and if possible enhance their endangered language. Progress here depends on recognizing the vast differences between the political and cultural situations - as illustrated by Welsh, Gaelic, Maori, Quechua, and the American Indian and Australian Aboriginal languages - which demand very different solutions. At the same time, progress also depends on collaboration between minority groups, such as those who form the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages. There is then a real chance of influencing international policies.

On the other hand, it is evident that most of the endangered languages of the world are beyond practical help. In many cases, such as the hundreds of languages of New Guinea, there are only a few elderly speakers left, and only a small number of concerned outsiders. Given the difficulty there has been in achieving language rights for such well-known communities as the Welsh or the Bretons, the likelihood of attracting world interest in these cases is remote. The linguistic plight of the 20 or so reported speakers of Usku in Irian Jaya or of Pipil in El Salvador has a low international priority. In these circumstances, linguists are concerned to determine the urgency of the need in such situations, document what is already known about the languages, extend the knowledge-base as much as possible, and thus make a contribution to preserving the languages, if only in archive form.

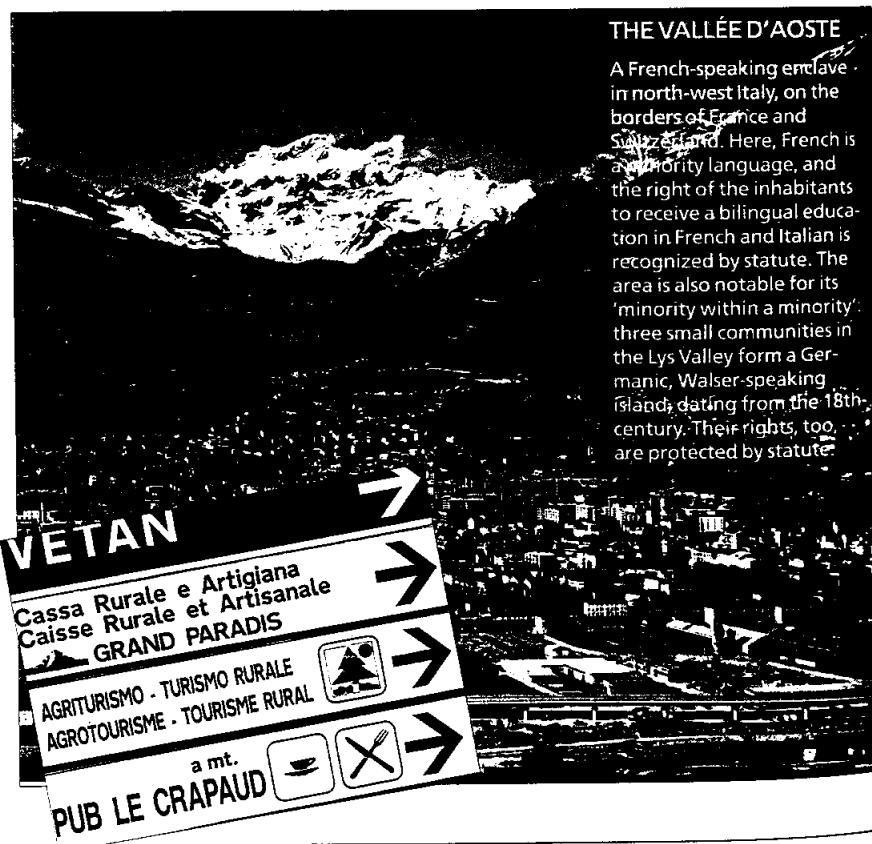
MAJOR ISSUES

This kind of work raises major intellectual, political, and economic issues. Obviously, the cost of the required fieldwork on a world scale, with some 3,000 languages at risk, is immense. But there are more profound questions which have received little discussion. What exactly are we doing when we try to keep a small language alive? What is the value of a language (and the cultural heritage it expresses) to the world, and what does the world gain by preservation? Does loss of linguistic diversity present civilization with a problem in any way analogous to the loss of species in biology? Then, at a more practical level, what are realistic and unrealistic goals in working with endangered languages? At what point do the linguistic issues become swallowed up in larger political considerations? For example, which countries are antagonistic - whether passively or actively - to preserving the identity of their minority groups?

Such questions presume a public awareness of linguistic issues, especially relating to multilingualism, which is widely lacking in strongly monolingual western environments such as Britain and the USA. New international initiatives, such as those reported on the facing page, are beginning to make an impact, but the task is an uphill one. The concept of a language as a 'national treasure' is still one which takes many people by surprise - and even English has no national linguistic archive. In the meantime, while initiatives slowly grow, languages steadily die - currently, one every two weeks or so.

THE EUROPEAN BUREAU OF LESSER USED LANGUAGES

The aim of the Bureau is to conserve and promote the lesser-used autochthonous languages of the European Union, together with their associated cultures. It is an independent body, with its head office in Dublin, which works in close cooperation with the European Commission, the European Parliament, their member state institutions, and other European bodies. It came into being in 1982, when members of a Brussels colloquium representing the various 'small peoples' of Europe voted to support an organization which would act on their behalf at an international level. The Bureau has since received formal recognition for its role, and is often referred to in resolutions of the European bodies. Its bulletin, *Contact*, is published three times a year.



THE VALLÉE D'AOSTE

A French-speaking enclave in north-west Italy, on the borders of France and Switzerland. Here, French is a minority language, and the right of the inhabitants to receive a bilingual education in French and Italian is recognized by statute. The area is also notable for its 'minority within a minority': three small communities in the Lys Valley form a Germanic, Walser-speaking island, dating from the 18th century. Their rights, too, are protected by statute.

Words, words, words ...

There is no specific reference to minorities in the U.N. Charter or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but since the 1980s a number of statements by leading international bodies have pro-

duced a contemporary climate of opinion in which linguistic minorities are receiving, at least in principle, a long overdue measure of recognition. Extracts from some of these statements are reproduced below.

Resolution on the languages and cultures of regional and ethnic minorities in the European Community (1987)

The European Parliament ...

2. Points out again the need for the Member States to recognize their linguistic minorities in their laws and thus to create the basic conditions for the preservation and development of regional and minority cultures and languages ...

[and recommends that]

5. they carry out educational measures including:

- arranging for pre-school to university education and continuing education to be officially conducted [in these languages] on an equal footing with instruction in the national languages ...

6. that they carry out administrative and legal measures including:

- providing a direct legal basis for the use of regional and minority languages

- reviewing national provisions and practices that discriminate against minority languages ...

- requiring decentralized central government services also to use the national, regional and minority languages ...

- officially recognizing surnames and place-names expressed in a regional or minority language,

- accepting place names and indications on electoral lists in a regional or minority language;

7. they take measures in respect of the mass media, including:

- granting and making possible access to local, regional and central public and commercial broadcasting systems in such a way as to guarantee the continuity and effectiveness of broadcasts in regional and minority languages ...

8. they take measures in respect of the cultural infrastructure including:

- ensuring that representatives of groups that use regional or minority languages are able to participate directly in cultural facilities and activities,

- the creation of foundations or institutes for the study of regional and minority languages ...

- the development of dubbing and subtitling techniques to encourage audiovisual productions in the regional and minority languages ...

9. they take social and economic measures including:

- providing for the use of the regional and minority languages in public concerns (postal services etc),

- recognition of the use of the regional and minority languages in the payments sector (giro cheques and banking),

- providing for consumer information and product labelling in regional and minority languages,

- providing for the use of regional languages for road and other public sign and street names ...

European Commission for Democracy through Law (1993)

1. The international protection of ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities must be a fundamental component of the international protection of Human Rights, and as such falls within the scope of inter-State co-operation. It represents a basic element of peace and stability in Europe. ...

4. For the purposes of this text, 'minority' shall mean a group which is smaller

in number than the rest of the population of a State, whose members, although nationals of that State, have ethnic, religious, or linguistic features different from those of the rest of the population, and are guided by the will to safeguard their culture, traditions, religion or language ...

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992)

Resolution 47/135

Article 1

1. States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity ...

Article 2

1. Persons belonging to [minorities] have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination. ...

Article 4

3. States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or have instruction in their mother tongue.

4. States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory ...

Resolution on Linguistic and Cultural Minorities in the European Community (1994)

The European Parliament ...

B. declaring the need for a European linguistic culture and recognizing that its scope also includes protection of the linguistic heritage, the overcoming of the language barrier, the promotion of lesser-used languages and the safeguarding of minority languages ...

H. whereas the Community should encourage action by the Member States in cases where the protection of such languages and cultures is inadequate or non-existent ...

M. whereas many lesser-used languages are endangered, with a rapid drop in the number of speakers, and whereas this endangers the well-being of specific population groups and greatly diminishes Europe's creative potential as a whole ...

2. Points out again the need for Member States to recognize their linguistic minorities and to make the necessary legal and administrative provisions for them to create the basic conditions for the preservation and development of these languages ...

63 · LANGUAGE FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

'They don't seem to be talking the same language.' This common observation acts as a reminder that barriers to communication exist, and indeed are commonplace, even within a language. Linguistic difficulties are inevitable when there is interaction between people from different racial, regional, cultural, social, or occupational backgrounds – something that is increasingly common in modern society as people become more mobile and come into contact with diverse forms of linguistic behaviour. A major aim of linguistic studies, accordingly, is to investigate the factors that promote and maintain the existence of varieties within a language (Part II), and to provide descriptions of their use. These studies have an intrinsic intellectual interest, as they provide a means of observing change in contemporary culture and civilization. But they can also be of practical assistance, by clarifying the reasons for the use of unfamiliar language, and thus providing a perspective that may help to resolve cases of linguistic conflict.

There is no theoretical limit to the number of special purposes to which language can be put. As society develops new facets, so language is devised to express them. In recent times, whole new areas of expression have emerged, in relation to such domains as computing, broadcasting, commercial advertising, and popular music. Over a longer time-scale, special styles have developed associated with religion, law, politics, commerce, the press, medicine, and science. A detailed linguistic account of any one of these areas would itself require an encyclopedia, as the analysis of the language used would require an exposition of the conceptual system that gave rise to it. The following illustrations of linguistic varieties and attitudes are inevitably highly selective, therefore, in both range and depth of treatment. But they do provide a hint of the extensive resources that language makes available to meet the special needs of developing societies, and of the complications that arise as people slowly come to terms with them.

A GOLDEN BULL WINNER

One of the winners of the British Golden Bull awards in 1982 was a written decision made by a government insurance officer, which opened in the following way:

As insurance officer I have decided to review the decision dated 19.9.83 for the following reasons: that by

its decision of 31.1.84 the medical board varied the assessment of disablement resulting from the relevant loss of faculty and this constitutes a revision of a decision on a special question.

My revised decision is as follows: A disablement gratuity of £21.50 based on an assessment of 3% per week

from 8.6.83 to 22.11.83 and £11.12 per week from 23.11.83 to 6.12.83 based upon an assessment of 20% for the period 8.6.83 to 1.12.83 and a disablement gratuity of £52.75 based upon an assessment of 3% from 2.12.83 to 1.6.84 are awarded for the same accident for which a disablement

gratuity of £21.50 based upon an assessment of 3% from 24.3.83 to 7.6.83 and a disablement pension of £10.72 per week from 8.6.83 to 22.11.83 and £11.12 per week from 23.11.83 to 13.12.83 (total £290.64) was awarded and paid... (Quoted in C. Maher & M. Cutts, 1986, p. 12.)

PLAIN ENGLISH CAMPAIGNS

Popular anxiety over special uses of language is most markedly seen in the campaigns to promote 'plain' speaking and writing – notably, the Plain English movements of Britain and the USA. The main aim of these campaigns is to attack the use of unnecessarily complicated language ('gobbledegook') by governments, businesses, and other authorities whose role puts them in linguistic contact with the general public. The campaigners argue that such language, whether spoken or written, should be replaced by clearer forms of expression.

The movements took shape only in the late 1970s, so it is too soon to ascertain their long-term influence on the characteristics of language varieties. But they have certainly played a major part in promoting public awareness of the existence of communication problems, and have influenced many organizations to do something about it. In Britain, the campaign was launched in 1979 by a ritual shredding of government forms in Parliament Square, London. By 1982, the government had published a report telling departments to improve the design of forms, and to abolish those that were unnecessary. By 1985, around 15,700 forms had disappeared and 21,300 had been revised. In the USA, President Carter's Executive Order of March 1978 required regulations to be written in plain English, and although this was revoked by President Reagan in 1981, it promoted a great deal of legislation throughout the country, and an increase in plain English usage among corporations and consumers.

Today the Plain English campaigns continue to grow, focusing especially on such everyday consumer products as forms, official letters, licences, leases, contracts, insurance policies, and guarantees. In Britain, annual publicity is given to the Plain English Awards competition, which gives trophies to organizations

DOUBLESPEAKING

negative patient care outcome (= death)

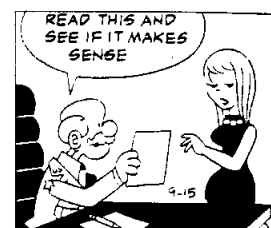
portable handheld communication inscriber (= pencil)

unlawful or arbitrary deprivation of life (= killing)

permanent pre-hostility (= peace)

revenue enhancement taxbase erosion control (= tax increase)

collateral damage (= civilians killed in a war)



Cartoon taken from the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak* (January 1996), published by the National Council of Teachers of English in Urbana, Illinois.

that have produced the clearest documents, and booby prizes (the Golden Bull Awards) to those whose materials are least intelligible. In the USA, similar interest is shown in the annual Doublespeak Awards, awarded by the National Council of Teachers of English to 'American public figures who have perpetrated language that is grossly unfactual, deceptive, evasive, euphemistic, confusing, or self-contradictory'.

In these cost-conscious days, it is stressed that clear language not only avoids anxiety on the part of the recipient, it also saves time and money. The campaigns have large dossiers of problem cases. In one case, an official government letter provoked so many complaints and questions that a second letter had to be sent to explain the first. In another, an application form was wrongly filled in by 50% of the applicants, which resulted in a considerable outlay of effort in returning and reprocessing the form. On the positive side, there are cases of businesses revising their literature to avoid legal jargon, and benefiting from increased sales.

Particular concern is expressed about the ambiguities and omissions found in medical labels. For example, in one pharmaceutical survey, the instruction to 'use sparingly' was found to be misunderstood by 33% of patients. The instruction to 'take two tablets four hourly' received a variety of interpretations (e.g. to take eight tablets an hour). Related areas of concern include the use of warning labels on household goods (such as disinfectants) and on toys for children.

The instructions accompanying do-it-yourself products are also regularly cited as a source of unnecessary expense or frustration. Few companies seem to test their instructions by having them followed by a first-time user. Often, essential background information is omitted, steps in the construction process are taken for granted, and some degree of special knowledge is assumed. This is especially worrying in fields where any failure to follow correct procedures can be dangerous.

Objections to material in plain English have come mainly from the legal profession. Lawyers point to the risk of ambiguity inherent in the use of everyday language for legal or official documents, and draw attention to the need for confidence in legal formulations, which can come only from using language that has been tested in courts over the course of centuries (p. 390). The campaigners point out that there has been no sudden increase in litigation as a consequence of the increase in plain English materials. Similarly, professionals in several specialized fields have defended their use of technical and complex language as being the most precise means of expressing technical and complex ideas. This is undoubtedly true: scientists, doctors, bankers, and others need their jargon, in order to communicate with each other succinctly and unambiguously. But when it comes to addressing the non-specialist consumer, the plain English campaigners argue, different criteria must apply.

WHAT IS PLAIN ENGLISH?

It is not easy to devise precise, consistent, and acceptable guidelines for those who wish to write in plain English. One proponent of the Plain English movement in the USA makes the following recommendations concerning readability and design. (For other views, see pp. 2, 254.)

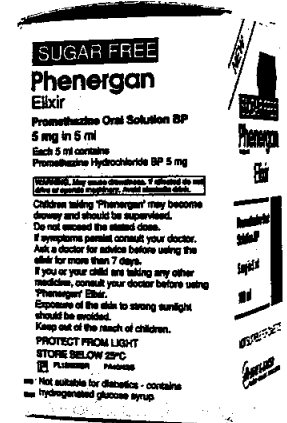
Readability

- Prefer the shorter word to the longer one. Use simple, everyday words rather than fancy ones. Prefer verbs over nouns and adjectives. Prefer the specific word to the general.
- Write short sentences with an average of no more than 20 words. Use the active voice rather than the passive. Be a miser with compound and complex sentences and a spendthrift with simple sentences.
- Write short paragraphs with an average of about 75 words. Avoid paragraphs that exceed five typed lines for business letters and ten lines for longer compositions.
- Write with the ear. A sentence may look correct on paper but its cadence may be jarring. Listen to your sentences in your head as you write, and do not write anything that you could not comfortably say.

Design

Write for the eye as well as the mind. Prepare an overall design, positioning understandable headings, subheadings, and captions for each segment, showing the organization of the text. Make the whole document visually appealing.

- Use appropriate underlining, ink colour that contrasts sharply with the paper, lists, boxes or panels, bold or other typefaces to emphasize key points.
 - Use 'white space' in margins, and between sections, paragraphs, and lines, to make the document look good.
- (J. Y. Dayananda, 1986, p. 13.)



BEFORE AND AFTER

An illustration of plain English in action can be seen from the British campaign's version of a contract for moving goods from one house to another.

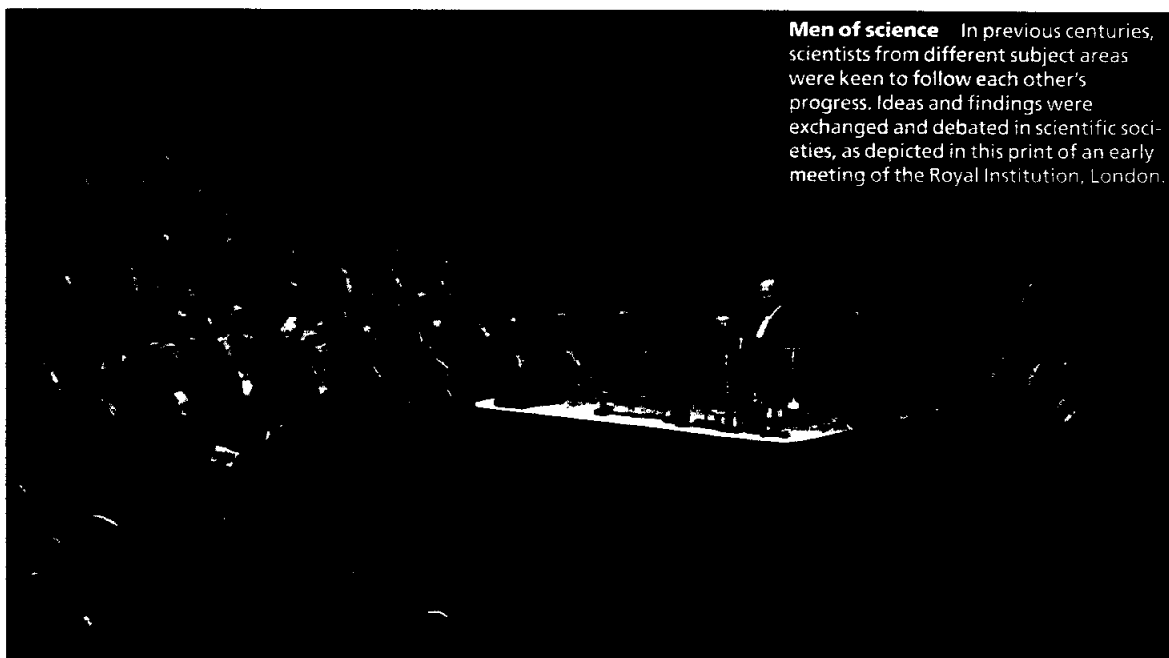
(Quoted in C. Maher & M. Cutts, 1986, p. 12.)

Original version

GENERAL LIEN - The contractor shall have a general lien upon all goods in his possession for all monies due to him from the customer or for liabilities incurred by him and for monies paid on behalf of the customer, and if part of the goods shall have been delivered, removed or despatched or sold the general lien shall apply in respect of such goods as remain in the Contractor's possession. The Contractor shall be entitled to charge a storage charge and all other expenses during which a lien on the goods is being asserted and all these conditions shall continue to apply thereto.

Plain English version

OUR RIGHT TO HOLD THE GOODS - We have a right to hold some or all of the goods until you have paid all our charges and other payments due under this contract. These include charges, taxes or levies that we have paid to any other removal or storage business, carrier or official body. While we hold the goods and wait for payment you will have to pay storage charges and all other necessary expenses. This contract will apply to the goods held in this way.



Men of science In previous centuries, scientists from different subject areas were keen to follow each other's progress. Ideas and findings were exchanged and debated in scientific societies, as depicted in this print of an early meeting of the Royal Institution, London.

THE LANGUAGE OF SCIENCE

The aim of science is to determine the principles governing the physical universe. Progress towards this end, however, is to a large extent dependent on the use of language. The knowledge base of a subject, upon which all scientists depend, is accessible only if previous generations have managed to express their findings in a precise and unambiguous manner. Similarly, present-day scientists, hoping to make their own contribution to this knowledge base, must satisfy the same linguistic constraints if their work is to be correctly interpreted and accepted by their peers. Research findings are of limited value, until they are written up and published.

The methodology of science, with its demand for objectivity, systematic investigation, and exact measurement, has several linguistic consequences. There is an overriding concern for impersonal statement, logical exposition, and precise description. Emotional comment, humour, figurative expression, and other aspects of personal language are avoided (except in writing intended for a lay audience). The mathematical expression of relationships promotes an extensive use of numerals, operators, letters, and other special symbols, which are frequently used in word-like and sentence-like combinations (as formulae, equations, etc.). Lengthy sequences of text can be written in logographic form (p. 202), thus giving the language of science its highly valued status as a universal medium of expression.

Vocabulary and grammar

In addition to this distinctive graphology (§33), scientific language illustrates several important features of

vocabulary and grammar. The large technical vocabulary is undoubtedly its most characteristic feature, reflecting the specialized subject matter of scientific domains of enquiry. Everyday words are too vague for many scientific purposes, so new ones have to be invented. This novel vocabulary is largely based on borrowings from Latin and Greek, showing the influence of Classical languages during the period of scientific discovery following the Renaissance. It contains many compound expressions, some of which (in such fields as chemistry) can be extremely long and unpronounceable, requiring abbreviation for practical use (a familiar example is *TNT*, short for *trinitrotoluene*). At the other extreme, some fields delight in using everyday words to identify new hypotheses and discoveries – notably, in contemporary particle physics, where we find such technical terms as *strangeness*, *flavour*, *colour*, and *charm*.

Moreover, scientific vocabulary requires continual updating in the light of the process of discovery. Science is in fact the main birthplace for new words in a language: in a comprehensive English dictionary (§18), the vast majority of the words would be scientific (or technological) terms. More than 750,000 species of insect have been discovered, for example; and if all their names were incorporated into the largest available dictionaries, the books would immediately double in size.

The grammar of scientific language also contains several distinctive features. Sentences are often long and have a complex internal structure. The complexity is centred on the noun phrases (§16) rather than the verb phrases, as can be seen from the illustration below. But probably the best-known grammatical feature is the use of the passive construction: *The mixture was poured ...*

SCIENTIFIC VOCABULARY

(Dates given are of the first recorded appearance in the *Oxford English Dictionary*)

16th century

1533	catarrh
1527	cornea
1543	cranium
1551	genus
1578	glottis
1598	mumps
1551	species
1531	temperature
1548	tibia
1550	vacuum

17th century

1626	acid
1605	acoustic
1628	apparatus
1694	axis
1601	cardiac
1638	formula
1641	gravity
1605	laboratory
1615	logarithm
1656	microscope
1626	pedicle
1693	pharynx
1601	rheumatism
1668	stamen

18th century

1751	antiseptic
1791	carbonic
1791	etiolate
1771	fauna
1791	hydrogen
1794	molecule
1759	nectary
1776	neurosis
1794	nitrogen
1704	nucleus
1790	oxygen
1726	thyroid

19th century

1849	allotropy
1867	aphasia
1865	barograph
1812	centigrade
1890	chromosome
1839	cirrhosis
1832	cretaceous
1882	dynamo
1856	gyroscope
1822	laryngitis
1878	metabolism
1892	micron

20th century

1913	allergy
1946	cybernetics
1901	genetics
1951	laser
1912	millibar
1929	penicillin
1934	positron
1910	quantum
1942	radar
1912	vitamin

instead of *We poured the mixture ...* The intention behind this usage is straightforward: as in this example, it enables a description to be made impersonally, without an agent being expressed (contrasting with the use of a personal pronoun in the corresponding active construction). However, the overuse of complex passive sentences in scientific writing has attracted considerable criticism in recent years, and there is now a marked tendency to avoid them. The *Handbook for Chemical Society Authors* (1961), for example, recommends: 'Before the final typing every paper should be scrutinised to see whether it cannot be improved by eliminating abstract words and passive voices.' But the weight of traditional usage is not easy to throw off, as illustrated by this very recommendation, which itself uses two passives!

Intelligibility gap

The gap between scientific and everyday language is a large one, which it is difficult to bridge. Scientists are often unable to express themselves in terms the lay person can understand, or are too busy to bother. There is frequently a need to maintain secrecy, in such areas as national security or industrial invention. Not surprisingly, therefore, there is a widespread mistrust of scientific language, which is only partly alleviated through popular science publications and radio or television programmes. It is still the exception to find popularizations of science that maintain intelligibility while avoiding oversimplification, and that come to be acclaimed by specialist and lay person alike.

AN EXAMPLE

This short extract (G. H. Williams, 1960, pp. 252-3) illustrates well the nominal bias of scientific language. In the final sentence of the paragraph, for example, 16 of the 24 words are part of noun phrases: *Smaller quantities of tarry products ... the reported yields of diaryls ... the diazo- and azo-compounds discussed above*. By contrast, verb phrases are extremely short, and use a restricted range of items: in the whole extract we have *provide*, *be* (four times), *add*, *effect*, *obtain*, and *discuss* – typical of the 'manipulatory' meanings that the majority of the verbs in scientific language express (*adjust*, *align*, *arrange*, *begin*, *boil*, *bring*, *continue*, etc.). Note also the inverted commas, to identify the use of a vague word from everyday discourse.

(a) Preparative Use of Diacyl Peroxides

The thermal decomposition of diacyl peroxides provides what is undoubtedly the "cleanest", and, provided the required peroxide is readily available, most convenient source of aryl radicals for the arylation of aromatic substrates. The purified peroxide, which is generally crystalline, is added to the aromatic solvent, and the decomposition is effected by heating, usually to about 70–80°. Smaller quantities of tarry products are obtained, and the reported yields of diaryls are generally higher than with the diazo- and azo-compounds discussed above.

NONVERBAL EXPRESSION

A large part of scientific expression consists of representations that are wholly or partly non-linguistic in character – such as physical models, charts, pictures, maps, graphs, and diagrams. The immediacy and economy of presentation achieved by these methods is self-evident. It would be impossible to provide a coherent account in words of all the interrelationships found on a map, graph, or tree diagram, for example, and verbal descriptions of formulae and equations are often highly complex and ambiguous (§33). On the other hand, linguistic and non-linguistic modes of expression are never totally independent of each other: verbal language is always needed in order to interpret and amplify the meaning or use of nonverbal representations.



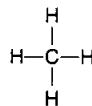
ALTERNATIVE 'LANGUAGES'

Chemists have four ways in which they can describe the substances they study: they can use a verbal label, write a formula, draw a structural diagram, or build a structural model. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. Verbal labels are basic, but their length (often several dozen morphemes, p. 90) can make them unusable. Formulae are shorter; but whereas these can display the elements of a substance, they do not show their physical relationship. The internal structure of a substance can be shown using a struc-

tural diagram; but this is restricted to two dimensions. Only structural models provide a three-dimensional picture.

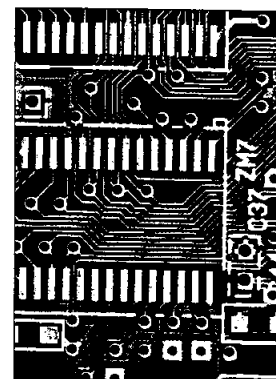
Label: METHANE

Formula: CH₄

Structural diagram: 

Structural model: 

EXPLAIN THIS!



It would be possible to provide a verbal description for this electronic circuit, but it would be so long and complex as to be unintelligible. On the other hand, the verbal description of the elements of such circuits is an essential feature of training programmes in the subject.

MATHEMATICAL EXPRESSIONS

$$\sqrt{\frac{250}{3}} + 7$$

This simple mathematical expression is unambiguous, in its non-verbal form, with all elements simultaneously present. But as soon as we attempt to read it aloud, in a serial way, complications arise. The verbal version would be: 'the square root of two hundred and fifty divided by three plus seven'. But this written formulation could be interpreted in several ways, such as:

$$\text{or } \frac{\sqrt{250}}{3} + 7$$

$$\text{or } \frac{\sqrt{250}}{3+7}$$

$$\text{or } \sqrt{200} + \frac{50}{3} + 7$$

$$\text{or } \sqrt{200} + \frac{50}{3+7}$$

In speech, careful use of intonation and rhythm could distinguish some of these interpretations, but the risk of ambiguity would always be present.

THE LANGUAGE OF MEDICINE

The field of medicine, more than any other, forces a confrontation between scientific and everyday language. Outside the world of the research laboratory and clinic, there exists the daily routine of medical practice – a communication situation in which a doctor attempts to understand the problems of a patient, and the patient attempts to understand the doctor's diagnosis. Language is involved at all points in the medical consultation. The initial statement of symptoms is of critical significance, as it guides the doctor's search for the clinical signs of the condition. Similarly, the doctor's explanation of a problem, and the recommendations for treatment, need to be clear and complete if the patient is to understand and follow the correct course of action (p. 383).

Communication problems

The need for careful listening and expression by both parties should be self-evident in a field as sensitive and serious as health. In practice, many problems arise. Patients worried about their health are often uncertain or confused in their accounts. Busy doctors will not have the time to take up every point the patient has alluded to. Moreover, there is a tradition of medical interviewing which hinders the development of a genuine communicative interaction. One study of ten major medical journals in the 1960s found general agreement about the following characteristics of doctor–patient communication (after S. B. Heath, 1979):

- 1 Topics of conversation should be restricted to those dealing with the patient's body and conditions contributing to disease.
- 2 Conversation should only be with the patients, not with relatives or friends.
- 3 It is the task of the doctor, not the patient, to ask questions.
- 4 The doctor should avoid telling all the truth, and discourage the elaboration of information from other sources.
- 5 Patients should be told that they are ultimately responsible for the improvement of their own health, which will occur only if they follow the doctor's advice.

This tradition is still widely encountered, though it has attracted criticism from both within and outside the medical profession in recent years.

Studies of medical communication have brought to light several types of situation in which there has been a breakdown of communication, and where the consultation has had an unsatisfactory outcome. Regional, social, and cultural differences between doctor and patient can all be sources of linguistic difficulty (espe-

cially in the case of immigrant patients). Even age can intervene. In one American study, the problem was so serious that it was found helpful to devise a questionnaire phrased in appropriate slang to enable older doctors to communicate with inner city teenage patients (C. C. Levine, 1970).

The careful analysis of medical interviews, using audio- or video-recorded samples, has brought to light many instances of these difficulties. Some people are naturally taciturn in formal situations, because their social or cultural background has developed in them a sense of 'knowing their place'. Some find it necessary to talk at length about unrelated topics as a preliminary to introducing their symptoms. Some play down the importance of these symptoms, because they have been brought up 'not to make a fuss'. Each type of case presents doctors with a problem of communication analysis.

But linguistic problems continue to occur even when doctor and patient share the same social background. Doctors need to be alert to pick up the linguistic cues that may express the patient's real reason for coming to the surgery ('By the way, doctor...') or the issue that is causing most subconscious worry (such as repeatedly referring to the heart during the conversation). They also need to anticipate points of potential misunderstanding – such as the common patient interpretation of the word *growth* ('You have a small growth here') to mean 'cancer', or *thrombosis* to mean 'heart disease'. Some disease names convey major negative connotations, because of the fear attached to the disease in a pre-scientific era, and this motivates change: *leprosy*, for example, is now the focus of a campaign for replacement by *Hansen's disease*.

Medical communication researchers have also drawn attention to several areas where medical staff could promote their own communicative skills – for example, by providing explanations of what they are doing to a patient while they are doing it, by welcoming questions from patients (rather than fostering the 'Doctor knows best' attitude), and by avoiding patronising or discourteous language (e.g. 'Drink it down like a good girl', said to an older female hospital patient).

Above all, medical staff need to be aware of the many functions that language can perform (§4), and in particular that language may be used to signal the desire for social contact, and need not be taken literally. For example, in one study, 40 hospital patients who asked for relief from pain were given either routine nursing attention or a visit from a nurse specially trained in communication skills: only two of the former group obtained immediate relief from their 'pain', whereas 14 of the latter group did so; and all of the former group required analgesics, compared with only six of the latter (M. B. Tarasuk *et al.*, 1965). Such findings illustrate the need for a perspective on communication to be a routine part of medical training.

SYMPTOMS OF BREAKDOWN

Several studies have collected data that indicate the kinds of communication problem that frequently arise in hospitals. Typical quotations include:

- I didn't like to ask; perhaps it's just me; I felt they might think I was prying or being nosy.
- I was strung up when the doctors were there, and forgot things.
- They would give you pills and if you asked what they were for you were told to take it and never mind. You were treated like a child, as if it was nothing to do with you if the medicine was changed. There was no reason given.
- They leave you in the dark too much. If only they treated you as if you could understand something.
- I feel better knowing. You always imagine things are worse than they are.

Many hospitals now give patients an information booklet telling them what they need to know in advance. Several researchers believe that a paragraph about communication should be a routine feature of such literature. One suggestion reads as follows:

Don't be afraid to ask the doctors or the nursing staff any questions you want to ask about your illness or its treatment or about anything else that worries you. Some people find it difficult to remember all they want to ask when the doctor or sister comes round. You may find it helpful, and it will help them, if you make a list of your questions to show them when they visit you. (C. M. Fletcher, 1973.)

The final breakdown

Nowhere has this communication gap been greater than in the management of the terminally ill patient. According to one (1970) estimate, 80% of dying patients know that they are dying and want to talk about it; whereas 80% of doctors deny this, and believe that the patient should not be told. Fortunately, the present-day climate of medical opinion seems to be changing, slowly, for the better. (W. A. Cramond, 1970.)