



THE ARCH ENEMIES OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

For many centuries scholars were mainly concerned with words. They studied words about words. They argued with words about words. And they believed they can find truth that way. They did it mostly in Latin. They felt contempt for the common languages, for the common people and for common understanding.

Then about 300 years ago courageous men with common sense revolted against the wordy professors. John Locke (1632-1704) wrote his "Essay concerning Human Understanding". He attacked the professors who blocked understanding. He accused the highbrows of deliberately making themselves not understood. "They Latin their tongue so that the people believe they speak by some sort of revelation", he cried.

Other men persuaded Charles II to issue a law against the university scholars forbidding them to "read a paper". Oozing boredom by oozing long-winded phrases in long-forgotten words to long-suffering listeners became a criminal offence. Charles II gave a Royal Charter to a new Royal Society for the Advancement of Science whose members must adhere to

"a close, naked, natural way of speaking....preferring the language of the artisan, countrymen and merchants before that of wits and scholars."

A few revolutionaries set out to make language a real tool for human understanding. The first, George Dalgarno of Aberdeen developed in 1661 a logical language and a new symbolism which he described

"I published a Synopsis...showing a way to remedy the difficulties and absurdities which all languages are clogged with...designing not only to remedy the confusion of language, by giving a much more easy medium of communication than any yet known, but also to cure even Philosophy itself of the disease of Sophism and Logomachy."

Logomachy and sophism mean a contest of words, using arguments with intention to deceive. It was a brave beginning. Seven years later, one of the founders of the Royal Society John Wilkins tried to improve on Dalgarno's work by inventing his

"Real Character, namely the expression of our conceptions by marks which should signify things and not words".

On the continent men joined in the revolution. The great mathematician Leibnitz joined Locke by writing "New Essays concerning Human Understanding." There he thought of improving on Dalgarno's and Wilkins' systems by proposing pictorial symbols "for giving thoughts less absurd and verbal than we now have" (see the chapter "Leibnitz and the new Logic" (p.29). Another revolutionary was Komenski, better known as Comenius, who introduced pictures into school books in his "Orbis Pictorum." He condemned schools and schoolmen with these words

808 Slovaks, Germans and Hungarians. The Poles seized territories where Ukrainians were in the majority. So did the Roumanians. So did others.

Suddenly all the linguistic tolerance and benevolence of the old Austrian Empire was gone. Millions of nationals woke up to find themselves as suppressed minorities in the new national and independent states. All other national schools were closed down. Street signs in other languages were torn down. It was one language to be taught and to be spoken. This is what the Roumanians did in my hometown. But they repeated only what the Hungarian linguists did before to Roumanians in Hungary. And the Hungarians did only what Prussian teachers did in the Polish provinces of Germany. But the German linguists followed only the example of the Russians. For 200 years the Lithuanian language was forbidden in Lithuania by penalty of death. When the Czarist regime broke down and Lithuania became independent, it was found that only 10% of the population could speak Russian, in spite of all the terror.

After only 20 years, the dreams of national independence of those small and weak states were shattered. Hitler knocked their dreams out. But his own dream of a German world was too big. Came Stalin who had the same dream, but he knew how to use words. And so he re-created the national and independent states of Czecho-slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Roumania, and the rest. Just in case, he kept Russian tanks and troops there. Sometimes they had to shoot at these independent nationals, but this was only to keep them national and independent of imperialist America. Now with the hindsight of past disasters many people think that the multi-national, multi-linguistic idea of the old Austrian Empire was not so bad after all. As a little boy I learned of the motto of Austria: Viribus Unitis. United we stand. Divided we fall. And fall they did. Thanks to the mad linguists of Austria, the Europe of old is now in the greatest danger of being swallowed up by the thousand year old despotism of Russia. The new Russian rulers use new words of course. They aim at the "Liberation of Mankind" they cry and they use troops, and tanks, and trials, and torture to this end.

I used to hike with my brother through Switzerland. There a view unfolded itself before our eyes, more glorious than the grandeur of the alpine scenery: the incredible fact that 4 different nationalities live in Switzerland, who think that difference in language is of no importance whatever. What is important is Viribus Unitis. They are a model democracy and the world's greatest hope that a world democracy is possible where language difference makes no difference in human relationship.

So much time has gone by, so many disasters have happened, so many people died that few are left who remember how it all started. But I remember. And once you realize the catastrophic influence of our language teachers on the disunity of mankind, you have no difficulty to find that they are doing the same disastrous thing in other countries too.