

'matter'. It is here that our direct experience over an extended period takes issue with 'the' research.

We encounter daily in our secondary classes the evidence of the atrophy of the critical faculty to which the popularisation of the humanities has led. The language of television commercials, designed by its nature as an opiate to critical thinking, is increasingly the language of English, History and General Studies essays. Tall, opaque words are gaining ground apace not simply because syndicated American soapies come cheaper but because verbiage for its own sake is seen as the better part of having something to say and knowing how to say it. Lifts have become elevators, cars have become limousines and automobiles, education has become the educative process, society has become the societal context, while 'situation', 'as such', and their ilk have achieved such random ubiquitousness as to be now largely meaningless. The content of many student essays is reduced to that chase after wind which so properly stirred Ecclesiastes to his moral depths.

To say these things is not simply to indulge in that nostalgic pining after the good old days with which each fading generation castigates the foibles of the one supplanting it. When the stock market becomes overinflated a 'correction' occurs which is something akin to the turning back the clock spoken of earlier – a salutary but periodically necessary process to restore sanity and a due sense of perspective. Similarly, it is timely now that we voice our alarm at the rapid devaluation of what ought to be our most prized possession, the language which expresses the quality of our thinking and of our lives. When its cultivation is seen either as 'irrelevant' or as of no account, and left in the fumbling hands of dilettantes in the back rooms of education departments, the writing is on the wall.

Today it is the 'communicators'. Next come the Goths.

### **Comment: I**

RONALD DUNLOP\*

And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating . . .  
T.S. Eliot, 1940

I recall observing some years ago to the mayor of my municipality that while it took humanity thousands of years to evolve modern roads, it took our local Council

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just a few months to begin closing them. Mr St Leon would agree, I think, that something comparable has happened to language studies in New South Wales. The punishment handed down to the citizens of Babel has, over the centuries, driven people to attempt to bridge the communication gap imposed on them. It is reasonable to ask if the present state of language studies in this State represents further progress or a slowing down of that task. Clearly Mr St Leon sees it as the former and as having reached a point serious enough to warrant close review and radical change.

While Australians are obviously managing to communicate with one another, there is evidence that the use of our language by what might seem to be the more articulate segments of the community is less precise and therefore less effective than it was a few decades ago. On the other hand, it may be difficult to show that there is a connection between literacy in one's own language and proficiency in a second language; but that does not preclude the possibility that both are going downhill together, and that this is true is inherent in Mr St Leon's argument. Many able language teachers will reject out of hand the notion that there is any deterioration in the teaching of English, or of foreign or of the more recently identified 'community languages', and I suspect Mr St Leon's carefully argued case will, in the first instance, provoke an even sharper polarization of views on language teaching.

The debate about the value of foreign languages as an educational discipline has gone on for many years. It seemed to those of us who had sought full recognition of their educational importance that they had been relegated to poor-relation status when universities dispensed with the modest requirement of at least one foreign language for matriculation. (There was a time not so very long ago when it was seriously argued on one university committee that a *pass* in English be not required as an admission prerequisite, provided that the student had seriously attempted the subject – whatever that meant!)

Changes in our social structure, however, have revived the language question, not so much for the educational value of foreign languages as for the need to establish language links with the increasing number of people who are resident in Australia, but do not have English as their first language, or, on their first arrival, do not have it at all. Questions about what should be done about teaching English to these people, about the place of their languages in our communities and in our education system have become major political and social as well as educational issues. Mr St Leon takes up this question in his essay but, while rightly identifying the political attractiveness of 'community languages' as against 'foreign languages' (French and German), he does not touch on their claims for recognition as areas for training in the disciplines of language. Having established that they have been used as sticks with which to beat the elitist study of French and German (Latin and Greek having

been long since lost to view in most schools), he would I am sure have views on the way in which all foreign languages could be given a common educational direction.

In identifying other problems in the teaching of languages today, Mr St Leon draws attention to the impact on it of the proliferation of comprehensive high schools. Highly qualified teachers are thinly spread over a larger student population, and this, along with an inevitable lowering of standards to accommodate a changed average level of ability, has devalued language studies when, at the end of secondary schooling, students vie for places in tertiary institutions.

The only way to cope with the increase in the demand for language teaching is, of course, to increase the number of what Mr St Leon calls 'appropriately trained teachers'. But this remedy has its own inbuilt difficulties. First, it will not affect the average quality of students, though it may offer more stimulus to some, and offer greater challenge to the abler ones. Second, the provision of appropriately trained teachers takes a long time. Given students who have qualified to enter tertiary language courses, the programme covers four or five years. If to these one adds a reasonable period spent in the home country of the language concerned, the ideal time for preparation is extended to, say, six years; and if, to provide an adequately trained intake of potential teachers, one adds in the necessary period of secondary schooling, the waiting time for a fully (ideally?) trained language teacher could be as much as eleven years. Add a couple more years for bureaucratic 'tooling up', and the logistical problem is indeed daunting. Add in the cost of the whole operation, and ask what government would, in the foreseeable future, meet it.

A short-cut solution suggested, the employment of 'a largely untapped source of native speaking teachers of our major second languages who, though they may not be specifically trained as language teachers, can be schooled over a period of years in the skills needed for teaching their native tongue to infants children', seems eminently reasonable. But it could well be on collision course with professional teacher organizations in this State. The ongoing row over the training of primary teachers for the teaching of Mathematics and Science in junior secondary classes, and the recent objections to a welfare group's efforts to remedy illiteracy and innumeracy in the community, are fair pointers to rough water ahead for the proposal.

How feasible, then, in the light of these and other problems that will arise - of reconverting schools, parents, educators, universities, institutes, colleges of advanced education, of countering the cry for 'useful' or 'relevant' school studies (the emerging meaning of education for living) and so on - is the attempt of a heroic few to retrieve the lost status of language study as an academic discipline by accepting the principles and undertaking the remedies set out in Mr St Leon's essay?

Rereading my jeremiad, I am conscious of what must seem an ungenerous response to 'The Quiet Revolution' and to the fifteen years spent putting its principles into practice. In fact, I endorse a 'call to order'. Furthermore, what has been done at Paddington, and more recently at the International Grammar School, has shown that his philosophy and methods are soundly based. Whether what he has done can be extended to language teaching state-wide or further is another matter, and it is to some of the problems involved in this that I have directed my comments.

But if more Reg. St Leons, more government endorsement and support, some approving nods from the *soi-disant* champions of the humanities, the Arts Faculties in our universities, and more particularly their language departments, are not forthcoming, it could well be that what is presented in 'The Quiet Revolution' as the cloud-cuckoo land of current language teaching will become the new Babel.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their  
language, that they may not understand one  
another's speech.

Genesis, traditionally c. 2,200 B.C.

## Comment: II

JIM NICHOLLS\*

Few people teaching languages in the universities of New South Wales would quarrel with what is said about the effects of the Wyndham scheme on language study. To take an example from my own field of interest, in 1936 candidates for Leaving Certificate Latin read about four-fifths of a speech of Cicero and the whole of a longish book of the Odes of Horace. Such a prescription has now become impossible, not because of a decline in the abilities of pupils or in the competence and dedication of teachers, but because of a decrease in the time allotted to language study, especially in the early years. It was a sad experience, over the last decades of my time at Sydney University, to attend syllabus committee meetings and to take part in the gradual reductions of course content made necessary by the changed conditions in the schools. What can be done about this?

With modern languages the solutions canvassed by Mr St Leon are, despite the difficulties they face, attractive. The difficulties are, of course, formidable. The first is the supply of teachers. I have not a great deal of confidence in the efficiency of the

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