

IMPRESSIONS OF 'TONG'

A DIRECTED LOOK at just what language is, how it behaves in social, political, and emotional life, whether it is necessary, its limits, its primacy, and ways in which language is involved in power, love, and audience. This could be an abstract for the short film, 'Tong,' directed by a friend of mine.¹ A few days ago I found a copy of J R Firth's now dated essay *The Tongues of Men* (1937) in the University's collection of books for teachers. The first sentences of chapter 1 offer a way in:

Men are strange creatures. And they know it. They recognize the gulf which separates them from what they call the dumb animals, and on the strength of speech have exalted themselves towards Heaven. This speaking business has gone to their heads, and they have held all manner of beliefs about themselves and their words.

A thread in 'Tong' is this exaltation of language for various purposes. In one case, as a way to get money, the most important thing implied by using English; I liked the tag question attached to this, 'Don't you think so?' with a falling tone by one of the Chinese actors. Since the fourth tone is used for emphasis, this is a perfect example of extra-phonological import, of language interference and the degree to which languages diverge still measuring meaning. Money is even more important than language, at least in the Chinese culture, according to the stereotypes. In this case, like money language is a tool.

Another persistent thread is identity: language as nationality. It is communion, what separates us not just from the dumb animals, but also from others not of our race or creed. It may keep lovers from loving with ease, parents from approving of a daughter's boyfriend, and say less than a picture snapped by a smart phone. Despite this idea that language is paramount, even Dave Shah, the English teacher, says that there are a million ways to say something without language, an ironic comment on his chosen trade. We can, as the poetic argument goes, speak with our eyes, and learn from looking whether someone is telling the truth or not. It

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8x-5eU33HWM>

begs the question. But still, to prove our love we should mix our identity with another even to the extent of learning the language of our lover. In this way, it was a clever stroke to allow the conversation between Shah and his former English student, a very articulate Chinese woman, as the warp of this video on the limits of language.

It's an interesting topic for me because at the moment I am considering the subject of World Englishes. This idea is not new, Karchu broached it a generation ago, but the native-speaking English folk would like to pretend they 'own' English. That ownership implies responsibility and authority. But you could point to the example of Latin splintering into French, Spanish, and Portuguese as proof that rules or authority never holds language change back. In the lovers' quarrel over Chinese is the ancient battle over what language is most powerful. To say it is not important is to avoid the question of what language means. Of course it means communication, the main notion of the piece, but it also, for many people, means identity.

At the moment, outside, on the Internet and in hearts, and in marketplaces and coffee shops people are negotiating how to use language for living, not just English but all language. Yet it is always about power. To avoid this fact is another avoidance. Whether English is better than Chinese, or Spanish more useful, French more poetic, Russian more complicated, and Sanskrit most ancient are just examples of how we wish to exalt our own tribal allegiances. The lesson of the tower of Babel was included in the Old Testament because, as Firth says, this 'speaking business' has gone to our heads.

The Chinese Actor With No Name intrigued me, too, for his offer to demonstrate both Shakespeare and Robert De Niro's character (in the 1976 movie 'Taxi Driver' about a lovelorn taxi driver). English is not just a tool to make money but a way to make global meaning. And Hamlet's words on identity, often quoted by the sophisticated and illiterate alike, which get at the basic question of why life is worth living, also aims glancingly at the question of whether language allows us comfort or merely a way to express universals? Language has many definitions: comfort, communication, tool (for gathering love, expressing emotion, acquiring money), and identity. It is always changing, always altering, often and perhaps always out of any person or institution's control. English, of course, is the current favourite. In a generation it may be Chinese. Previously it was French, and before that Latin. It may well be Arabic in the distant future.

Language, the Word, is a collection of sounds organised by a community to explain, unify, separate, and it may well be a part of what makes humans different from animals in degree rather than kind. Behind the definition is the sadness expressed by the fall of the tower of Babel: we once could communicate as a species in some universal fashion. And even this idea of a 'fall' is religious rather than rational. Life is a matter of change at the level of energy, not just language. Languages change, grow, decline, die, lose influence, gain influence. One is not better than another unless you speak of different discrete advantages. The sentence, 'I love you,' *does* sound more elegant in French than German; one can describe a machine with precision in English or German; the language of cooking is appealing in Italian or French; the brevity and ambiguity coupled with punning of Chinese or Arabic is refreshing. But none of these natural human languages is 'better,' they just represent the change that is endemic.

It was piquant to notice the Dutch Bakery mentioned in the credits since one does not normally associate baking with the Dutch but the French, a small example of my own linguistic prejudice, as well as a benefactor with a most amazing name, Philomene Rabu. Philomene, by the way, means 'powerful love' in Greek and in medieval literature was personified as the nocturnal nightingale, the 'bird of love.' In addition, the presence of Sorya Hocini, the dancer, in the video put a face to the idea that the heart is final master of the language, and that the animal part of us, which is still below the surface of the argument, goes in step with language. Firth was right. We still hold all manner of beliefs about language and ourselves. But, *in principio erat verbum*.

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