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# Spectra

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## The Tyranny of Relevance

Excerpts from the 1969 Presidential Address

Marie H. Nichols

"If we could discover the little backstairs door that for any age serves as the secret entranceway to knowledge," said the historian Carl Becker, "we will do well to look for certain unobtrusive words with uncertain meanings that are permitted to slip off the tongue or the pen without fear and without research; words which, having from constant repetition lost their metaphorical significance, are unconsciously mistaken for objective realities." According to Becker, in the thirteenth century the key words would no doubt have been God, sin, grace, salvation, heaven, and the like; in the eighteenth century such words would have been nature, natural law, first cause, reason, sentiment, humanity, perfectibility; in the nineteenth century, matter, fact, matter-of-fact, evolution, progress; in the twentieth century, relativity, process, adjustment, function, complex.

But writing in the early part of the century, Becker could not have foreseen that the little backstairs doors that would serve as an entry way to part of this age would have such unlikely keys as "hypocrisy," "white devil," "black power," "student power," "colonialism," "military-industrial complex," "racism," "the Establishment," and "relevance in education."

The history of this age will not be completely written, if it is written at all, without an understanding of the part words are playing, whether they slip lightly off the tongue or not. So important is the word that one of the spokesmen for the younger generation finds it the chief method of violence. "The central instrument of violence in American culture is not physical violence," says Mike Rossman, spokesman for the new rebels in education; "it is the word. We are violent to each other in almost no other way, and therefore the central institutions of violence in America are those that deal with the word and the killing abstraction. . . . The university may be the central instrument of violence in America." By the word the human mind is assaulted, perceptions are conditioned, authority is established, reward and punishment are

*Continued, page 9*

## EDITORIAL

A two-year effort to provide the SAA with a more functional structure and mode of governance culminated during the early morning hours of December 27 in the adoption, by a specially convened Constitutional Conference, of a new Constitution and By-Laws. If ratified by the membership, the new instruments will become effective July 1, 1970.

Despite inclement weather and the pressures of personal interests during the holiday season, forty-six of the fifty Constitutional conferees who had been elected by the membership assembled on December 26 to consider a draft document that had been prepared by a special Structure Committee. Substantive deliberations began shortly after 10:00 a.m. and concluded some sixteen hours later. While the conferees accepted much that had been recommended by the Structure Committee and its panel of thirty-eight consultants, important changes were proposed from the floor. Some were rejected; many were adopted. When presiding officer J. Jeffery Auer put the final question—that of adoption by the Conference of the new Constitution and By-Laws as amended—no dissenting voices were heard. This did not mean that all present were satisfied with, for example, the proposed new name, The Speech Communication Association, nor that all were pleased with the nine new Divisions that had been established. It did appear to signify, however, that the conferees believed that the new instruments of governance were a significant improvement over those presently in force.

Subsequently, the Administrative Council, after having received several petitions relative to the new Constitution and By-Laws, resolved that "the Administrative Council urges ratification of the new Constitution and By-Laws and that the Council, cognizant of dissatisfactions expressed by some groups regarding certain structural features of the proposed Constitution and By-Laws, expresses confidence that the amendment procedures provided are adequate to bring about change." *Spectra* agrees, and joins the Council in urging ratification; a ballot and return envelope accompany this issue.

Regardless of the outcome of the referendum, we owe a debt of gratitude to the members of the Structure Committee

*Continued, page 10*

## Prospects for a New Decade

Donald C. Bryant  
President of SAA

As the Speech Association of America and the professions which it serves enter the lists of the 1970's, there is cause for a new President, and for every member, to take a sanguine view of the difficult times immediately ahead. The evidences of size, strength, quality, and achievement which Douglas Ehninger cited in his Presidential statement in this column two years ago are as firm and clear now as then; and the "search for excellence" described by Marie Nichols a year ago seems more serious, more earnest, more wide-spread, if more diverse, than ever. It takes only the experience of coordinating the programs for the recent convention and serving in the council's of the Association and in the recent Constitutional Conference to fortify such confidence.



Donald C. Bryant

Such a program as that, in 1969, would be only one of several to be expected in a normal convention. It would be innovative only in that it would require a double meeting-period! Contemplate, besides, the National Developmental Project in Rhetoric for 1970, planned and organized by regular agencies within the SAA, enthusiastically funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and now under way. What better evidence of

*Continued, page 2*

*Relevance, Cont. from page 1*

meted out, and we are all enslaved. Hence, the schools are to be brought down with a crash.

I want to single out only one of the words—a word which is an abstraction, but which is being taken as an objective reality—and examine it for a little while, one that is gnawing at the roots of the educational structure, and of singular concern to all of us who are teachers. In its name John Gerassi at San Francisco State was hired, and in its name he was also fired. In its name Harvard's Social Studies 148 was developed and taken over by students, and in its name is also marked for elimination. In its name, both high schools and colleges have staged sit-ins, walk-outs, firebombings, and physical maiming; and on my own campus, in its name eleven files of index cards—guides to a library of more than 4,000,000 volumes—were destroyed. The name of the word is *relevance*.

After a year in office as president of SAA, Douglas Ehninger, of the University of Iowa, remarked that if he were to name priorities, he would have to give first consideration to the problem of making speech education socially relevant. Today, as never before, remarked Ehninger, "teachers of speech are faced by a challenge—a challenge to give our work at all levels and in all areas a new measure of social relevance; to search out what we as professed experts in the processes of communication can do to facilitate understanding among men and between factions; to replace divisiveness and war with consubstantiality and peace; to study not only how to make ideas safe for people, but how to make people safe for ideas."

With almost none of Ehninger's remarks could anyone disagree. But we need to ask ourselves whether or not the idea of *relevance* has not taken on more sinister aspects in our time, whether it has not become a bullying slogan, allied with power, designed to stop thought, as slogans frequently do; whether it fosters unreason, instead of reason, whether, under it, the freedom of the teacher to teach and the student to learn are not threatened, whether under it also, the curriculum is about to become a patchwork, not a unified system of teaching based on a philosophy of education, but on power, and whether under it we are preparing to sacrifice standards of excellence for we know not what.

No one doubts that the educational system needs reform, that speech training needs reform to meet the exigencies of changing times, but that effective change can be brought about by turmoil and abdication to the pressure of a slogan may well be doubted. At the time Marlene

Dixon was fired by the University of Chicago social studies department for ineffectiveness as a scholar and defended by student strikers as a "relevant" teacher, the puzzled reporter of the *Chicago American*, wandering among the sit-ins, could only scratch his head and observe: "What, for instance, is meant by that wholesome-sounding demand for more 'relevance' in teaching? Relevance to what, exactly? To the student's own personal interests, his plans for a career, his political opinions, his state of mind on a given calendar date? Would 'relevant' instruction have to shift with the prevailing moods and interests of a class, from day to day or even from minute to minute?" Relevance to *what* is indeed a key question.

In the last number of months, in addition to studying the rather mundane uses of the word *relevance* in Webster's International, I have put the term to a good many students of speech, and have accumulated quite a collection of uses. Among those uses, I find the following: it means "interesting," "important," "up-to-date," "related to the new professions," "true," "concerned with race," "concerned with democracy," "opposed to reason and rationalism," "more commitment in teaching," "opposed to de-humanization," "restoration of feeling," "autonomous education," "the fun thing," "replacing the outmoded," "doing one's thing," "learning to find one's identity."

When there is so much difference about what is wrong, encompassed in a single word, one cannot help but be troubled about whether an educational system can be structured at all. Educational philosophers like Jacques Barzun, in truth, find in the word a rallying cry for students' taking the curriculum into their own hands, or, in open scorn, setting up free universities. In it also, he finds the "clue to the whole degradation of thought and language from which the academy now suffers." "It is as absurd to try educating 'for' a century yet unborn as 'for' a present day that defies definition. Relevance is in the mind, a perception of the way ideas are related; it is not a connection between things."

At least three points of vulnerability show up in the slogan as it is applied to education in general, and possibly speech education in particular: relevance in the curriculum, relevance in teaching, and relevance of our professional organization.

A recent issue of the *Speech Teacher* contains a plea for relevance in the form of a parody on the curriculum leading to the Ph.D. in speech. The curriculum as presently structured is supposed to enable the student to answer such questions as: (1) Tell Attic Orators from Asian Orators; (2) Name all the cartilages in the human head; (3) Name 39 tropes and figures;

(4) Pick out all the enthymemes from the 'Cross of Gold' speech; (5) Recite the whole of Aristotle's Rhetoric (Roberts translation), etc. The writer, of course, takes such questions to be based upon a curriculum that grows out of an educational philosophy in the main concerned with conserving and passing on a tradition, a tradition superseded by the urgencies of our time—training for a "man prepared at the wrong time, in the wrong way, for purposes that never existed," hence socially insignificant. And under the rallying cry of relevance, our own Concerned Committee of Students and Teachers asks: "Are we a field aimed only at the perpetuation of white, middle class standards and concepts of human discourse," "an idealistic series of prescriptions for effective speaking and listening within the aforementioned norm," offering little for the student whose social existence is outside that norm.

Clearly we are on the bandwagon of a slogan. The peculiar thing is that it does not seem to have occurred to our various critics that it has always been in our power to adjust to changing conditions. No "Establishment" has brought about inadequate training, if such there is—no "hierarchy of authority"—no suppression of free speech and discussion of desirable modification of the curriculum in any direction that an alert faculty would envision. We have among us a fair number of johnny-come-lately sloganeers, and I submit a proper question is still, Relevance to what?

Suppose we do give up white middle-class standards of language training. Might we be playing the cruelest hoax of all on our minorities, as Sir Arthur Lewis, distinguished black president of the University of Guyana observes, when we know that more than 50% of the minorities will work in an integrated world, dominated for the foreseeable future by white middle-class standards? Are we to continue to adjust the minorities to the lower rungs of the economic ladder, rather than to help them claim 11% of the top-echelon positions, 11% of the middle positions to which they are entitled, rather than push them into the lower 40% of available positions, where something other than the best possible communication is acceptable.

Recently a young Australian, back from two years of teaching English in Communist China, spoke to a group of Harvard and Radcliffe students. At one point, the speaker was asked what kind of complaints motivated China's young radicals, the Red Guards. "Well," said he, "at first it was a little thing like the way teachers taught." And all around, of course, the audience chuckled knowingly.

*Continued, page 10*



Relevance, Cont. from page 9

It is a winter of the student's discontent. It is not merely that the curriculum is called into question; it is the way the teacher has been going about his classroom performance. Everywhere we hear cries that the lecture system must go, the formalized discussion must go, and every mode of instruction we have used in the past must go, this despite the fact that educators have frequently demonstrated that there is no one method of presenting materials. No one doubts that free-wheeling discussion is useful sometimes, but doctors also are being trained, and I suspect that free-wheeling discussion has little relevance to a clear and pedestrian, step-by-step exposition of what to do next, and next, and next in a heart transplant operation, and doctors, too, are our students somewhere along the way in their training; so are engineers who construct bridges over which we hope to travel in safety.

In a Manifesto of a Concerned Committee of Students and Teachers distributed to members of the Speech profession, the question was asked, Should our professional Association remain politically neutral (or apathetic) on problems and issues which confront our contemporary society and which intersect upon the assumed capabilities of the scholar, teacher, and student of speech? And I am sure that some of you were present at a convention session last December, and heard as I heard, to the accompaniment of multiple four-letter words, the whole SAA Convention declared to be "irrelevant."

What could that mean? Does it mean, "I don't like conventions"? If so, what about them do I not like: the city in which they are held? the hotel? the people who come together? the programs I did not hear? the substance of programs I did hear? Is there something better foreseen in a utopian future that should replace conventions, or what? Could it be that in the kind of society one foresees, free and rational discussion will be out of order? Could it mean that we should be passing manifestoes opposing the war in Vietnam, condemning the military-industrial complex?

I should like to know what is so irrelevant about professional people getting together either to learn or to exchange views on the relative merits of differing medical views on the causes and therapies for hoarseness in children, on the ethics of speechmaking, on new modes of presenting religious teaching, on scientific modes of studying communication, on modes of communicating with the blacks, on the relationship between business and the disadvantaged. I should like to know whose notion of relevance is to guide the

association in its preparation of scholarly reports and in its conventions. I want to know whose ideology should guide us in our judgment of what is relevant and what is not.

I share the alarm contained in a letter from a friend of mine, a former member of Hitler's youth, and now a distinguished, thoughtful member of our professional association, when he says, "When you ask me whether my professional organization should remain politically 'neutral' (or apathetic), you ask much more than that. You cause me to wonder if I may face the day when my professional association is 'captured' by political activists, who then present me with the choice of submitting to their philosophy or leaving the association."

So what are we talking about when we talk of relevance, or social relevance? Relevance to what society? A realistic one? A utopian one? Barbarism? Relevance cannot exist in a vacuum. The answer to the question, Relevant to what? consists in the answer, "Man." There is a continuity, not of the word, but of man. Relevance is determined by what man was, is, and will be—not what he now seems to be. Whoever knows the field of speech knows that other words at other times have tried to take over. The field of speech has persisted because it has always evaluated the new idea or word in terms of man's ancient, contemporary, and everlasting needs to communicate and work with other men in a changing society.

The speech teacher today must not be a cyclops with one eye only for relevance. Indeed he must be even more than a Janus looking backward and forward. He must determine what is relevant today both in terms of the past and the hopes for the future. On the day the *Saturday Evening Post* was announced as folding, a victim, not of irrelevance to its readers who were increasing in numbers, but to the advertiser and the pitchman, Eric Sevareid closed his daily editorial with these sobering words: "The tyranny of relevance may be the death of us all."

## YEARBOOK AVAILABLE

Copies of the 1969 *Freedom of Speech Yearbook*, a publication of the SAA Committee on Freedom of Speech, may be ordered at \$3.00 per copy prepaid from: Alvin A. Goldberg, School of Speech, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60201.

For a copy of the 80-page Caedmon catalog of records and tapes of the spoken word, write to: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02107.

Editorial, Cont. from page 1

and to their consultants, to the members of the Constitutional Conference, and to the presiding officer, J. Jeffery Auer, the Parliamentarian, J. Calvin Callaghan, and the Clerk, John F. Wilson.

## AWARDS PRESENTED

The fifth annual SAA Golden Anniversary Prize Fund Awards for scholarly publication were presented at the convention luncheon in New York on December 29. The recipients were selected by an Awards Committee composed of Professors Charlotte I. Lee, Raymond E. Nadeau, and John W. Black, who served as Chairman. Professor Black announced the Awards as follows:

### \$100 MONOGRAPH AWARDS:

Parke G. Burgess, "The Rhetoric of Black Power: A Moral Demand," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, LIV (April, 1968), 122-133.

Katharine T. Loesch, "The Shape of Sound: Configurational Rime in Poetry of Dylan Thomas," *Speech Monographs*, XXXV (November, 1968), 407-424.

Paul Moore, (1) "An X-Ray Study of Vocal Fold Length," *Folia Phoniatrica*, 20 (1968), 349-359.

(2) Related to the foregoing and continuing a career of photographic studies of the physiology of the speech mechanism, "An Unusual Case of Diplophonia," a color demonstration film of a young woman who sings with a double voice.

(3) Again, related to the foregoing, a critical analysis of a film and a paper concerning Vocal Fold Action presented by P. Lieberman, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 155 (November, 1968), 39-41.

(4) "Otolaryngology and Speech Pathology," *The Laryngoscope*, LXXVIII (September, 1968), 1500-1509.

Lawrence W. Rosenfield, "The Anatomy of Critical Discourse," *Speech Monographs*, XXXV (March, 1968), 50-69.

Barbara Sundene Wood, "Implications of Psycholinguistics for Elementary Speech Programs," *The Speech Teacher*, XVII (September, 1968), 183-192.

The 1970 Awards Committee will consider books and articles by SAA members published during 1969.

Persons interested in acquiring copies of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* from 1930 through 1961, approximately 120 copies, should write to Professor John C. Snidecor, Department of Speech, University of California, Santa Barbara, California 93106.