Chapter **4**

WHAT IS AN INSTITUTION? THE CASE OF LANGUAGE

WE HAVE PREVIOUSLY DEFINED institutions as regulatory patterns, that is, as programs imposed by society upon the conduct of individuals. Probably this definition did not arouse resistance on the part of the reader, since, while different from it, the definition does not seem to offend directly against the common usage of this term. In common usage the term means organizations that somehow "contain" people—such as *a* hospital, *a* prison, or, for that matter, *a* university. Or it refers to the large societal entities that are seen as hovering almost like metaphysical beings over the life of the individual—like "the state," "the economy" or "the educational system." Thus, if the reader were asked to name an institution, he would very probably come up with one of these cases. He would be right, too. This common usage, however, is too one-sided. More precisely, it associates the term too closely with those societal entities that are recognized and codified by the law. Perhaps this is an example of the influence of lawyers on the way we think. Be this as it may, for our purpose here it is important to show that the meaning of institutions in the perspective of sociology is *not* quite this. For this reason, we want to take a moment, or a short chapter, to show that language is an institution.

Indeed, we would argue further that language is very probably *the* fundamental institution of society, as well as being the first institution encountered by the individual biographically. It is fundamental, because all other institutions, whatever their various purposes and characteristics, build upon the underlying regulatory pattern of language. The state, the economy and the educational system, whatever else they may be, depend upon a linguistic edifice of classification, concepts and imperatives for individuals' actions—that is, they depend on a world of meanings that was constructed by means of language and can only be kept going by language.

Also, language is the first institution encountered by the individual. This statement may surprise. Probably, if asked about the first institution the child experiences, the reader will think of the family. Again, in a way, he is right. For the great majority of children primary socialization takes place in the context of a particular family, which in turn is a case in point of the broad institution of kinship in that particular society. And, of course, the family is a very im-

portant institution; we will discuss this in the next chapter. *But the child is unaware of this.* What he, in fact, experiences is his parents, brothers and sisters, and whatever other relatives may be around at that time. Only later does he become aware that these particular individuals, and what they do, are a case in point of the much larger social reality known as "the family." Presumably, this insight occurs as the child begins to compare himself with other children—something that hardly happens in infancy. Language, on the other hand, impinges on the child very early in its macro-social aspects. From a very early stage on, language *points to* broader realities that lie beyond the micro-world of the child's immediate experience. It is through language that the child first becomes aware of a vast world "out there," a world that is mediated by the adults who surround him but which vastly transcends them.

LANGUAGE: THE OBJECTIFICATION OF REALITY

First of all, of course, it is the child's micro-world itself that is structured by language. Language *objectifies* reality—that is, the incessant flux of experience is firmed up, stabilized, into discrete, identifiable objects. This is true of material objects. The world becomes organized in terms of trees, tables and telephones. The organization goes beyond the act of naming, of course; it also involves the meaningful relations between all these objects. The table is pushed under the tree if one wants to climb up on it, and the telephone, perhaps, summons the doctor if one falls off. Language also structures, by objectification and by establishing meaningful relations, the human environment of the child. It populates reality with distinct beings, ranging from Mommy (in most cases a sort of presiding goddess, whose throne stands in the center of an expanding universe) to the bad-little-boy who throws tantrums next door. And it is by means of language that the fact becomes established that Mommy knows best, but that bad-little-boys will be punished; and, incidentally, it is only through the power of language that such propositions can retain their established plausibility even if experience offers little or no proof.

Very importantly, it is by means of language that roles become stabilized in the experience of the child. We have already talked of roles in connection with the child's learning to take the role of the other—a crucial step in the socialization process. The child learns to recognize roles as recurring patterns in the conduct of others—the experience that we have previously described with the phrase "here he goes again." [1] This recognition becomes a permanent fixture in the child's mind, and thus in his interaction with others, by means of language. It is language that specifies, in a repeatable way, just *what* it is that the other is at again—"Here he goes with the punishing-father bit again," "Here she goes again putting on her company-is-coming face" and so on. Indeed, only by means of such linguistic fixation (that is, giving to the action of the other a fixed meaning, which can be repeatedly attached to each case of such action) can the child learn to take the role of the other. In other words, language is the bridge from "Here *he* goes again," to "Watch out, here *I* come."

LANGUAGE: THE INTERPRETATION AND JUSTIFICATION OF REALITY

The micro-world of the child is structured in terms of roles. Many of these roles, however, extend into the wider reaches of the macro-world, or, to use the reverse image, are extensions of that macro-world into the immediate situation of the child. *Roles represent institutions.*[2] As father goes through his punishing bit once more, we may assume that this performance is accompanied by a good deal of verbiage. As he punishes, he talks. What is he talking about? Some of

[1] The definition of role used here is quite conventional by now, not only in sociology but in the social sciences generally. Compare the following definition by Ralph Turner: "In . . . most . . . usages, the following elements appear in the definition of role: it provides a comprehensive *pattern* for behavior and attitudes; it constitutes a *strategy* for coping with a recurrent type of situation; it is *socially identified*, more or less clearly, as an entity; it is subject to being played recognizably by *different individuals;* and it supplies a major basis for *identifying* and *placing* persons in society." (Article on "Role: Sociological Aspects," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences,* Vol. 13 [New York, Macmillan, 1968], p. 552).

[2] We are here combining the concept of role with that of representation, as coined by Durkheim.

the talking may just be a way of giving vent to his own annoyance or anger. But, in most cases, much of the talking is a running commentary on the offending act and the punishment it so richly deserves. The talking *interprets* and *justifies* the punishment. Inevitably, it does this in a way that goes beyond the father's own immediate reactions. The punishment is put in a vast context of manners and morals; in the extreme case, even the divinity may be invoked as a penal authority. Leaving aside the theological dimension (about which, regrettably, sociology has nothing to say), the explanations of manners and morals relate the little drama in the micro-world to a whole system of macro-scopic institutions. The punishing father now represents this system (say, good behavior and morality as such); when he is at it again, that is, when he repeats the performance in a recognizable role, then that role represents the institutions of the moral system.

Language thus confronts the child as an all-encompassing reality. Almost everything else that he experiences as real is structured on the basis of this underlying reality—filtered through it, organized by it, expanded by it or, conversely, banished through it into oblivion—for that which cannot be talked about has a very tenuous hold on memory. This is true of *all* experience, but it is especially true of the experience of others and of the social world.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INSTITUTION: EXTERNALITY

What, then, are some of the essential characteristics of an institution? We will try to clarify these, using the case of language.[3] And we would make a further suggestion: in the future, if the reader comes across a statement about institutions, what they are or how they operate or how they change, a good rule of thumb will be to ask first how that statement looks when applied to language. Needless to say, there are institutions that are very different from language—think, for instance, of the state. All the same, if such a general statement, even if appropriately modified to cover a different institutional case, makes no sense at all when applied to language, then there is a good chance that something is badly wrong with the statement.

Institutions are experienced as having external reality; that is, an institution is something outside the individual, something real in a way (one might say, in a "hard" way) different from the reality of the individual's thoughts, feelings or fantasies. In this characteristic, an institution resembles other entities of outside reality—even trees, tables and telephones, all of which are *out there* whether the individual likes it or not. He cannot wish a tree away—nor an institution. Language is experienced in this way. To be sure, when someone is speaking, he is, as it were, "throwing out" something that was previously "inside" himself—not just the sounds of which language is made up but the meanings that language is intended to convey. Yet this "throwing out" (a more elegant term for this is "externalization") is in terms of something that is not the idiosyncratic creation of the speaker. He is, let us say, speaking *English*. The English language, though, was not created in the depths of his particular consciousness. It was out there long before this moment at which he is using it. It is *as* something out there that he experiences it, as well as the other he is speaking to, and both of them experienced the English language as such an outside reality when they first learned it.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INSTITUTION: OBJECTIVITY

Institutions are experienced as possessing objectivity. This is really repeating the previous statement in a slightly different form. Something is objectively real when everyone (or nearly everyone) agrees that it is actually there, and that it is there in a certain way. The last point is important. There is *correct* English and *incorrect* English—and this remains so, *objectively* so, even if an individual should think that the rules determining this are the height of folly and that he would

[3] These characteristics of an institution closely follow Durkheim's description of social facts.

have a much better, more rational way of organizing the language. Most of the time, of course, the individual gives little thought to this; he accepts the language as he accepts other objective facts in his experience. The objectivity of one's first language is particularly powerful. Jean Piaget, the Swiss child psychologist, tells the story somewhere of a small child who was asked whether the sun could be called anything else except "sun." "No," replied the child. How did he know this, the child was asked. The question puzzled him for a moment. Then he pointed to the sun and said, "Well, look at it."

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INSTITUTION: COERCIVENESS

Institutions have coercive power. To some extent, this quality is already implied by the preceding two: the fundamental power of an institution over the individual is precisely that it is objectively there and that he cannot wish it away. It may happen, though, that he overlooks the fact, or forgets it—or, even worse, that he would like to change the whole arrangement. It is at those points that the coercive power of the institution is very likely to show itself in quite crude forms. In an enlightened middle-class home, and at an age when everyone agrees that such slips are to be expected, the young child is mainly treated to gentle persuasion when he offends against the canons of correct English. This gentle power may extend to the progressive school. It will hardly extend to the child's peers in that school. They are likely to treat offenses against their own code of proper English (which, needless to say, is not quite the same as that of the schoolteacher) with brutal ridicule and possibly with physical persecution. The adult faces persecution on every side if he should continue such defiance. The working-class youth may lose his girl because he refuses to speak "nice"—as he may lose his promotion. Webster's dictionary and Fowler's *Modern English Usage* stand guard at every rung of the status ladder. But pity the middle-class youth who *continues* to speak "nice" in the army! As to the middle-aged professor, who tries to ingratiate himself with the young by speaking "their language" and who, of course, is always at least two years behind in the latter's rapidly shifting orthodoxies, *his* encounter with the coercive power of language reaches the pathos of Sophoclean tragedy.

To recognize the power of institutions is *not* to say that they cannot be changed. Indeed, they change all the time—and *must* so change, because they are nothing but the inevitably tenuous products of innumerable individuals "throwing out" meanings into the world. Thus, if everyone in America stopped speaking English tomorrow, the English language as an institutional reality in America would abruptly cease to exist. In other words, the objective existence of the language depends on the ongoing speech of many individuals who, in speaking, are expressing their subjective intentions, meanings and motives.[4] It is clear that this kind of objectivity, unlike the objectivity of the facts of nature, can never be a static one. It is always changing, is in dynamic flux, sometimes goes through violent convolutions. But *for the individual* it is not easy to bring about deliberate change. If he is by himself, in most cases, his chances of succeeding in such an enterprise are minimal. Let the reader imagine himself in the role of grammatical reformer or of innovator of vocabulary. He may have some success in his immediate micro-world. Indeed, he probably had some such success as a young child: his family may have adopted a couple of his more outrageous baby-talk creations as part of the family's in-group language. As an adult, the individual may have similar mini-victories as he speaks with his wife or his circle of close friends. But, unless he is a recognized "great writer" or statesman, or unless he goes to incredible efforts to organize masses of people around his banner of linguistic revolution (one may think here of the revival of classical Hebrew in modern Zionism or of the less successful effort to do the same for Gaelic in Ireland), his impact on the language of his macro-world will probably be close to nil on the day he leaves this vale of words.

[4] The differentiation between language and speech is derived from Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist greatly influenced by Durkheim.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INSTITUTION: MORAL AUTHORITY

Institutions have moral authority. Institutions do not simply maintain themselves by coercive power. They claim the right to legitimacy—that is, they reserve to themselves the right not only to hit the offender over the head but to reprimand him morally. Institutions, of course, vary in the degree of moral loftiness ascribed to them. This variation is usually expressed in the degree of punishment inflicted on the offender. The state, in the extreme case, may kill him; the suburban community may just snub his wife at the country club. In both cases, the act of punishing is accompanied by a sense of indignant righteousness. The moral authority of language will only rarely express itself in physical violence (though, for instance, there are situations in modern Israel where the non-Hebrew speaker may become physically uncomfortable). It does express itself in the successful stimulation of shame and sometimes even guilt in the offender. The foreign child who keeps on making mistakes in English, the poor immigrant carrying the burden of his accent, the soldier who cannot overcome his ingrained habits of linguistic politeness, the avant-garde intellectual whose erroneous jargon shows that he is not "with it" after all—these individuals suffer from more than external reprisals; like it or not, one must concede to them the dignity of moral suffering.

BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF AN INSTITUTION: HISTORICITY

Institutions have the quality of historicity. Institutions are not only facts but historical facts; they *have* a history. In almost all cases experienced by the individual, the institution was there before he was born and it will be there after he is dead. The meanings embodied in the institution were accumulated there over a long time, by innumerable individuals whose names and faces can never be retrieved from the past. Thus the speaker of contemporary American English is reiterating, without knowing it, the verbalized experiences of generations of dead people—Norman conquerors, Saxon serfs, ecclesiastical scribes, Elizabethan lawyers, not to speak of Puritans, frontiersmen, Chicago gangsters and jazz musicians of more recent times.

Language (and, indeed, the world of institutions generally) may be seen as a broad stream flowing through time. Those who sail on it for a while, or who live alongside it, keep throwing objects into it. Most of these sink to the bottom or dissolve right away. Some coagulate in such a way that they are carried along, for a longer or shorter period. Only a few make it all the way downstream, to the point where this particular stream, as all others, ends in the ocean of oblivion that is the termination of any empirical history.

An Austrian writer, Karl Kraus, has called language the house in which the human spirit lives. Language provides the lifelong context of our experience of others, of self, of the world. Even when we imagine worlds beyond this one, we are constrained to put our intimations or hopes in terms of language. Language is *the* social institution above all others. It provides the most powerful hold that society has over us.

RECENT WORK

In this chapter language has been discussed in the singular—language as *the* basic institution, language as *the* house in which the human spirit lives, and so on. In terms of the points to be made, there is nothing to be corrected there. In actual fact, of course, there are *many* languages—and thus, for different individuals, *many* basic institutions, *many* houses of language. This is obvious if one compares the languages of national cultures. The world in English is different from the world in French, and markedly different from the world in Chinese. Linguists, historians, and cultural anthropologists have gone to great pains to understand these differences. Sociologists have been more interested in language differences *within* a culture. The language of the lower classes differs from that of the upper class, for instance. It may be assumed (precisely on the basis of what has been discussed in the preceding pages) that this difference is not merely linguistic, but that it reflects a difference in fundamental social experience—a difference, that is, in terms of "world." But how? And why?

A focus of recent work in this area has been *differences in language between different classes.* An important impetus for this work has come from England, where Basil Bernstein has been studying the special characteristics of working-class language. Bernstein came to the conclusion that working-class and middle-

class people in England essentially speak different languages, each of which conveys a very different experience of the world. Bernstein's key categories are "elaborated code" and "restricted code," pertaining to middle-class and working-class language respectively. Supposedly, the "elaborated code" is much better suited for abstract thought and nuanced expressions of experience, while the "restricted code" confines its users to a more concrete, narrower range of experience. Interestingly, Bernstein's position has had different political repercussions. Thus some people with a radical approach to contemporary society have welcomed Bernstein's findings, citing them as evidence that, on top of all their other deprivations, the lower classes are also linguistically deprived. Others, with the same political approach, have criticized Bernstein for looking at the working-class through (distortive) middle-class lenses. In this country, both Bernstein's approach and the political interpretations related to it have been applied to the question of linguistic differences between whites and blacks.

The following articles, all by Basil Bernstein, contain the principal formulations of his approach:

Basil Bernstein. "Some Sociological Determinants of Perception." *British Journal of Sociology* 9 (1958):159ff. Different linguistic training of middle-class and working-class children.

———. "A Public Language." *British Journal of Sociology* 10 (1959):311ff. This "public language" is the language of the middle class. According to Bernstein it tends, among other things, to encourage conformity and to suppress the expression of tenderness.

———. "Language and Social Class." *British Journal of Sociology* 11 (1960): 271ff. A concise statement of the basic position.

———. "Aspects of Language and Learning in the Genesis of the Social Process." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (1960):313ff. The "public language" of the middle class supposedly fosters impersonality, which in turn protects social status.

———. "Linguistic Codes, Hesitation Phenomena and Intelligence." *Language and Speech* 5 (1962):31ff. Statement on the two codes, with relevant empirical data.

———. "Social Class, Linguistic Codes and Grammatical Elements." *Language and Speech* 5 (1962):221ff. More of the same.

———. "Elaborated and Restricted Code." *American Anthropologist* 64 (1964):6. A usefully concise statement on the two codes.

———. "A Sociolinguistic Approach to Socialization." In Frederick Williams, ed., *Language and Poverty*. Chicago: Markham, 1970. The two codes related to early socialization.

The following is a mélange of articles on related themes:

Martin Deutsch. "The Role of Social Class in Language Development and Cognition." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 25 (1965):78ff. Data tending to confirm Bernstein's approach.

Doris Entwisle. "Developmental Sociolinguistics." *American Journal of Sociology* 74 (1968):37ff. Data tending to disconfirm Bernstein: White slum children were found to be more advanced linguistically than white suburban children.

———. "Semantic Systems of Children." In Williams, *Language and Poverty*. Further data that put Entwisle in something like Bernstein's corner after all: *Older* suburban children surpass slum children linguistically.

F. Erickson. "A New Look at Black Dialect and the School." *Elementary English* 46 (1969):495ff. Data on American blacks, anti-Bernstein in tendency.

William Labov. In Williams, *Language and Poverty*. A blast at Bernstein-like approaches: The notion of linguistic deprivation is a middle-class myth.

W. P. Robinson. "The Elaborated Code in Working Class Language." *Language and Speech* 8 (1965):243ff. Data tending to modify some of Bernstein's conclusions.

A recent book offers a useful summary of the Bernstein controversy and also places it in a broader context of political sociology:

Claus Mueller. *The Politics of Communication*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

The Reader suggests quite different texts for this chapter:

Iona and Peter Opie, "The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren." From a fascinating British study of the language of children.

Matthew Speier, "Selecting an Identification by Means of Social Categories." How language orders social experience.

Anne Sullivan, "Helen Keller Acquires Language." From the moving account, by her teacher, of Helen Keller (who was both blind and deaf-mute) discovering the wonders of language.

Jean Piaget, "The Language and Thought of the Child." From the work of the famous Swiss child psychologist.

Russell Lynes, "Introduction to Nancy Mitford's 'Noblesse Oblige.'" On the language of social class (nothing to do with Bernstein).