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BEACH-LA-MAR

THE JARGON OR TRADE SPEECH OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC

BY

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BEACH-LA-MAR

THE JARGON OR TRADE SPEECH OF THE
WESTERN PACIFIC
CHAPTER I.

PARENTAGE OF THE JARGON.

Jargon is the speech of necessity. It is like its mother in that it knows not the law by which it is rigidly governed.

A jargon is a speech of chips and fragments seized wherever found and used to such end as may be accomplished by brute force of sheer insistence. Because its origin lies in the need of simple men for the communication of a selection of their most simple ideas a jargon is rude, it is vivid, it is picturesque. Not only does it avail to show us to what lowest terms a superior speech may be reduced and yet serve as language, but it affords us a valuable insight into the machinery and method of the language of the more primal type which stands as the party of the second part in every such speech.

For each jargon has grown into being as the speech of the marches, the language of the borderland.

By this we do not mean the bilingual zone which exists along political boundary lines where empires of two speech families come together and evade the sentry and the customs officer in a friendly smuggling. Where a jargon arises and attains currency there must be a marked distinction in the cultural and in the intellectual planes of the two languages which march together. This speech osmosis is most active in the case where the relatively inferior man of the superior speech and culture is brought in small numbers into contact with larger masses of folk of the lower development but of more consistent average attainment to the maximum of that development. In other words, we are to note that the savage maintains much the higher average; no member of such a community falls so far short as to be regarded as ignorant by his fellows. Under usual social conditions this contrast of two cultures out of which jargon tends most readily to come into being is most commonly attained by the contact of our sailors with the savage or imperfectly civilized communities.

In such cases it is well to bear in mind the classic of the scrivener—it is the party of the first part who doth grant, assign and convey; it is the party of the second part who most doth have and hold. Our sailor party of the first part is of the unlettered class, he has no illusions about the niceties of language, his speech is not nice at all. An
inflection, a shade of meaning, a canon of grammar—he is perfectly ready to sacrifice them all if only he may succeed in making himself in some sort comprehended. Placed in the same situation the philologist, the amateur of the preciosity of speech, would be dead in the misunderstanding in about the time that it would take the sailor to establish a thriving business on the beach in which iron nails serve each as price for a log of sandalwood worth its weight in silver. Under this stimulation—and beads are good trade, too—the savage is avid to acquire the sailor's speech and to teach his own. Thus jargon best, most commonly, begins.

Of the jargons, artificial yet valuable languages, we list the following as among the most conspicuous examples.

First in order of time, and on a Latin base, was the Lingua Franca of the Venetians and Genovese in the Levant, when those Italian ports served empires of commerce. By an odd portage among the crews of the adventurous fleets of Prince Henry the Navigator, the Portuguese (Portingales in the speech of their English rivals) carried this jargon to the Malay seas, where it underwent new growth in the admixture of Indonesian elements and lives in ready currency.

Next arose the trade language of the treaty ports of China, the still existing Pidgin. Here the base is English. The conditions under which it came into being are beautifully typical. The English were not of that order of mind which might set itself to the task of acquiring the highly cultivated language of the Middle Kingdom; nor on the terms of their scantily tolerated residence at a few mean points, whose infamy was notorious matter of local knowledge, did they have the time to engage upon such study. Scorning the inferior foreign culture which was so lacking in the dignity of courtesy, the Chinese were disposed to acquire only so much of the new language as might serve them in business, and a sympathy which can see beneath the unruffled calm of Chinese benignity will have no difficulty in discerning the pleasures of disdain with which consciously they mutilated the English speech and when they charily added a word or two of their own were sedulous to draw it from the polluted speech of the most ignoble classes.

Of about the same period, but on the other shore of the Pacific, we next note the Chinook, the jargon of the fur trade, of the sailors upon the sea and the no less adventurous voyageurs du bois. Here the conditions were somewhat different; the fur-trader usually established himself in approximately permanent relations with some nomadic community of Indians and accompanied them in their wanderings over somewhat well delimited territory. For this reason the great mass of this jargon is derived from several Indian languages—each, however, subjected to the typical and necessary mutilation. The external element is fairly divisible between an English and a
French source, for if the Astoria trappers were users of English the
rangers of the Hudson's Bay Company were preponderantly French
or Breeds. As showing that the importance of jargon study was early
recognized, we may note in passing that among the earliest of the
publications of the Smithsonian Institution in its youth was the
Gibbs dictionary of Chinook.

Our next example in chronological order is the Beach-la-mar
jargon of the southern and western Pacific islands with a certain
extension to the nearest littoral of Australia. It is this which is to
engage our attention in this study and may therefore be postponed
in this summary schedule.

In the Guianas the Negro English, a magma of an already jarg-
goned mass from various African sources, now mingled with English
and other European material, has been in such use that it has
advanced toward respectability: the Scriptures have been printed
in the language.

Within thirty years a wonderful expansion has taken place in a
jargon on the west coast of Africa, the Krooboy. The base of this is
English, but fragments have been caught up from many sources,
African and European, along a thousand leagues of Gold Coast,
Ivory Coast, Palm Coast. The spread of this new and rapidly grow-
ing jargon is due to the fact that merchant vessels find it economi-
cally advantageous to supplement their crews with drafts of Kroomen
for the heavy work of handling cargo on unwholesome beaches.

It would not be pertinent to the present topic to essay the making
of a complete list of these languages, lusty in spite of the bend sinister.
We might readily add the Gombo and the Cajun of Louisiana, the
bâtarid French of Haiti, the Papimiente and other mixed tongues of
the West Indies, much of the Spanish of Mexico and of the Latin
republics. The few which have been presented with a brief note in
the foregoing paragraphs have been introduced solely for the purpose
of showing that jargons have a respectable history and that in the
present time the actuating causes are still potent to create new
jargons when the conditions are meet.

Our present study shall be directed upon the Beach-la-mar, a
jargon of wide extent but of scanty record; for it has come to its
growth in a plane far below that in which interest in speech for itself
becomes active. Thus it has lacked its historian, its records are
scattered through a few books of travel in the South Sea whenever
the crudities of its diction have seemed to the recorder sufficiently
droll to add a comic touch to descriptive pages. Even of record of
such sort we find but a brief collection, as will be shown in the notes
and bibliography following the vocabulary of this treatise.

There seems no limit to the life of the spoken word; anything
which pretends to be speech lives on and on and may appear long
after and far away. While this sketch of the Beach-la-mar was taking shape the jargon phraseology was reproduced on the witness stand in the New York Supreme Court. The witness had solemnly averred that King Johnson of a Solomon island "has been going to college for forty years and he can read and write as well as any one aboard ship." The statement lacks verisimilitude, but no such default attaches to the further testimony of the witness that this savage monarch addressed him in the following terms: "Long fellow man he come ashore, he tell me plenty yarn."

The name of this jargon gives us some clue to its place and time and manner of origin. Beach-la-mar is the common sailor mispronunciation of bêche-de-mer, a name applied to the edible trepang, which, as a delicacy to palates sufficiently acute to enjoy the niceties of its faint flavor, fetches a high price in the Chinese markets. At the time of the beginning of the commercial exploitation of the islands of the South Pacific the reefs and lagoon shallows in these archipelagoes, more particularly from Fiji along the chains of islands of the Western Pacific, abounded in these holothurians. Now, although the demand remains as great as ever, these reefs are unproductive; they have been fished bare in the absence of a reasonable system of protection of this sluggish game. It is only in Fiji, with its recent British government, that any attempt has been made to restore the depleted waters and under proper supervision to provide a source of revenue for the islanders.

The manner of the first commercial exploitation of the islands we shall find germane to the consideration of the genesis of the mixed speech which grew out therefrom. The great voyages of European explorers, bent upon the discovery of the secrets of the Pacific, reached their period of greatest activity in the middle and in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Voyages there had been before that. Gaetano found the eight islands of the Hawaiian group and left no record save a few names dotted on his chart of the way of the Manila galleon upon the sea. Quiros and Mendaña sailed for the gold of Ophir in the Solomon Islands; they even colonized in the northern bay of Espiritu Santo the half-mythical city of a New Jerusalem at the mouth of a River Jordan; but their work lacked permanence in itself and made no appeal to other adventurers. In like manner the exploration of the Pacific did not cease with Cook and Vancouver. In the early years of the nineteenth century no less lustre was shed by the voyages of the unfortunate La Pérouse and of Dumont d'Urville. That century was more than a generation old when Wilkes cleared up the secrets which had escaped the zeal of the long line of his glorious predecessors.

Upon the track of these many voyages of scientific geography flocked fleets of commercial geographers, merchant seamen intent