SUSANNE K. LANGER
Language

SUSANNE K. LANGER (1895–1985) was raised in Manhattan and developed a youthful interest in philosophy. At Radcliffe College of Harvard University, she studied with Alfred North Whitehead and a host of other distinguished philosophers. Whitehead was her advisor when she earned her doctorate in philosophy in 1926. Since there were no openings for female philosophy professors at Harvard at that time, she was appointed as a tutor there from 1927 to 1942. Thereafter, she taught at the University of Delaware, Wellesley College, Smith College, and Columbia University. From 1952 to 1962, Langer taught at Connecticut College, which in those years was a women's college. The Edgar J. Kaufmann Fund awarded her a grant that permitted her to continue her research and writing until her death in 1985.

Langer's career as a teacher was distinguished, and her influence as a philosopher in studies of the mind and of the arts has been widespread. Her *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942) is probably her most widely read book. It deals with the fundamental issues involved in the human disposition to use symbolism as a means of communication on many levels. Her views established the relationship of symbol to language and language formation as well as developed an understanding of other kinds of symbols by which we shape our lives. As she says in *Philosophy in a New Key*, "The development of language is the history of the gradual accumulation and elaboration of verbal symbols. By means of this phenomenon, man's whole behavior-pattern has undergone an immense change from the simple biological scheme, and his mentality has expanded to such a degree that it is no longer comparable to the minds of animals." Langer's concentration

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From *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art.*

on the uses of symbols led her to see how our cultures developed and how our arts flourished.

Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (1953) continued her studies of symbolic development by demonstrating how we use symbols in the arts to express our feelings. Among the interesting ideas Langer championed was her assurance that the arts are the only things that truly educate our emotions. She continued and deepened her studies in *Problems of Art: Ten Philosophical Lectures* (1957), another major contribution to the study of symbols in the arts. Her final work was a three-volume study called *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* that was published between 1967 and 1982.

Langer's Rhetoric

Langer's interest is in the acquisition of language by humans, so one of her strategies is to contrast how infants learn language with what we know about experiments with primates and the success experimenters have had trying to teach them language. Her focus is on vocalization rather than on signing. In experiments conducted several decades after Langer wrote, some primates were taught to use signs as a means of communication, and some of them, such as the famous Washoe, seem to have been able to express complex thoughts. But Langer's emphasis on vocalization separates her concerns from those of later researchers.

Because she is speaking to an audience with a deep interest in language, another of her rhetorical strategies is to reference experts in the field whose research helps her establish her own understanding of how humans develop the ability to communicate through language. She refers to several primary experts and quotes a few of them fully enough for us to understand how they relate to her argument. Additionally, when quoting from some of these authorities, she also relies on narrative, such as her references to Victor, the "Savage of Aveyron," who was discovered in the wilderness of France when he was twelve. He seemed to have been abandoned as an extremely young child and never to have lived with another human nor to have been exposed to language. He was studied very carefully, especially by Dr. Jean Marc Gaspard Itard, who spent several years trying to teach him language. The experiment was a failure despite very arduous efforts to try to make Victor understand the relationship between a word's sound and the object it represented. Langer takes this experiment seriously and offers a complex set of analyses to try to explain why Victor could not use

language and why he lacked the intellectual capacity to determine vocalizations as indicators of meaning.

Her main point concerns the relationship between a word and its conceptualization as a symbol of meaning rather than a word as a sign of an object. She begins the essay with what seems like a difficult concept, but as she continues, her meaning becomes clear. She says, "The notion that the essence of language is the formulation and expression of conceptions rather than the communication of natural wants . . . opens a new vista upon the mysterious problem of origins" (para. 1). As she goes on to demonstrate, Victor does not say *eau*, French for *water*, when he wants water. If he says it at all, it is only because he is amused at its sound. Language, Langer says, does not develop because people want something and then vocalize the word that correlates with that want, but instead language develops when infants conceptualize the sound that they hear with a meaning of some kind. They may discover it associatively, as when the vocalization *ma-ma* is responded to by a mother, or they may discover it by the sensory means by which Helen Keller, who had been born blind and deaf, discovered the meaning of the word *water* when it was flowing over her hand.

Langer's interest in language centers on its symbolic virtues. She sees the human mind as distinct from the minds of other animals because of the human ability to think symbolically and therefore to elevate vocalizations to the status of language designed to interpret symbols and therefore communicate complex and subtle ideas. In one of her more unexpected observations, she suspects that there is a connection between certain human activities that she feels must have preceded our use of language, such as dance and rituals. Such activities, she suggests, may have hastened and shaped our urge to speak and communicate.

PREREADING QUESTIONS: WHAT TO READ FOR

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of Susanne K. Langer's "Language." Keeping them in mind during your first reading should help focus your attention.

- What is the value of lalling in the infant stage of development?
- What is the optimum period of learning for language?
- Why does Langer emphasize the point that language is conceptual?

Language

The notion that the essence of language is the formulation and 1
expression of conceptions rather than the communication of natural wants (the essence of pantomime) opens a new vista upon the mysterious problem of origins. For its beginnings are not natural adjustments, ways to means; they are purposeless lalling-instincts, primitive aesthetic reactions, and dreamlike associations of ideas that fasten on such material. The preparations for language are much lower in the rational scale than word-uses; they can be found below the evolutionary level of any communication by sounds.

Moreover, this originally impractical, or better, *conceptual,* use of 2
speech is borne out by the fact that all attempts to teach apes or the speechless "wild children" to talk, by the method of making them ask for something, have failed; whereas all cases where the use of language has dawned on an individual, simian or human, under such difficult circumstances, have been independent of the practical use of the word at the moment. Helen Keller's[1] testimony has already been cited; after all her teacher's efforts in formal daily lessons to make the child *use* words like "cup" and "doll" to obtain the denoted objects, the significance of the word "water" suddenly burst upon her, not when she needed water, but when the stream gushed over her hand! Likewise, Yerkes'[2] efforts to make Chim use an articulate syllable to ask for a piece of banana all failed; he articulated no "word" resembling the speech of man, nor did he seem to establish a relation between the sound and any particular object. Furness,[3] on the other hand, carefully kept all practical interests out of his experiment. He tried only to associate an impression, a visual experience, with a word, so that by constant association the two should fuse, not as sign and result, but as name and image; and he has had the greatest success on record so far as I know.

But the most decisive and, at the same time, pathetic evidence 3
that the utilitarian view of language is a mistake, may be found in the story of Victor, the Savage of Aveyron,[4] written by the young doctor who undertook to study and educate him. Since the boy always took notice when anyone exclaimed "Oh!" and even imitated the sound, Dr. Itard undertook to make him use the word *"eau"* as a *sign* when he

[1] **Helen Keller (1880–1968)** Born deaf and blind, she learned language after a struggle with and because of the persistence of her teacher, Anne Sullivan.

[2] **Robert Yerkes (1876–1956)** Worked with primates to see if they could learn language.

[3] **William Furness (1867–1920)** Tried to teach an orangutan the word *cup.*

[4] **Savage of Aveyron** Victor, a young boy discovered in the forest near Aveyron. He had lived without human contact for most of his life and had little ability to learn language.

wanted water; but this attempt failed because he used every sign *but* the vocal one, and water could not be indefinitely withheld to force the issue. So a second attempt was made with the word *"lait,"*[5] of which Itard gives the following account:

"The fourth day of this, my second experiment, I succeeded to the 4
utmost of my wishes; I heard Victor pronounce distinctly, in a manner, it must be confessed, rather harsh, the word *lait,* which he repeated almost incessantly; it was the first time that an articulate sound had escaped his lips, and of course I did not hear it without the most lively satisfaction. I nevertheless made afterwards an observation, which deduced very much from the advantage which it was reasonable to expect from the first instance of success. It was not till the moment, when, despairing of a happy result, I actually poured the milk into the cup which he presented to me, the word *lait* escaped him again, with evident demonstrations of joy; and it was not till after I had poured it out a second time, by way of reward, that he repeated the expression. It is evident from hence, that the result of the experiment was far from accomplishing my intentions; the word pronounced, instead of being the sign of a want, it appeared, from the time in which it was articulated, to be merely an exclamation of joy. If this word had been uttered before the thing that he desired had been granted, my object would have been nearly accomplished: then the true sense of speech would have been soon acquired by Victor; a point of communication would have been established between him and me, and the most rapid progress must necessarily have ensued. Instead of this I had obtained only an expression of the pleasure which he felt, insignificant as it related to himself, and useless to us both. . . . It was generally only during the enjoyment of the thing, that the word *lait* was pronounced. Sometimes he happened to utter it before, and at other times a little after, but always without having any view in the use of it. I do not attach any more importance to his spontaneous repetition of it, when he happens to wake during the course of the night."[6]

Another word which Victor acquired quite spontaneously was 5
"Li," which Itard identifies as the name of a young girl, Julie, who stayed at the house for several weeks, to Victor's great delight; but this word he uttered to himself, all the time, and "even during the night, at those moments when there is reason to believe that he is in a profound sleep," so no importance was attached to it as a sign of reason.

Unfortunately, the young doctor was such a faithful disciple of 6
Locke and Condillac[7] that after his "failure" with the word *"lait"* he

[5] ***lait*** French for "milk."

[6] *The Savage of Aveyron,* pp. 93–96. [Langer's note]

[7] **Locke and Condillac** John Locke (1632–1704) and Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–1780) were both important philosophers of the mind who had observations about the acquisition of language.

gave up the attempt to teach the Wild Boy spoken language, and tried to instruct him in the deaf-mutes' alphabet instead. Victor picked up a few spoken words, subsequently, by himself; but as he merely said them when he contemplated their objects with joy or sorrow, not when he *lacked* anything, no one paid much attention to these "mere exclamations" or made response to them.

Young children learn to speak, after the fashion of Victor, by 7
constantly using words to bring things *into their minds,* not *into their hands.* They learn it fully whether their parents consciously teach them by wrong methods or right or not at all. Why did Victor not defy the doctor's utilitarian theories and learn language by the babbling method?

Because he was already about twelve years old, and the lalling- 8
impulse of early childhood was all but completely outgrown. The tendency to constant vocalization seems to be a passing phase of our instinctive life. If language is not developed during this period, the individual is handicapped—like the apes—by a lack of *spontaneous phonetic material* to facilitate his speech experiments. The production of sounds is conscious then, and is used economically instead of prodigally. Victor did not articulate to amuse himself; his first word had to be stimulated. Wild Peter, we are told, never babbled to himself, though he sang a great deal; Kamala,[8] the surviving little "wolf-girl" found at Midnapur, had learned about forty words at the end of six years in human surroundings, and formed sentences of two or three words; but even with this vocabulary, which would serve a three-year-old to carry on incessant conversations, Kamala *never talked unless she was spoken to.* The impulse to chatter had been outgrown without being exploited for the acquisition of language.

In a social environment, the vocalizing and articulating instinct of 9
babyhood is fostered by response, and as the sounds become symbols their use becomes a dominant habit. Yet the passing of the *instinctive phase* is marked by the fact that a great many phonemes[9] which do not meet with response are completely lost. Undoubtedly that is why children, who have not entirely lost the impulse to make random sounds which their mother tongue does not require, can so easily learn a foreign language and even master several at once, like many English youngsters born in India, who learn not only one vernacular, but speak with every native servant in whatever happens to be

[8] **Kamala** In 1920 in Mindapore, India, Kamala and her sister, Amala, were found after having been raised by a wolf. They were feral and looked and acted like wolves. Amala died, but Kamala was helped by a minister's wife to learn a few words and begin acclimating to civilized life.

[9] **phonemes** The smallest distinctive sounds in a language.

his dialect. A British psychologist, J. W. Tomb,[10] has called attention to this phenomenon and concluded from it that children have a *linguistic intuition* which is lost later in life.

But *intuition* is a slippery word, which has to cover, in this case, 10
understanding, reproduction, and use—i.e., independent, analogous application—of words. It is hard to imagine any "intuition" that would bestow so many powers. It is better, perhaps, to say that there is an *optimum period of learning,* and this is a stage of mental development in which several impulses and interests happen to coincide: the lalling instinct, the imitative impulse, a natural interest in distinctive sounds, *and a great sensitivity to "expressiveness" of any sort.* Where any one of these characteristics is absent or is not synchronized with the others, the "linguistic intuition" miscarries.

The last requirement here mentioned is really the "higher func- 11
tion" of the mind that shines forth so conspicuously in human intercourse; yet it is the one that linguists and psychologists either overlook entirely, or certainly do not credit to early childhood. The peculiar impressionability of childhood is usually treated under the rubric of attention to exact colors, sounds, etc.; but what is much more important, I think, is the child's tendency to read a vague sort of *meaning* into pure visual and auditory forms. Childhood is the great period of synesthesia;[11] sounds and colors and temperatures, forms and feelings, may have certain characters in common, by which a vowel may "be" of a certain color, a tone may "be" large or small, low or high, bright or dark, etc. There is a strong tendency to form associations among sensa that are not practically fixed in the world, even to confuse such random impressions. Most of all, the overactive feelings fasten upon such flotsam material. Fear lives in pure *Gestalten,*[12] warning or friendliness emanates from objects that have no faces and no voices, no heads or hands; for they all have "expression" for the child, though not—as adults often suppose—anthropomorphic form. One of my earliest recollections is that chairs and tables *always kept the same look,* in a way that people did not, and that I was awed by the sameness of that appearance. They *symbolized* such-and-such a mood; even as a little child I would not have judged that they *felt* it (if any one had raised

[10] **J. W. Tomb (fl. 1925)** Psychologist who wrote an article on the "intuitive capacity of children to learn language."

[11] **synesthesia** Neurological condition in which one sensory experience generates another, as in perceiving different numbers as being different colors or connecting a visual stimulus with a smell.

[12] ***Gestalten*** German term meaning a collection of elements—psychological, physical, or environmental—that work together to form a whole, or a pattern. In this sense, Langer means that fear is a perception of a pattern that is incompletely understood.

such a silly question). There was just such-and-such a look—dignity, indifference, or ominousness—about them. They continued to convey that silent message no matter what you did to them.

A mind to which the stern character of an armchair is more 12
immediately apparent than its use or its position in the room, is oversensitive to expressive forms. It grasps analogies that a riper experience would reject as absurd. It fuses sensa that practical thinking must keep apart. Yet it is just this crazy play of associations, this uncritical fusion of impressions, that exercises the powers of symbolic transformation. To project feelings into outer objects is the first way of symbolizing, and thus of *conceiving* those feelings. This activity belongs to about the earliest period of childhood that memory can recover. The conception of "self," which is usually thought to mark the beginning of actual memory, may possibly depend on this process of symbolically epitomizing our feelings.

From this dawn of memory, where we needs must begin any 13
firsthand record, to adolescence, there is a constant decrease in such dreamlike experience, a growing shift from subjective, symbolic, to practical associations. Sense-data now keep to their categories, and signify further events. Percepts become less weighted with irrelevant feeling and fantasy, and are more readily ranged in an objective order. But if in theory we count backward over the span which none of us recollect, and which covers the period of learning language—is it likely that the mind was realistic in its earlier phase? Is it not probable that association was even more trivial, more ready, and that the senses fused more completely in yielding impressions? No experience belongs to any class as yet, in this primitive phase. Consider, now, that the vocal play of the infant fills his world with *audible actions,* the nearest and most completely absorbing stimuli, because they are both inner and outer, autonomously produced yet unexpected, inviting that *repetition* of accidental motions which William James[13] deemed the source of all voluntary acts; intriguing, endlessly variable noises mysteriously connected with the child himself! For a while, at least, his idle experiments in vocalization probably fill his world.

If, now, his audible acts wake echoes in his surroundings—that 14
is to say, if his elders reply to them—there is a growth of experience; for the baby appears to recognize, gradually, that the sound which happens there and comes to him, is the *same* as his lalling. This is a rudimentary abstraction; by that sameness he becomes aware of the tone, the product of his activity, which absorbs his interest. He repeats that sound rather than another. His ear has made its first judgment.

[13] **William James (1842–1910)** One of America's most important psychologists.

A sound (such as "da-da," or "ma-ma," probably) has been *conceived,* and his diffuse awareness of vocalizing gives way to an apparently delightful awareness of a vocable.

It is doubtful whether a child who never heard any articulate 15
sounds but his own would ever become conscious of different phonemes. Voice and uttered syllable and the feeling of utterance would probably remain one experience to him; the babbling period might come and go without his recognizing any *product* of his own activity. If this guess is correct, it is easy to understand why Victor and Wild Peter did not invent language, and were nearly, if not entirely, past the hope of acquiring it when they were socialized.

A new vocable is an outstanding *Gestalt.* It is a possession, too, 16
because it may be had at will, and this itself makes it very interesting. Itard tells us that when Victor pronounced his first word he repeated it "almost incessantly"; as does every baby who has learned a new syllable. Moreover, an articulate sound is an entirely *unattached* item, a purely phenomenal experience without externally fixed relations; it lies wide open to imaginative and emotional uses, synesthetic identifications, chance associations. It is the readiest thing in the world to become a symbol when a symbol is wanted. The next sharp and emotional arrest of consciousness, the next deeply interesting experience that coincides with hearing or uttering the vocable, becomes fixed by association with that one already distinct item; it may be the personality of the mother, the concrete character of the bottle, or what not, that becomes thus identified with the recognizable, producible sound; whatever it is, the baby's mind has hold of it through the word, and can invoke a conception of it by uttering the word, which has thus become the *name* of the thing.

For a considerable time, playing with conceptions seems to be the 17
main interest and aim in speaking. To name things is a thrilling experience, a tremendous satisfaction. Helen Keller bears witness to the sense of power it bestows. Word and conception become fused in that early period wherein both grow up together, so that even in later life they are hard to separate. In a sense, language is conception, and conception is the frame of perception; or, as Sapir[14] has put it, "Language is heuristic . . . in that its forms predetermine for us certain modes of observation and interpretation. . . . While it may be looked upon as a symbolic system which reports or refers or otherwise substitutes for direct experience, it does not as a matter of actual behavior stand apart from or run parallel to direct experience but completely interpenetrates with it. This is indicated by the widespread feeling, particularly

[14] **Edward Sapir (1884–1939)** One of the most important early American linguists.

among primitive people, of that virtual identity or close correspondence of word and thing which leads to the magic of spells. . . . Many lovers of nature, for instance, do not feel that they are truly in touch with it until they have mastered the names of a great many flowers and trees, as though the primary world of reality were a verbal one and as though one could not get close to nature unless one first mastered the terminology which somehow magically expresses it."[15]

18 The fact is that our primary world of reality is a verbal one. Without words our imagination cannot retain distinct objects and their relations, but out of sight is out of mind. Perhaps that is why Köhler's[16] apes could use a stick to reach a banana outside the cage so long as the banana and the stick could be seen in one glance, but not if they had to turn their eyes away from the banana to see the stick. Apparently they could not look at the one and *think of* the other. A child who had as much practical initiative as the apes, turning away from the coveted object, yet still murmuring "banana," would have seen the stick in its instrumental capacity at once.

19 The transformation of experience into concepts, not the elaboration of signals and symptoms, is the motive of language. Speech is through and through symbolic; and only sometimes signific. Any attempt to trace it back entirely to the need of communication, neglecting the formulative, abstractive experience at the root of it, must land us in the sort of enigma that the problem of linguistic origins has long presented. I have tried, instead, to trace it to the characteristic human activity, symbolic transformation and abstraction, of which prehuman beginnings may perhaps be attributed to the highest apes. Yet we have not found the commencement of language anywhere between their state and ours. Even in man, who has all its prerequisites, it depends on education not only for its full development, but for its very inception. How, then, did it ever arise? And why do all men possess it?

20 It could only have arisen in a race in which the lower forms of symbolistic thinking—dream, ritual, superstitious fancy—were already highly developed, i.e., where the process of symbolization, though primitive, was very active. Communal life in such a group would be characterized by vigorous indulgence in purely expressive acts, in ritual gestures, dances, etc., and probably by a strong tendency to fantastic terrors and joys. The liberation from practical interests that is already marked in the apes would make rapid progress in a species with a definitely symbolistic turn of mind; conventional meanings

[15] From Sapir, Article "Language." [Langer's note]

[16] **Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967)** Studied primates and wrote *The Mentality of Apes* (1917).

would gradually imbue every originally random act, so that the group life as a whole would have an exciting, vaguely transcendental tinge, without any definable or communicable body of ideas to cling to. A wealth of dance forms and antics, poses and maneuvers might flourish in a society that was somewhat above the apes' in nonpractical interests, and rested on a slightly higher development of the symbolific brain functions. There are quite articulated play forms, verging on dance forms, in the natural repertoire of the chimpanzees; with but a little further elaboration, these would become most obvious material for symbolic expression. It is not at all impossible that *ritual*, solemn and significant, antedates the evolution of language.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. What does the experiment with Victor tell us about the optimum period for learning language?
2. When do sounds become symbols? (See para. 9.)
3. Do you agree that lalling by infants is as crucial to developing language as Langer says it is?
4. Why is expressiveness important when talking about language acquisition (para. 10)?
5. In paragraph 8, Langer refers to "*spontaneous phonetic material*." What is she referring to and why is it important?
6. Langer points out that Victor did not vocalize when he needed something. She says this is true of infants as well. Does your experience bear her out?
7. Langer says very young children articulate sounds to amuse themselves. Is this true?

SUGGESTIONS FOR CRITICAL WRITING

1. If you have observed very young children beginning to use language, how much of what they do is similar to what Langer says they do? She speaks about the chattering instinct as being one of the most crucial forms of behavior for young children learning language. Have you observed the chattering instinct? Do young children repeat the same sound over and over as Langer says they do? How does that seem to help young children master language? Do your experiences validate Langer's views?
2. In one of Langer's most striking observations, she says, "Young children learn to speak, after the fashion of Victor, by constantly using words to bring things *into their minds*, not *into their hands*" (para. 7).