

...EDITORIAL

By the President of the Therolinguistics Association¹

What is Language?

This question, central to the science of therolinguistics, has been answered — heuristically — by the very existence of the science. Language is communication. That is the axiom on which all our theory and research rest, and from which all our discoveries derive; and the success of the discoveries testifies to the validity of the axiom. But to the related, yet not identical question, What is Art? we have not yet given a satisfactory answer. Tolstoy, in the book whose title is that very question, answered it firmly and clearly: Art, too, is communication. This answer has, I believe, been accepted without examination or criticism by therolinguists. For example: Why do therolinguists study only animals? Why, because plants do not communicate. Plants do not communicate; that is a fact. Therefore plants have no language; very well; that follows from our basic axiom. Therefore, also, plants have no art. But stay! That does not follow from the basic axiom, but only from the unexamined Tolstoyan corollary.

What if art is not communicative? Or, what if some art is communicative, and some art is not?

Ourselves animals, active, predators, we look (naturally enough) for an active, predatory, communicative art; and when we find it, we recognise it. The development of this power of recognition and the skills of appreciation is a recent and glorious achievement. But I submit that, for all the tremendous advances made by Therolinguistics during the last decades, we are only at the beginning of our age of discovery. We must not become slaves to our own axioms. We have not yet lifted our eyes to the vaster horizons before us. We have not faced the almost terrifying challenge of the Plant. If a non-communicative, vegetative art exists, we must rethink the very elements of our science, and learn a whole new set of techniques. For it is simply not possible to bring the critical and technical skills appropriate to the study of Weasel murder mysteries, or Batrachian erotica, or the tunnel sagas of the earthworm, to bear on the art of (the rata), the redwood or the zucchini. This is proved conclusively by the failure — a noble failure — of the efforts of Dr. Srivas, in Calcutta, using time-lapse photography, to produce a lexicon of Sunflower. His attempt was daring, but doomed to failure. For his approach was kinetic — a method appropriate to the communicative arts of the tortoise, the oyster, and the sloth. He saw the extreme slowness of the kinesis of plants, and only that, as the problem to be solved.

But the problem was far greater. The art he sought, if it exists, is a non-communicative art: and probably a non-kinetic one. It is possible that Time, the essential element, matrix, and measure of all known animal art, does not enter into vegetable art at all. The plants may use the meter of eternity. We do not know. We do not know. All we can guess is that the putative Art of the Plant is entirely different from the Art of the Animal. What it is, we cannot say; we have not yet discovered it. Yet I predict with some certainty that it exists and that when it is found it will prove to be, not an action, but a reaction: not a communication, but a reception. It will be exactly the opposite of the art we know and recognise. It will be the first passive art known to us.

Can we in fact know it? Can we ever understand it?

It will be immensely difficult. That is clear. But we should not despair. Remember that so late as the mid-twentieth century, most scientists, and many artists, did not believe that Dolphin would ever be comprehensible to the human brain—or worth comprehending! Let another century pass, and we may seem equally laughable. “Do you realise,” the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, “that they couldn’t even read Eggplant?” And they will smile at our ignorance, as they pick up their rucksacks and hike on up to read the newly deciphered lyrics of the lichen on the north face of Pike’s Peak. And with them, or after them, may there not come that even bolder adventurer—the first geolinguist, who, ignoring the delicate, transient lyrics of the lichen, will read beneath it the still less communicative, still more passive, wholly atemporal, cold, volcanic poetry of the rocks: each one a word spoken, how long ago, by the earth itself, in the immense solitude, the immenser community, of space.

Anne Noble, 2022

¹ ‘Editorial’ is an extract from a short story by Ursula K. Le Guin titled, *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*, in which she imaginatively invents the research fields of Therolinguistics (from the Greek, wild beasts) and Phytolinguistics, as disciplines advancing the study of non-human languages. *The Author of the Acacia Seeds* is a compilation of excerpts from a series of fictional academic papers that speculate on the form and content of non-human languages. ‘Editorial’ is one of these excerpts.

* *The Author of the Acacia Seeds (And Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics)* Ursula K. Le Guin, (1974) Included in the collection of essays, *Ursula K. Le Guin, The Compass Rose* (London: Gollanz, 1983).