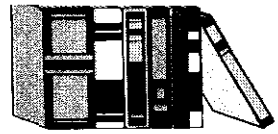


# The Blumenfeld Education Letter



"My People Are Destroyed For Lack Of Knowledge" HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks.  
"Without vision, the people perish."

## Whole Language, Linguistics, and the Wittgenstein Connection

Anyone intimately involved in the ongoing battle being waged in primary reading between the advocates of intensive, systematic phonics and those of whole language knows that an immense cultural and spiritual chasm lies between the two pedagogical philosophies. The best way to demonstrate the depth of this chasm is to simply juxtapose the definitions of reading as given by both sides of the conflict.

The traditional phonetic concept of reading is clearly given by Noah Webster in his *American Dictionary of the English Language* published in 1828. He writes:

Read: to utter or pronounce written or printed words, letters or characters in the proper order; to repeat the names or utter the sounds customarily annexed to words, letters or characters.

Webster's definition is a straightforward description of what is done when a person "reads." It consists of uttering what is written or printed in the proper order. This implies that an alphabetically written or printed message is an exact representation of its original spoken equivalent. It also implies that characters, such as numbers, rep-

resent specific, unambiguous words. It should be stated at this point that Webster was an orthodox Christian who believed that language was given to man by God at the time of man's creation. He writes:

We read in the Scriptures, that God, when he had created man, "blessed them; and said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea," &c. God afterward planted a garden, and placed in it the man he had made, with a command to keep it, and to dress it; and he gave him a rule of moral conduct, in permitting him to eat the fruit of every tree in the garden, except one, the eating of which was prohibited. We further read, that God brought to Adam the fowls and beasts he had made, and that Adam gave them names; and that when his female companion was made, he gave her a name. After the eating of the forbidden fruit, it is stated that God addressed Adam and Eve, reproving them for their disobedience, and pronouncing the penalties which they had incurred. In the account of these transactions, it is further related that Adam and Eve both replied to their Maker, and excused their disobedience.

If we admit, what is the literal and obvious interpretation of this narrative, that vocal sounds or words were used in these communications between God and the progenitors of the human race, it results that Adam was not only endowed with intellect for

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understanding his Maker, or the signification of words, but was furnished both with the faculty of speech and with speech itself, or the knowledge and use of words as signs of ideas, and this before the formation of woman. Hence we may infer that language was bestowed on Adam, in the same manner as all his other faculties and knowledge, by supernatural power; or, in other words, was of divine origin: for, supposing Adam to have had all the intellectual powers of any adult individual of the species who have since lived, we can not admit as probable, or even possible, that he should have invented and constructed even a barren language, as soon as he was created, without supernatural aid. It may indeed be doubted whether, without such aid, men would ever have learned the use of the organs of speech, so far as to form language. At any rate, this invention of words and the construction of a language must have been by a slow process, and must have required a much longer time than that which passed between the creation of Adam and of Eve. It is, therefore, probable that *language*, as well as the faculty of speech, was the *immediate gift of God*. We are not, however, to suppose the language of our first parents in paradise to have been copious, like most modern languages; or the identical language they used, to be now in existence. Many of the primitive radical words may and probably do exist in various languages; but observation teaches that languages must improve and undergo great changes as knowledge increases, and be subject to continual alterations, from other causes incident to men in society.

By giving Adam the power of speech, God gave man the ability to know objective reality, to know truth—which Webster defines as: “Conformity to fact or reality; exact accordance with that which is, or has been, or shall be.” In fact, the first purpose of language for Adam was to enable him to know God, his Creator. That knowledge, in and of itself, established the basis for knowing the truth, the existence of God and the objective reality created by God. Thus, the believer speaks of the universe as God’s creation.

According to Webster, Adam’s initial vocabulary was given to him by God. Adam did not initially invent words which he then taught God. It had to be the other way around. But then God brings before Adam

every living creature, “and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof.” And so Adam became an objective observer of the natural world around him, he became the world’s first scientist and the world’s first lexicographer.

## Linguistics and Evolution

As a believer and a linguist, Webster defined linguistics as “the science of languages, or of the origin, signification, and application of words.” Modern linguists, however, begin with the premise that man is the product of evolution and that man, therefore, created language through a process of evolutionary development without the help of any supernatural deity. In other words, language is an arbitrary set of voice noises made by man to represent thought. Of course, even evolutionists can accept the notion that man developed and used language as a means of getting a grip on reality. Why else would language have been developed?

Curiously enough, Noam Chomsky, the world’s leading linguist, believes that man is indeed the product of evolution but that his language faculty is not. He writes:

[I]t is almost universally taken for granted that there exists a problem of explaining the “evolution” of human language from systems of animal communication. . . . [H]uman language appears to be a unique phenomenon, without significant analogue in the animal world. If this is so, it is quite senseless to raise the problem of explaining the evolution of human language from more primitive systems of communication that appear at lower levels of intellectual capacity. (*Language and Mind*, p. 67)

As far as we know, possession of human language is associated with a specific type of mental organization, not simply a higher degree of intelligence. There seems to be no substance to the view that human language is simply a more complex instance of something to be found elsewhere in the animal world. This poses a problem for the biologist, since, if true, it is an example of true “emergence”—the appearance of a qualitatively different phenome-

non at a specific stage of complexity of organization. (p. 70)

In fact, the processes by which the human mind achieved its present stage of complexity and its particular form of innate organization are a total mystery. (p. 97)

Furthermore, Chomsky believes that man's language faculty is biologically and genetically predetermined, that it is innate. In fact, his view is about as close to a Biblical creationist view as a humanist scientist can come to. He writes:

The human mind appears to consist of different systems, each intricate and highly specialized, with interactions of a kind that are largely fixed by our biological endowment; in these respects it is like all other known biological systems, the physical organs of the body below the neck, for example. One of these systems is the human language faculty. It is particularly interesting because it is a common property of humans, with little if any variation apart from quite serious impairment, and it appears to be unique to the human species; contrary to much mythology, other organisms appear to lack even the most rudimentary features of the human language faculty, a fact that has been shown quite dramatically in recent studies of apes. Thus human language appears to be a true "species property," and one that enters in a central way into our thought and understanding. (*The Reading Teacher*, Dec. 1994, p. 330)

As for his views on the teaching of reading, Chomsky says:

As a linguist, I have no particular qualifications or knowledge that enables or entitles me to prescribe methods of language instruction. (*Ibid.*, p. 332)

Thus, Kenneth Goodman's claim, that his idea of reading being a "psycholinguistic guessing game" was suggested by something Chomsky said, may be a product of Goodman's strained imagination. From what Chomsky writes about a child's acquisition of language, it seems to be anything but a game. He writes:

The person who has mastered any human lan-

guage has developed a system of knowledge that is rich and complex. This cognitive system provides specific and precise knowledge of many intricate and surprising facts. It seems that the mind carries out precise computational operations, using mental representations of a specific form, to arrive at precise conclusions about factual matters of no little complexity, without conscious thought or deliberation. The principles that determine the nature of the mental representations and the operations that apply to them form a central part of our biologically determined nature. They constitute the human language faculty, which one might regard as an "organ of the mind/brain." (*Language and Problems of Knowledge*, p. 131)

But there are those among psycholinguists who believe that the evolutionary development of language was and still is a subjective psychological process with a rather loose connection to objective reality. The implication is that man, by creating language, creates reality out of his own head. Thus internal reality is considered more real than external reality which is interpreted subjectively. Consequently, "truth" is within, not without. Such an idea is anathema to adherents of the Bible who believe that God gave man language to enable him to *know* objective reality, not create it.

## The Chasm

In other words, language divorced from God makes no sense to the believer, while for the atheist cognitive psychologist or linguist, language derived from God is not only unbelievable but not even worthy of discussion. That is why, despite Chomsky, the chasm between evolutionists and creationists is so deep and so wide. That is why cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner could complain in his memoir about "becoming the target of the ultra-right in America for espousing a curriculum that included a beautifully crafted account of human evolution. The hounds of creationism were set

baying!" Thus, the chasm is political as well as philosophical.

And now we shall present a whole-language, psycholinguistic definition of reading as given by three whole-language professors in their book, *Whole Language: What's the Difference?* published in 1991:

From a whole language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process (Rosenblatt 1978; Goodman 1984), reading is not a matter of "getting the meaning" from text, as if that meaning were in the text waiting to be decoded by the reader. Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provide and the knowledge they bring with them (of language subsystems, of the world) to construct a unique interpretation. Moreover, that interpretation is situated: readers' *creations* (not retrievals) of meaning with the text vary, depending on their purposes for reading and the expectations of others in the reading event. This view of reading implies that there is no single "correct" meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings. (p. 19)

Obviously, when one compares this definition of reading to Webster's, one can see the stark difference between the two. Webster's is based on the premise that God endowed man with the power of speech so that man could know and deal with external as well as internal reality objectively. Webster defines the alphabet as "the series of letters which form the elements of speech." Thus, an alphabetic writing system represents spoken language, and that to read, as Webster explains, is "to utter or pronounce written or printed words, letters, or characters, in the proper order." In other words, one derives meaning—or the message—from text by decoding the text accurately. The author's message may be clear or unclear, but that judgment cannot be made until the message is accurately decoded and articulated in the form of speech.

The whole-language approach is quite different. It implies that it is the reader's

subjective interpretation that determines what the author's message is, regardless of what the author intended to convey. Thus, in whole language the reader, not the author, creates the meaning, the reader, not the author, creates the message.

## A Holistic Reflex

This view of reading naturally affects the way reading is taught in whole-language classrooms. The children are taught to develop a holistic reflex, that is, to automatically look at printed words as whole configurations, like Chinese characters, rather than see the words alphabetically in their phonetic components. They are taught strategies rather than phonetic decoding, although some whole-language teachers will equate strategies with decoding. The children are taught to rely on configuration cues, picture cues, context cues, syntactic cues, and graphophonemic cues—that is, some letter sounds, or phonemic cues, as one of the strategies to be used in reading. But this information becomes largely irrelevant phonetic knowledge in the child's head which is rarely if ever used. Why? Because it is discouraged by whole-language teachers who advocate "taking risks," or guessing, and using word substitutions to arrive at meaning. Besides, when a child has developed a holistic reflex, it requires conscious effort to apply phonetic knowledge, effort which most children are reluctant to make because it slows down the reading process.

It is odd that a reading philosophy that puts so much emphasis on "meaning" should encourage guessing and word substitutions which make a mockery of accurate meaning. Indeed, we read in *Evaluation: Whole Language, Whole Child* by Jane Baskwill and Paulette Whitman (Scholastic, 1988):

The way you interpret what the child does will

reflect what you understand reading to be. For instance, if she reads the word *feather* for *father*, a phonics-oriented teacher might be pleased because she's come close to sounding the word out. However, if you believe reading is a meaning-seeking process, you may be concerned that she's overly dependent on phonics at the expense of meaning. You'd be happier with a miscue such as *daddy*, even though it doesn't look or sound anything like the word in the text. At least the meaning would be intact. (p. 19)

The inference is that the phonics-oriented teacher who wants to help the child read the text accurately by helping her improve her decoding skills is somehow not interested in meaning. In whole-language, readers are supposed to "create meaning" rather than derive it from the text. The concept of accuracy gets totally lost in the process. But we live in a high-tech civilization in which accuracy is exceedingly important, and to give a child the impression that it isn't is doing the child a tremendous disservice. Yet, whole-language advocate Julia Palmer, president of the American Reading Council, when questioned about word substitutions by a reporter from the *Washington Post* (11/29/86), replied: "Accuracy is not the name of the game."

How can a high-tech civilization advance with that kind of philosophy governing the education system?

## The Meaning of Meaning

The confusion is over the word "meaning" and how it is being used by whole-language educators. They define "reading" as "creating meaning." In fact, the Kentucky Department of Education describes its whole-language view of reading in its Outcome Based Education program as: "Students construct meaning from a variety of print materials for a variety of purposes through reading."

In phonics, children are taught to de-

code an author's message before they decide what it means. In other words, there is a difference between such questions as: "What does the message say?" and "What does the message mean?" Whole-language educators not only confuse the two but equate the two. And one can imagine the confusion this creates in the mind of a child.

The phonics-oriented teacher wants to make sure that the child can "read" or decode what "the author says," and in simple children's books the authors generally mean what they say, or what they say can be easily understood. What authors "mean" is what high school and college students might reflect on as they read works of greater complexity that challenge the intellect.

But where did this confusion about meaning, which seems to be at the heart of the psycholinguistic approach to reading, originate? Where did Kenneth Goodman get his idea of reading being "a psycholinguistic guessing game?" He says he got it from Chomsky who suggested "that readers make tentative decisions as they strive to make sense of text, and they remain ready to modify their tentative decisions as they continue reading." We can already see within this statement a confusion between the process of finding out what the author is saying, by decoding, and determining what he or she means, by interpretation or analysis. Obviously, not all texts require interpretation or analysis. But to use such a confusing concept as the basis for primary reading instruction can only lead to enormous confusion and frustration among children.

## The Wittgenstein Factor

Perhaps we can best understand where all of this confusion came from by seeking its philosophical source since so many whole-language advocates insist that whole language is a philosophy and not a method of

instruction. The one name that stands out among many lesser lights is that of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), the Austrian-born English philosopher who taught at Cambridge University from 1929 to 1947. His two chief works, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) and *Philosophical Investigations*, published posthumously in 1953, have profoundly influenced not only modern philosophy, but also psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology. Indeed, one finds references to Wittgenstein in the books of Chomsky, Jerome Bruner, and virtually every other author dealing with language. Indeed, it is quite possible that the term "whole language" itself is derived from a passage in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein begins his treatise by quoting a passage from Augustine's *Confessions* in which Augustine describes how he learned language by associating words with objects. Wittgenstein writes:

In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. (p. 2)

Wittgenstein is simply restating the Augustinian notion of language. But then he begins a very long, tedious process of testing the limits of that idea. He writes:

That philosophical concept of meaning has its place in a primitive idea of the way language functions. But one can also say that it is the idea of a language more primitive than ours. (p. 3)

Wittgenstein then presents us (in §2) with an example of a very primitive language of only four words based on the Augustinian model. He writes:

We could imagine that the language of §2 was the *whole* language of A and B; even the whole language of a tribe. . . . (p. 4) [Emphasis in the original.]  
We can also think of the whole process of using

words in (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games "language games" and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game. . . . (p. 5)

I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the "language-game". (p. 5)

## Psycholinguistic Guessing Game

Is this where Kenneth Goodman got his idea for calling the whole-language concept of reading "a psycholinguistic guessing game"? In any case, Wittgenstein proceeds in his investigation of the Augustinian concept of words as names of objects. He writes:

But what, for example, is the word "this" the name of in language-game (8) or the word "that" in the ostensive definition "that is called . . ."?—If you do not want to produce confusion you will do best not to call these words names at all. . . . (p. 18)

This queer conception springs from a tendency to sublime the logic of our language—as one might put it. The proper answer to it is: we call very different things "names"; the word "name" is used to characterize many different kinds of use of a word, related to one another in many different ways;—but the kind of use that "this" has is not among them. . . . (p. 18)

This is connected with the conception of naming as, so to speak, an occult process. Naming appears as a *queer* connexion of a word with an object.—And you really get such a queer connexion when the philosopher tries to bring out the relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word "this" innumerable times. For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday. And here we may indeed fancy naming to be some remarkable act of mind, as it were a baptism of an object. And we can also say the word "this" to the object, as it were address the object as "this"—a queer use of this word, which doubtless only occurs in doing philosophy. (p. 19)

At this point, Wittgenstein begins speculating about the concept of "meaning." He writes:

Let us first discuss *this* point of the argument: that a word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it.—It is important to note that the word "meaning" is

being used illicitly if it is used to signify the thing that 'corresponds' to the word. That is to confound the meaning of a name with the *bearer* of the name. . . . (p. 20)

For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (p. 20)

Wittgenstein then quotes Socrates who says: "For the essence of speech is the composition of names." (p. 21) Once more, we are touching base with Augustine. But then Wittgenstein decides to wade into deeper philosophical water. Using the notion that the word "this" is not a name, he tries to use it to make distinctions between "simple constituent parts" and "composites," and between "names" and "descriptions." He writes:

For naming and describing do not stand on the same level: naming is a preparation for description. Naming is so far not a move in the language-game—any more *than* putting a piece in its place on the board is a move in chess. We may say: *nothing* has so far been done, when a thing has been named. It has not even got a name except in the language-game. This was what Frege meant too, when he said that a word had meaning only as part of a sentence. (p. 24)

That concept strikes a familiar note in whole language, where children are not taught to read words in isolation but only in sentences so that they can get the "meaning."

From this point on, Wittgenstein wanders off into endless philosophical speculation about the language-game. He seems to be saying that we are all locked in the language-game and that the philosopher is trying to find a way out but can't. He says:

We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound, essential, in our investigation, resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order existing between the concepts of proposition, word, proof, truth, experience, and so

on. This order is a super-order between—so to speak—super-concepts. Whereas, of course, if the words "language", "experience", "world", have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door". (p. 44)

The question "What is a word really?" is analogous to "What is a piece in chess?" . . .

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language. (p. 47)

The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of the discovery.

When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of every day. Is this language somehow too coarse and material for what we want to say? Then how is another one to be constructed?—And how strange that we should be able to do anything at all with the one we have! (p. 48)

## Wittgenstein on Reading

And so, even though Wittgenstein sees language as a game, it is a game played on an Augustinian playing field. Nor would he approve of reading being defined as a "psycholinguistic guessing game." In investigating the word "reading," he writes:

First I need to remark that I am not counting the understanding of what is read as part of 'reading' for purposes of this investigation: reading is here the activity of rendering out loud what is written or printed; and also of writing from dictation, writing out something printed, playing from a score, and so on.

The use of this word in the ordinary circumstances of our life is of course extremely familiar to us. But the part the word plays in our life, and therewith the language-game in which we employ it, would be difficult to describe even in rough outline. . . .

Now what takes place when, say, [an adult] reads a newspaper?—His eye ~~passes~~ as we say—along the printed words, he says them out loud—or only to himself; in particular he reads certain words by taking in their printed shapes as wholes; others when his eye has taken in the first syllables; others again he reads syllable by syllable, and an occasional one perhaps letter by letter. . . .



Now compare a beginner with this reader. The beginner reads the words by laboriously spelling them out--some however he guesses from the context, or perhaps he already partly knows the passage by heart. Then his teacher says that he is not really reading the words (and in certain cases that he is only pretending to read them).

If we think of this sort of reading, the reading of a beginner, and ask ourselves what reading consists in, we shall be inclined to say: it is a special conscious activity of mind. . . .

The word "to read" is applied differently when we are speaking of the beginner and of the practised reader. . . . (pp. 61-62)

But when we think the matter over we are tempted to say: the one real criterion for anybody's reading is the conscious act of reading, the act of reading the sounds off from the letters. (p. 63)

And if I so much as look at a German printed word, there occurs a peculiar process, that of hearing the sound inwardly. (p. 67)

I feel that the letters are the reason why I read such-and-such. For if someone asks me "Why do you read such-and-such?"—I justify my reading by the letters which are there. (p. 68)

Obviously, Wittgenstein would be appalled by what whole-language people call "reading"! But Wittgenstein had no control over how future academics would interpret his philosophical ideas. He wrote:

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach from one side and know your way about; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about. (p. 82)

What is your aim in philosophy?—To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. (p. 103)

My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense. (p.133)

In a way, Wittgenstein brought philosophy to a dead end, by simply making us aware of the limits of language. But if we understand the functions of language in Biblical terms, then we understand that the primary purpose of language is to enable us to know truth.

It is no accident that we read in the Gospel According to St. John (1:1):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

God endowed man with what Chomsky calls our "language faculty" or our "species-specific human possession" so that man, made in God's image, would be able to know truth. The language that God gave man provides him with limitless capabilities to seek and know truth, to know what is, what exists. For the unbeliever, however, it isn't the limits of language that confine him, but the limits of truth, the limits of objective reality, the limits of what exists.

That is why for the believer, "the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32), but for the unbeliever the truth is an unspeakable prison.

## Quotable Quote

The foundations of modern philosophy are in Descartes. His thinking made the individual consciousness the world's basic reality and the starting point of all philosophy. Man's ego, the "I", took precedence over God and the world. Not surprisingly, the logic of this led to Hume, who dispensed with God and the world as epiphenomena, and even the mind was eroded to the point that it was only momentary states of consciousness rather than a reality. Immanuel Kant went a step further; things in themselves, i.e., realities, are unknowable and only phenomena can be known. The real world is thus not a valid area of knowledge, because we can only know appearances. As Schopenhauer put it, the world is will and idea.

Philosophy thus set the stage for the substitution of role-playing, i.e., phenomena, for the real man, the thing in itself, reality. It could thus be said that clothes make the man (or woman), and that a good front is essential; appearances become everything.

. . . The results have been devastating. Role playing in the theater ends commonly in a curtain call and a pay check. In real life, politics, role playing leads instead to disaster.

—R. J. Rushdoony, Chalcedon Position  
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