

# The QUARTERLY JOURNAL of SPEECH

VOLUME XXXVII

APRIL 1951

NUMBER 2

---

## SPEECH AT MID-CENTURY

Horace G. Rahskopf

MR. CHAIRMAN, fellow-presidents, and colleagues in the teaching of speech:

The mid-century is a time of great rejoicing for all of us in the Speech Association of America. This is our thirty-sixth anniversary. Since 1914 we have grown from seventeen founders to a membership of nearly 6,000. Our program, now carried on with an annual budget of more than \$50,000, involves extensive committee and organizational activities. Our research and educational publications are significant and are increasing in number; many of them have been developed in cooperation with other major educational groups. The range of our educational interests is now typified by the position of our Association as a department of the National Education Association and a constituent member of the American Council on Education, as well as by our affiliation through the Committee on Debate Materials with the National University Extension Association. We anticipate an even wider range of affiliations

with major teaching and research groups at the national level. We also have close working relationships with flourishing affiliated and regional organizations representing the varied aspects of our broad field of human activity. The importance of speech in human life has probably never been more widely understood or greatly appreciated than it is at this hour. We have, therefore, a basis for optimism as we move forward into the second half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless we should not forget that our nation and the world exist in grave emergency. Pride of achievement is pleasant but is also dangerous if it gives us a false sense of well-being. The vital question for us now is, "How can we best serve the nation and the life of freedom?" To that question I invite your attention. The search for the best avenues of service requires frank recognition of our limitations and errors; and though I do not like to be a negative critic, I shall not speak softly.

We scarcely need to be told that the world crisis has intensified both the challenges and the opportunities for our profession. I want to discuss these challenges and the significance of these opportunities from three standpoints: first, from the standpoint of the world scene;

*Mr. Rahskopf (Ph.D., Iowa, 1935) is Professor and Executive Officer of the Department of Speech at the University of Washington. "Speech at Mid-Century" is his address delivered as President of the Speech Association of America at the Convention in New York, December 28, 1950.*

second, from the standpoint of education in our own country; and third, from the standpoint of the place of speech in American education.

### I

The world scene is obviously one of turmoil and confusion. Communism, brooding over us like a dark and vaporous cloud, infiltrates the atmosphere of freedom. In the Council of Nations communication between peoples is hindered by falsehood masquerading as truth. Some men suffer from the delusion that conflict is a fundamental process of human life and that violence is an ultimate means to power. Mankind seems not to have learned that persuasion is more lasting than violence and that the cooperative pooling of ideas is greater than either violence or persuasion. Self-interest befores the landscape, narrows our vision, and clogs the channels of our communication.

Under such conditions free men have difficulty seeing clearly the path before them. We Americans are endangered not merely by power from abroad, but also by our own internal limitations and weaknesses. One of these weaknesses lies close to the main theme of our Convention at this mid-century: As a people we are deficient in the processes by which policy is formulated. We fumble and hedge; we quarrel among ourselves. Like the rest of mankind, we too have served the gods of competition and conflict and have allowed them to hinder that meeting of minds on which democracy depends. In plain terms, we are deficient in communication. Here is one of the most serious weaknesses in our bastion of defenses for democracy.

### II

The unpleasant truth is that education in America is partly responsible for this ineptitude of our people. The

charge may sound extreme. Communication and speech have never received greater emphasis than they are given today; at least we are talking about them more than ever. Nevertheless, the deeper meanings of these processes are often distorted and neglected; in this hour of crisis we pay heavy toll for superficiality.

Is a bill of particulars necessary? We need only look around us.

First, some thinkers in this area are so preoccupied with the instruments for transmission of symbols that they fail to make careful examination of the symbols themselves. Is not communication often discussed as though it were primarily a technological matter? Yet the machines and the circuits are not communication nor even the symbols of communication.

Second, some of the curricula of our American schools give little hint that scholars have long recognized the oral as the primary form of language. The emphasis in teaching has been, and to a considerable extent still is, on writing. The importance of effective writing certainly cannot be questioned, but our emphasis in education should be on speech, the immediate, face-to-face medium by which men think and act together. In our schools the assumption is still made that any one trained in language and literature is therefore qualified to teach speech. This assumption and its corollary, that writing is more basic than speaking, are among the chief confusions of educational thought in our time. Even the concept of "language arts" has in actual practice often reduced speech to a kind of oral verbalism and has missed the larger implication that speech is man's basic symbolic medium for social and intellectual activity.

Third, many plans for "general edu-

cation" do lip-service to the importance of communication but overlook the truth that speech is its primary form. We are amazed at the extent to which educational leaders have failed to observe the function of speech in social and intellectual life. Many of them have reduced speech to a narrow verbalistic or noisemaking process and have not understood that it is of the essence of our common humanity.

Finally, our educational system has been so permeated by verbalistic and elocutionary concepts of speech that our people have not fully learned to use the processes of face-to-face cooperative thinking on which democracy depends. Many of our students enter college and some of them graduate with the idea that speech is simply oral composition, or, worse yet, merely performance.

These are some random evidences of educational confusion in the area of communication where the fate of free institutions is now being settled. American education is fiddling at the job of teaching speech while the fires of misunderstanding and conflict threaten to destroy us.

### III

We students and teachers of speech share responsibility for the muddled state of thinking about communication in our educational system. Let us glance at ourselves.

First, some of us apparently have not learned that cooperation is more fundamental than conflict. A few of us are still beating the tournament drums, priding ourselves on the numbers of contests engaged in and the number of decisions won. A very few of us are still using "smart" practices to win such decisions. The value of competition is undeniable; pro and con debating has an important place in modern life. Nevertheless, some of us have not seen competi-

tion and debating in their true perspective, and have not given the cooperative processes of discussion the emphasis which their social importance justifies. We must admit that some of the sins we have committed in the name of competition are a disgrace to education.

Second, many of us are uncertain what we mean by the term *fundamentals of speech*. In some of our colleges the course called "Fundamentals of Speech" is essentially a course in elementary public speaking, in others it is essentially voice and diction. Some of our leading departments of speech have given up the attempt to offer a general introductory course and have established in its place a sequence of elementary courses in public speaking, voice and diction, and oral interpretation of literature. One of our most urgent needs is some agreement about what is *fundamental* in speech behavior.

Third, in like manner many of us are not certain what we mean by *elements of speech*. Does that phrase refer to the various aspects of a speaker's action, or to the features of the setting of an act of speech, or to the different forms and uses of speech? Some uses of this term suggest all three of these meanings; and lists of the elements of speech, written by leading authorities in our field, include these different types of elements without discrimination. We need to systematize our analysis of speech behavior.

Fourth, some of us are not even sure what we mean by the term *speech*. One illustration of our confusion will serve. In the literature of our field I have seen the statement, "All speaking is public speaking." Now the obvious truth intended is that all speaking is social. Nevertheless many a student and many a citizen will be puzzled and confused by the statement, especially if he has

taken the trouble to observe that speech occurs not only as public speaking but also in such forms as conversation, discussion, reading aloud, and acting. His confusion will not be diminished by the fact that some of our best-known textbooks, whose declared purpose is to present a course of basic training in speech and not just in public speaking, are nevertheless primarily texts on public speaking. The talk given before a group may indeed be our readiest means of general speech improvement in a classroom situation; but that fact does not justify the blunt statement by some of our leaders that all speaking is public speaking. Even casual observation shows the utter nonsense of such an assertion. Are we really so confused and careless that we cannot clarify and systematize the distinction between speech as a basic human process and the various forms in which speech occurs? Our students and the public we serve have a right to expect clearer thinking from us.

Finally, some of us who teach speech have apparently not realized that our specialisms are but partial approaches to one great primary aspect of human life. We seem not to understand that our many different avenues of study and teaching—such as public speaking, oral interpretation, speech correction, and acting—are but different approaches to one great educational objective, i.e., the improvement of speech. To some of the specialists among us acting may seem closer to the dance, for example, than to voice science. Speech correction may seem closer to medicine than to rhetoric, oral interpretation closer to literature than to speech correction, and public speaking closer to the social sciences than to audiology. These relationships between aspects of the study of speech and other areas are real and important;

they indicate the tremendous range of the speech field. Nevertheless anyone who fully grasps the concept of speech as a basic social and cultural process of human life will also realize that our various educational activities in teaching public speaking, oral interpretation, radio speaking, acting, speech correction, and related processes, deal with the same distinctive kind of human behavior and are varied means to the same goal, i.e., the improvement of our people's mastery of this unique human function called *speech*. Although our relations to other areas of study are of great importance, all of us who teach any phase of speech are dealing with the same quality of human life. We ought to recognize the common ground on which we stand.

The old familiar story of the blind men and the elephant is pertinent. Of course the elephant was in part like a tree, and in part like a rope, and in part like a spear. Each man was right, yet no one of them could see the real truth.

And so these men of Indostan  
 Disputed loud and long,  
 Each in his own opinion  
 Exceeding stiff and strong,  
 Though each was partly in the right,  
 And all were in the wrong!

We who insist that our own specialisms are complete elephants are wrong; in our preoccupation with one aspect we are missing the larger truth and the wholeness of view on which our greatest usefulness depends.

What I have said may be summed up in three statements: (1) The world situation is confused and dangerous, partly if not primarily because men are deficient in their understanding and use of communication. (2) In education the attitudes toward speech reflect this misunderstanding and confusion. Many of our colleagues have not fully realized

that speech is the primary form of communication, hence an integral part of our humanity. (3) We who concentrate on the study and teaching of speech share responsibility for these confusions because we have not fully systematized our own fundamental concepts and have allowed our special interests to limit our view of the task we share. These follies have intensified the dangers of this hour of crisis.

This, then, should be our theme at mid-century: Our primary job is the deepening and strengthening of the concepts on which all our study and teaching rest. This was a major need before the international emergency became acute; it is even more urgent now. Of course we shall do all we can to help meet the crisis. We are ready, even eager, to join our colleagues in other areas in planning the part of education in the emergency. We are ready, even eager, to contribute to military preparedness in whatever ways and to whatever extent may be necessary. We are ready, even eager, to help inform the public on the issues of the crisis. But underlying all these services is the need to define our field, to state our goals, and to develop our *methods* so clearly that no one of us will lose his way in the confusions of our time. The prophetic statement made by Rupert Cortright of Wayne University in the national crisis of 1942 still applies: "This may be the crisis in which we can fail, not by any backwardness in persuading others of the importance of speech, but because we ourselves are not prepared to meet the challenge. . . ."<sup>1</sup> The greatest need of our profession at this hour is the deeper probing and clarification of the principles on which we stand. These principles cannot be fabricated. They

are inherent in our work and need only be fully discovered and made effective.

We should keep constantly before us the truth that speech is more than public speaking, or conversation, or acting, or any other one of its forms or uses. It is deeper than its visible and audible aspects. Speech is a primary and unique aspect of life. Man's inner thought life depends largely on speech. The soundness of democracy among us depends on effective speech. Our diplomatic effectiveness abroad depends on effective speech. Our military effectiveness is conditioned largely by effective speech.

Speech is the essential pattern of behavior common to all the forms of speaking. Even casual observation reveals that conversation, discussion, addressing an audience, speaking to a microphone, reading aloud, acting, or story telling, are essentially alike. Of course differences exist among these activities, but the essential pattern of action occurs in every one of them. This fundamental process is *speech*.

We should recognize that such a concept is somewhat elusive. In one sense we never see or hear speech as such; we experience it only as one or another of its varied forms. If the concept of speech is to be made fully clear we shall have to define its inherent pattern of action. This we may do in two ways.

First, we may describe speech in terms of the essential phases of a speaker's behavior. The four traditional elements—thought, language, voice, and action—are familiar. I like to list them as five—social attitudes, thought processes, bodily movements, sounds, and words. Others have broken the elements of speech down in still different patterns. An essential truth often overlooked, however, is that no matter how broadly or minutely we describe the elements of speech, they are as inseparable as the

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Sustaining Members of the Speech Association of America, mimeo., May 21, 1942.

elements in a chemical union and as dynamic as the particles of an atom.

Again, the unique pattern which characterizes all speech may be described in terms of the setting. Every act of speech involves speaker, listener or listeners, time and place, a body of ideas, and a body of commonly understood symbolic processes. Speaking is an interaction among these elements. The relationships are inseparable and dynamic. Speech is a distinctive and unified process of human life.

I summarize these well-known concepts here because they outline the whole subject matter of our field as well as the essential unity of our educational function. We teachers of speech are dealing with a primary aspect of human life: its importance cannot be overrated, especially in this time of emergency. There is little hope, however, that our colleagues in other disciplines or our

fellow citizens will understand fully what we are trying to do until we ourselves have completed the task of defining our basic principles. Our most effective contribution to the cause of freedom depends upon a clear exposition of our subject and of our goals.

Our major goals lie not primarily in numbers or material growth, but in ideas; not in curricular units, but in educational concepts; not alone in the processes of persuasion, but even more in the cooperative integration of ideas; not in techniques primarily, but in the common humanity which binds us all together. Now at mid-century our main task is in the realm of basic philosophy. We must clarify and systematize the ideas that underlie, motivate, and unify our work. Our faith as educators demands it. The preservation of our freedom may depend on it.

## COMMENTARIES

### THE GOALS OF SPEECH EDUCATION

There is no better way of realizing what are the present activities and coming opportunities than to study a collection of the phrases in which are made different statements of the purpose of this department. Note some of these phrases and think of their meaning. "The purpose of this department is to give a greater recognition to the spoken word in education; to give more emphasis to the peculiar, academic discipline of the speech sciences." "To realize more fully the educational values in the study of the speech arts." What a body of meaning back of such a declaration as this: "In the past the emphasis has been overmuch upon the artistic, upon performance; to-day the stress should be shifted to the scientific to scholarship." Not half so radical but just as revolutionary is the statement: "As the goal of science is explanation—one of the purposes of this study is to discover knowledge of speech, and as the goal of art is action, the other purpose, is to study the art of speaking well." Some of these statements are interesting as revealing the tones of a radical. Less interesting perhaps, but more potent are those statements which echo the voice of the philosopher, or reflect larger tendencies in education. "To find out knowledge of speech, to develop the ability to think in terms of social life and social culture, to train men and women to play their part in a democracy." No one can review these statements of purposes without finding a clearly marked movement to stress educational values, to emphasize social relationship, and to build up a genuine scholarship by work in the field of research. This is the program of the Department of Speech. —J. P. Ryan, "Terminology: The Department of Speech," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech Education*, Vol. IV, No. 1, pp. 10-11. January, 1918.