

Paul Robeson's Linguistics Breakthrough

by

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Introduction

In this essay, I examine a little known ingenuity of Paul Leroy Robeson—that is, his linguistics breakthrough. As a brilliant scholar of languages and world cultures, Robeson spoke more than 20 languages, including a number of African languages, Chinese, Russian, and Arabic. As an accomplished musicologist, he discovered common links in music through the pentatonic scale—a five-tone scale characteristic of both Chinese and African traditional music. He used this to also demonstrate that the Aorist form of Chinese and African languages has five different tonal patterns, each used regularly under certain conditions (Robeson 1958/1971/1988). [*Tone* refers to the linguistic function of pitch at word level. Tones are usually classified in terms of pitch range and direction into high vs. low, and rising vs. falling level, with more complex sequences (such as rising-falling and falling-rising). In a tone language, tone is one of the features which determine the lexical meaning of a word.]

Also, Robeson discovered a common link between Chinese and African languages based on changes of tone and inflection which give new meanings to words and grammatical constructions. Furthermore, he found that all ancient music from around the world is part of a common body of music based on a common means of expression—the pentatonic scale (Robeson 1958/1971/1988). These discoveries, arrived at through his own research, provided the historical and cultural foundation for his dedication to universal brotherhood and world peace.

Tones in Chinese and African Languages

The following are the types of tones found in Chinese and African languages (see, for example, Binyong and Felley 1990, Westermann and Ward 1933/1970):

- (1) Falling [F]
- (2) Rising [R]
- (3) Falling-rising [FR]
- (4) Rising-falling [RF]
- (5) Mid [M]

These tones are marked by the following levels as follows:

- (1) High [H]
- (2) Low [L]
- (3) Unmarked [U]

Robeson used notes of a musical scale to do the same. Some European linguists later used it in their works, but never credited Robeson. It can be speculated, however, that these European linguists must have seen or heard about Robeson's discoveries. This is because it is difficult for the European to realize tone, since s/he is not accustomed to thinking of intonation as part of the word itself. Besides, these European linguists are not trained musicologists.

Two Purposes Tone is Used in Chinese and African Languages

Tone is used in Chinese and African languages for the following two purposes:

- (1) to indicate meaning (semantic or etymological tones)
- (2) to show grammatical relationships (grammatical or syntactic tones)

Examples of Semantic or Etymological Tones:

Chinese

hao [R] = day hao [LFR] = good
ma [H] = mother ma [R] = water ma [LFR] = horse
lan [R] = blue lan [LFR] = lazy

Efik

akpa [H] = river akpa [LR] = first akpa [HF] = he dies
ekere didie [LRMF] = what is your name? ekere didie [LRHF] = what do you think?

Igbo

isi [HF] = smell isi [H] = head isi [LF] = six
ibe [H] = place ibe [HF] = companion

Kpele

nya [L] = he nya [H] = I

nye [L] = he said nye [LF] = I said

Chuana

bua [FM] = to skin bua [HF] = to speak

Ewe

havi [LR] = a young pig havi [H] = friend

Duala

ya [L] = to come ya [MF] = to give birth

koka [HF] = to dry koka [L] = to grow

Yaunde

neng [L] = to take neng [MF] = to rain

be [MF] = they be [L] = to make

Examples of Grammatical Tones

Efik

eto [H] = tree etinge eto [LRF] = to of tree

The genitive has a different tone from that of the nominative.

Dinka

pany [[H] = wall (singular) pany [L] = walls (plural)

The difference between singular and plural in this word is shown by the tone alone.

Gā.

mi le [LF] = I know mi le [MF] = I don't know

e le [MF] = he knows e le [LF] = he doesn't know

The relation between the tones of the two syllables is the same in each case, but the height is different.

In sum, tone in these languages is an extremely complicated matter. It demands as accurate an analysis as any other linguistic phenomenon, and the rules of pitch should be studied as carefully as those of grammar and phonetics. On scientific analysis, these tone rules are as definite as grammatical rules and they can be classified and set out with considerable accuracy. Moreover, the analysis of tones throws light on grammatical usages which have been unknown. In this way, unsuspected richness of construction in a language may be revealed.

Thus, what is inspirational about Robeson's linguistics breakthroughs is that he was doing this work and revealing his findings at a time when African languages were still being considered underdeveloped, inferior, and unworthy of serious scientific analysis, and that European languages were "languages" while all others were "vernaculars." It is not surprising that even African American English was referred to at the time as "Black English Vernacular" or "BEV," for short.

Conclusion

Robeson's linguistic insight allowed him to sing and analyze spirituals with deep structural linguistic meanings, since the messages of these songs contained a secret language of communication which arranged escape from slavery. In essence, Robeson was deft in the syntactic (sign vs. sign), semantic (sing vs. concept or universe) and pragmatic (sign vs. context) meanings of the spirituals.

This linguistic insight propelled Robeson to stand up at every opportunity and speak out against injustices and degradation that Africans experienced in America. It also pushed him to embrace the cause of the poor and oppressed people wherever they were, no matter what the price or personal sacrifice.

References

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