

# Unit 1 The Power of Language

*Language is not an abstract construction of the learned, or of dictionary makers, but is something arising out of the work, needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground.*

—Walt Whitman

*Language is what makes us human.*



## The Miracle of Language

“Language is the Rubicon<sup>1</sup> that divides man from beast,” declared the philologist Max Müller<sup>2</sup>. The boundary between human and animal—between the most primitive savage and the highest ape—is the language line. In some tribes in Africa, a baby is called a *kuntu*, a “thing”, not yet a *mntu*, a “person”. It is only through the gift of language that the child acquires reason, the complexity of thought that sets him or her apart from the other creatures who share this planet. The birth of language is the dawn of humanity; in our beginning was the word. We have always been endowed with language because before we had words, we were

### Words & Expressions

philologist , *n.* 语史学家

not human beings.

“The limits of my language,” wrote the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, “are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for.” Without the word we are imprisoned; possessing the word, we are set free. Listen now to the stories of four thinkers—two men, two women; two whites, two blacks—as they give eloquent testimony to the emancipating power of language.

Most of us cannot remember learning our first word, but Helen Keller<sup>3</sup> recalled that event in her life with a flashing vividness. She remembered because she was deaf, mute, and blind from the age of nineteen months and did not learn her first word until she was seven.

When Helen was six, an extraordinary teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, entered her life. Miss Sullivan was poor, ill, and nearly blind herself, but she possessed a tenacious vitality that was to force her pupil’s unwilling mind from the dark, silent prison in which it lived: “Before my teacher came to me, I lived in a world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew aught, or that I lived or acted or desired.”

tenacious , *adj.* 紧握的 ;

坚持的

In his play *The Miracle Worker*, William Gibson<sup>4</sup> shows us what happened when Anne Sullivan first met Helen’s mother:

Mrs. Keller: What will you try to teach her first?

Anne Sullivan: First, last, and in between, language.

Mrs. Keller: Language.

Anne Sullivan: Language is to the mind more than light is to the eye.

The miracle that Anne Sullivan worked was to give Helen Keller language, for only language could transform a small animal that looked like a child, a kuntu, into a human being, a muntu. Day

after day, month after month, Anne Sullivan spelled words into Helen's hand. Finally, when Helen was seven years old and working with her teacher in the presence of water, she spoke her first word. Years later she described that moment in *The Story of My Life* (1902):

Somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! ... I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a thought name, and each name gave birth to a new.

Not only did Helen Keller learn to speak, write, and understand the English language. She graduated *cum laude* from Radcliffe College and went on to become a distinguished lecturer and writer. But perhaps the most poignant moment in her life came when, at the age of nine, she was able to say to Anne Sullivan, "I am not dumb now".

Richard Wright<sup>5</sup> spent his childhood in the Jim Crow South—a prison of poverty, fear, and racism. He was born on a farm near Natchez, Mississippi, and, when he was five, his sharecropper father deserted the family. Richard, his mother, and his brother had to move from one community to another throughout the South so that he seldom remained in one school for an entire year. Yet somehow Richard Wright escaped the prison of hunger and hatred to become the most significant black writer in America, the author of *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy* (1945), two watershed books in American literature.

In *Black Boy*, Wright's unsparing autobiography, he describes his liberation at the age of eighteen. Because black people were not allowed library privileges, Wright used the card of a friendly white man along with a forged note that said, "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books by H. L. Mencken." He obtained a copy of Mencken's *A Book of Prefaces*, and all at once the sun of a great literature burst through the window of his prison:

*cum laude*, *adv. & adj.*

(from Latin)(美国)以优异成绩;(第三级)优等地

*poignant*, *adj.* 令人沉痛的;酸楚的

*sharecropper*, *n.* 佃农

*unsparing*, *adj.* 无情的;慷慨的;不吝啬的

*nigger*, (taboo, slang), *n.* (对黑人的冒犯称呼)黑鬼

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? ...I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of the words. Yes, this man was fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club...Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon...

What strange world was this? I concluded the book with the conviction that I had somehow overlooked something terribly important in life. I had once tried to write, had once reveled in feeling, had let my crude imagination roam, but the impulse to dream had been slowly beaten out of me by experience. Now it surged up again and I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing.

The titles of his first three works—*Uncle Tom's Children*<sup>6</sup>, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy*—keep alive the abiding memory that Richard Wright always carried for the child who opened a book by H. L. Mencken and discovered a world, for the son who never felt himself native to the country of his birth, and for the boy who struggled out of the depths to speak for those who remained behind.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*<sup>7</sup> (1964), Malcolm tells how he rose from a world of thieving, pimping, and drug peddling to become one of the most articulate and dynamic leaders of the black revolution in America. Like Helen Keller and Richard Wright, Malcolm X was walled within a prison, in this instance the Norfolk Prison Colony, and, like them, he gained his liberation through the gift of language.

Frustrated by his inability to express himself in writing, Malcolm borrowed a dictionary from the prison school and slowly, painstakingly, began to copy—word by word and page by page—the entire dictionary onto his tablet: “With every succeeding page, I also learned of people and places and events from history.

revel, v. 狂欢作乐

abiding, (of a feeling or belief, *adj.* (感情或信念) 持久的; 长久的

encyclopedia, *n.* 百科全书

Actually the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia .” As his vocabulary expanded, an already powerful speaker experienced a new empowerment through literacy. He read all day and even at night, in the faint glow of a corridor light:

Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened up. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading in my bunk<sup>⑪</sup>. You couldn’t have gotten me out of books with a wedge...Months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I had never been so truly free in my life.

The last of our four prisoners is Anne Frank<sup>8</sup>, a young Jewish girl who grew up in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of Holland. In July of 1942 Anne’s family was forced into hiding in the upper story of an Amsterdam warehouse, where they remained for twenty-five months. The rooms became more suffocating<sup>⑫</sup> than any prison one could imagine. The Franks, who shared the space with another family and with an elderly dentist, were unable to feel the sun’s warmth, unable to breathe fresh air. While the warehouse was in operation during the day, there could be no noise of any kind—no speaking, no unnecessary movements, no running of water.

Then, in 1944, the hideout<sup>⑬</sup> was discovered by the police. Of the eight who had been crowded into the sealed-off attic rooms, only Mr. Frank survived the ensuing horrors of the concentration camps<sup>9</sup>. In March 1945, two months before the liberation of Holland and three months before her sixteenth birthday, Anne Frank perished in the camp at Bergen-Belsen. According to one witness, she “died peacefully, feeling that nothing bad was happening to her”.

Anne may have been devoured by the concentration camps, but her voice was not stilled. From the pages of a small, red-checked, cloth-covered diary book, she speaks to us across the years. The diary was the favorite gift that Anne received for her thirteenth birthday. She named it Kitty and determined to

⑪ bunk, *n.* (尤指船或火车的) 卧铺, 架子床

⑫ suffocating, *adj.* 闷的 ; 使人窒息的

⑬ hideout, *n.* 藏身处; 隐蔽所

⑭ confidante, *n.* 女性知己 (或密友)

express to her new confidante<sup>⑩</sup> her innermost thoughts, concerns, and desires. Between the covers of *Kitty the young girl*, Anne Frank, recorded her moving commentary on war and its impact on human beings:

I see the eight of us with our “Secret Annexe<sup>⑪</sup>” as if we were a little piece of blue heaven, surrounded by heavy black rain clouds. The round, clearly defined spot where we stand is still safe, but the clouds gather more closely about us and the circle which separates us from the approaching danger closes more and more tightly. Now we are so surrounded by danger and darkness that we bump against each other, as we search desperately for a means of escape. We all look down below, where people are fighting each other, we look above, where it is quiet and beautiful, and meanwhile we are cut off by the great dark mass, which will not let us go upwards, but which stands before us as an impenetrable wall; it tries to crush us, but cannot do so yet. I can only cry and implore: “Oh, if only the black circle could recede and open the way for us!”

⑩ annexe , n. 附属建筑物 ;  
附加建筑物

Finally the Franks were betrayed, and on August 4, 1944, the fury of the Gestapo<sup>10</sup> burst upon them. The invaders confiscated the silverware and Chanukah<sup>11</sup> candlestick, but they threw the family’s papers to the floor, including Anne’s diary, which was recovered a year later by Mr. Frank.

The Nazis had failed in their mission. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* was first published in 1947 and has since been translated into tens of languages and sold millions of copies. No one has described its impact more eloquently than Anne’s biographer, Ernst Schnabel: “Her voice was preserved out of the millions that were silenced, this voice no louder than a child’s whisper...It has outlasted the shouts of the murderers and soared above the voices of time.”

What do the stories of Helen Keller, Richard Wright, Malcolm X, and Anne Frank say to us? They tell us that the world we perceive is the world we see through words. They tell us, as Wittgenstein<sup>12</sup> once wrote, that “of what we cannot speak we must be silent”. They tell us that human beings grapple with the

mystery of life by trying to find words to what it is. They tell us that we must never take for granted the miracle of language.

(Adapted from *The Miracle of Language*, by Richard Lederer, Gallery Books, 1999)

## Notes

1. **Rubicon**, the point at which a decision has been taken which can no longer be changed.( 无法退回的界限；界线 )

2. **Max Müller** (1823—1900), German scholar of comparative language, religion, and mythology.

3. **Helen Keller** (1880—1968), American author and educator who was blind and deaf. Her education and training represent an extraordinary accomplishment in the education of persons with these disabilities.

4. **William Gibson** (1948—), American-Canadian writer of science fiction who was the leader of the genre's cyberpunk ( 数字朋克：以计算机或信息技术为主题的科幻小说 ) movement.

5. **Richard Wright** (1908—1960), novelist and short-story writer who was among the first African American writers to protest white treatment of blacks.

6. *Uncle Tom's Children*, collection of four novellas by Richard Wright, published in 1938.

7. **Malcolm X** (1925—1965), African American leader and prominent figure in the Nation of Islam who articulated concepts of race pride and black nationalism in the early 1960s.

8. **Anne Frank** (1929—1945), Jewish girl whose diary of her family's two years in hiding during the German occupation of the Netherlands became a classic of war literature.

9. **Concentration camps** were an integral feature of the regime in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945. The first concentration camps in Germany were established soon after Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January 1933. Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz were both notorious concentration camps of Nazi Germany.

10. **Gestapo**, the political police of Nazi Germany.

11. **Chanukah** is the same as Hanukkah, an eight-day Jewish festival and holiday in November or December when Jews remember the occasion when the Temple in Jerusalem was dedicated again in 165 BC.

12. **Wittgenstein** (1889—1951), Austrian-born British philosopher, regarded by many as the

greatest philosopher of the 20th century.

## Exercises

1. **Comprehension:** What impacts does language have on the four people illustrated in the text?

**Helen Keller:**

**Richard Wright:**

**Malcolm X:**

**Anne Frank:**

2. **Translation and memorization:** Translate the underlined sentences into Chinese and memorize them for writing and speaking.

3. **Discussion:** Topic—Things or persons we always take for granted.



### Words of wisdom

*Life is about making an impact, not making an income.*





