

LANGUAGE

Book review in *The Use of English*, ed. Denys Thompson, 18 (3), 1967, pp. 258-60

FIVE INAUGURAL LECTURES, edited by P. D. Stevens. [*O.U.P.*, 8s. 6d.]

THE STORY OF LANGUAGE, by Mario Pei. [*Allen and Unwin*, 42s.]

LANGUAGE. A TEXT FOR SENIOR STUDENTS, by J. H. Britton, S. A.

Bray, K. P. Kittson, J. S. Rowland. [*Thomas Nelson, Australia, Ltd.*, 21s.]

ENGLISH NOW AND THEN, by D. C. Measham. [*C.U.P.*, 10s. 6d.]

LEARNING ABOUT LANGUAGE, by Leonard Saffron. [*Nelson*, 8s.]

These five books range from a set of academic occasional pieces to a well programmed study of the uses of language, designed for middle and upper-middle school level. They share in common the changed climate of opinion in which language is freed from a rigid prescriptivism and allowed its natural varieties of emphasis and context.

Professor Stevens' attractive looking paperback is, of course, not intended for school work; the teacher aware of his own deficiencies in knowledge of modern linguistics will find the lectures at once too piecemeal and too specific, but the as yet unpersuaded may welcome the last of the five lectures (Professor Stevens' own on *The study of present day English*) as of more than sentimental value.

Mario Pei's revision and extension of his popular work in this second edition is livelier and better signposted than the earlier version, and teachers wanting a reference book of linguistic illustrations and curiosities from other language structures than our own, as well as a wide view of the place of English in the world family of languages, will not find the price too high. They may even share sympathetically, if with none too sure a faith, in the author's attempt to cross the boundary of the study of language as such into the true cosmopolitan's desire to use language as an instrument in bringing about world and personal understanding and sympathy of communication. At least—the implication might be—we shall know what we are quarrelling

about when we have a universal language.

The Australian *Language* is intended to help fifth and sixth form students of New South Wales with the language part of their English course. The student will certainly need help in working through the book, which attempts to cover an enormous area in its fairly short span—the history of the language; its phonetics; comparative sketches of traditional grammar, immediate constituent analysis, and transformational grammar; semantics; the exercise of critical reading and much more. It is an enterprising digest, packed with nourishment, but rather a heavy cake, I fancy. There is not a mention of Strine, and it is a pity that the book is rather poorly produced.

English Now and Then is also rather a Jacob's coat, as all eclectic books must be. The stitching shows at times. The audience seems slightly uncertain, and could at times be fourth year leavers and at others first year Sixth formers according to the level of response demanded by the text. In general, the type of information given is fourth year (for example, fairly elementary information about names), but the type of work expected is more difficult. It would be unfair, however, to quibble about these uncertainties. What is encouraging is that the book attempts, with some success, to explicate in short compass a wide variety of language usage and material—historical change; matters of style; grammatical structures; flexibility and growth in modern English; language and logical thought. Its success will be commensurate with the intelligence and linguistic enthusiasm of the pupils who have (quite rightly) to do a great deal of the work, rather than with any adequate coverage of the individual issues raised. A good and accessible library of reference books would be essential to the effective use of the book.

Mr. Saffron's book is most interesting as an example of pedagogic technique. It has something of the simplicity of a 'programmed' instrument, without the latter's dullness. It could be used by intelligent fourth formers or by older but linguistically unsophisticated sixth formers to study in a rationally developing sequence the use of words in context and the distinctions between words, thoughts and things—two basic concepts of language. The debt to Ogden and Richards is acknowledged. By not attempting to contain everything in one cover, *Learning about Language* gains enormously as a practical classroom book—it leaves thought room to grow, and does not embarrass progress along its chosen road by competition from innumerable billboards.