

The Book Trail

LANGUAGE IN ACTION

By S. I. Hayakawa

Harcourt, Brace & Co., \$2.00

As part of his investigation of the economic causes of poverty, Henry George found it necessary to consider definitions. In "Progress and Poverty" (Book I, Chapter 2) he says, "Nothing so shows the importance of language in thought as the spectacle of even acute thinkers basing important conclusions upon the use of the same word in varying senses."

Dr. Hayakawa is Assistant Professor of English at the Illinois Institute of Technology. In his book he attacks the problem of how thought may be efficiently channeled through a correct use of words—essentially the problem considered by Henry George in the paragraph quoted. He finds that errors in the use of words fall into a comparatively small number of broad categories, and in describing these and furnishing us with examples, attempts to teach his readers to use language with precision.

Of especial interest at this time is Chapter V, on "Words that Don't Inform"—specifically the second section, on "Snarl Words and Purr Words." Says Dr. Hayakawa: " 'She's the sweetest girl in all the world' is not a statement about the girl, but a revelation of the speaker's feelings—a revelation such as is made among lower animals by wagging the tail or purring. Similarly, the ordinary oratorical and editorial denunciation of 'Reds,' 'Wall Street,' 'corporate interests,' 'radicals,' 'economic royalists,' and 'fifth columnists,' are often only protracted snarls, growls, and yelps, with, however, the surface appearance of logical and grammatical articulation. These series of 'snarl-words' and 'purr-words,' as it will be convenient to call them, are not reports describing things in the extensional world, but symptoms of disturbance, un-

pleasant or pleasant, in the speaker."

The benefits that can be obtained from the conscientious study of such a book are very great; but it is just as well that Dr. Hayakawa has no illusions. It will be a long time before any great number of us are willing to lay our glands aside and apply cold logic to matters which vitally concern our personal welfare.

PAUL PEACH.

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