

When former Senator S. I. Hayakawa died last week at 85, the San Francisco Chronicle described him as "one of the nation's specialists in semantics and linguistics," and the New York Times called him "a noted scholar." Academic linguists may be a little uncomfortable with those descriptions. But Hayakawa lived a life in language, and it took him on a remarkable course.

He was an obscure professor of English in 1941 when he wrote a surprise best-seller called *Language in Action*. It was a popularization of the quirky theories of the Polish philosopher Alfred Korzybski, who held that social pathologies are the results of an uncritical acceptance of the patterns of "Aristotelean logic" that are implicit in our speech. Hayakawa's book is far from serious linguistics. But it's written engagingly, and it deserves real credit for awakening a lot of Americans to the insidiousness of totalitarian propaganda, a decade before Orwell developed the theme in earnest.

*Language in Action* taught a healthy skepticism about the mischief that language could do. But as time went by Hayakawa's mistrust of language seemed to deepen, to the point where he came to believe that some forms of speech were too dangerous to be permitted. As president of San Francisco State University, he came to national prominence during the student unrest of 1968 when the media broadcast pictures of him jumping on top of a platform to rip out the wires of an amplifying system being used at a rally of student strikers. He became a symbol of hardnosed suppression of campus activism, a reputation he parlayed into a Senate seat in 1976.

After he retired from the Senate in 1982, he devoted himself to a campaign to make English the official language of the United States. That was how I met him in 1986, when we found ourselves on opposite sides in a Stanford University debate about the English-only question. Perhaps he had mellowed by then, but I saw little of his celebrated feistiness. He was courtly to me and polite even to the angry students who tried to beard him in the question period. But the mistrust remained. He spoke of the need to prohibit foreign-language billboards and television programs. He warned that language minorities could become breeding grounds for sedition and political separatism. He seemed to have lost his faith that people in a free society could make the right decisions about language of their own accord.

The Times ran another respectful obituary when Dwight Bolinger died in the same week as Hayakawa. But Bolinger's loss was mostly noticed in the small field of linguistics. The irony here is that Bolinger was the genuine article Q one of the most distinguished semanticists of the age, with an uncanny ear for the nuances of words. Of course he spent most of his life in academic cloisters like Harvard and USC writing scholarly books and papers. His only foray into electoral office was to serve as president of the Linguistic Society of America and some other professional societies. But he also believed that language was too important to be left a purely academic preoccupation. In a wonderful popular book called *Language, The*

*Loaded Weapon*, he wrote that the the manipulation of language was "the most devastating form of social control [of our time]." At times the book sounds like Hayakawa's *Language in Action* -- and in fact Bolinger is one of the few linguists I know of who has discussed Hayakawa's work seriously. The difference is that Bolinger never lost faith that the remedy for the abuses of speech was more speech. He wrote that people had to reassert the public ownership of language; it should "take its place alongside of diet, traffic safety, and the cost of living as something that everybody thinks about and talks about."

I don't know why Bolinger's popular writings about language never got the wide attention that Hayakawa's *Language in Action* did. Maybe it's because he lacked Hayakawa's gifts as a controversialist. It would be hard to imagine him interrupting somebody he disagreed with, much less pulling the plug on them. Nor was he much of a hand at the keening derision of the pop grammarians. He did the best he could with civility and good sense, and I suppose he won as large a readership as he could have reasonably expected. Perhaps every age gets the linguists it deserves.