

## 2.2 *Metologue: Why Do Frenchmen?\**

Daughter: Daddy, why do Frenchmen wave their arms about?

Father: What do you mean?

D: I mean when they talk. Why do they wave their arms and all that?

F: Well—why do you smile? Or why do you stamp your foot sometimes?

D: But that's not the same thing, Daddy. I don't wave my arms about like a Frenchman does. I don't believe they can stop doing it, Daddy. Can they?

F: I don't know—they might find it hard to stop.... Can you stop smiling?

D: But Daddy, I don't smile all the time. It's hard to stop when I feel like smiling. But I don't feel like it all the time. And then I stop.

F: That's true—but then a Frenchman doesn't wave his arms in the same way all the time. Sometimes he waves them in one way and sometimes in another—and sometimes, I think, he stops waving them.

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F: What do you think? I mean, what does it make you think when a Frenchman waves his arms?

D: I think it looks silly, Daddy. But I don't suppose it looks like that to another Frenchman. They cannot all look silly to each other. Because if they did, they would stop it. Wouldn't they?

F: Perhaps—but that is not a very simple question. What else do they make you think?

D: Well—they look all excited...

F: All right—"silly" and "excited."

D: But are they really as excited as they look? If I were as excited as that, I would want to dance or sing or hit somebody on the nose ... but they just go on waving their arms. They can't be really excited.

F: Well—are they really as silly as they look to you? And anyhow, why do you sometimes want to dance and sing and punch somebody on the nose?

D: Oh. Sometimes I just feel like that.

F: Perhaps a Frenchman just feels "like that" when he waves his arms about.

D: But he couldn't feel like that all the time, Daddy, he just couldn't.

F: You mean—the Frenchman surely does not feel when he waves his arms exactly as you would feel if you waved yours. And surely you are right.

D: But, then, how does he feel?

F: Well—let us suppose you are talking to a Frenchman and he is waving his arms about, and then in the middle of the conversation, after something that you have said, he suddenly stops waving his arms, and just talks. What would you think then? That he had just stopped being silly and excited?

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D: No... I'd be frightened. I'd think I had said something that hurt his feelings and perhaps he might be really angry.

F: Yes – and you might be right.

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D: All right – so they stop waving their arms when they start being angry.

F: Wait a minute. The question, after all, is what does one Frenchman tell another Frenchman by waving his arms? And we have part of an answer – he tells him something about how he feels about the other guy. He tells him he is not seriously angry – that he is willing and able to be what you call “silly.”

D: But – no – that's not sensible. He cannot do all that work so that later he will be able to tell the other guy that he is angry by just keeping his own arms still. How does he know that he is going to be angry later on?

F: He doesn't know. But, just in case...

D: No, Daddy, it doesn't make sense. I don't smile so as to be able to tell you I am angry by not smiling later on.

F: Yes – I think that that is part of the reason for smiling. And there are lots of people who smile in order to tell you that they are not angry – when they really are.

D: But that's different, Daddy. That's a sort of telling lies with one's face. Like playing poker.

F: Yes.

F: Now where are we? You don't think it sensible for Frenchmen to work so hard to tell each other that they are not angry or hurt. But after all what is most conversation about? I mean, among Americans?

D: But, Daddy, it's about all sorts of things – baseball and ice cream and gardens and games. And people talk about other people and about themselves and about what they got for Christmas.

F: Yes, yes – but who listens? I mean – all right, so they talk about baseball and gardens. But are they exchanging information? And, if so, what information?

D: Sure – when you come in from fishing, and I ask you “did you catch anything?” and you say “nothing,” I didn't know that you wouldn't catch anything till you told me.

F: Hmm.

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F: All right – so you mention my fishing – a matter about which I am sensitive – and then there is a gap, a silence in the conversation – and that silence tells you that I don't like cracks about how many fish I didn't catch. It's just like the Frenchman who stops waving his arms about when he is hurt.

D: I'm sorry, Daddy, but you did say...

F: No – wait a minute – let's not get confused by being sorry – I shall go out fishing again tomorrow and I shall still know that I am unlikely to catch a fish...

D: But, Daddy, you said all conversation is only telling other people that you are not angry with them...

F: Did I? No – not all conversation, but much of it. Some-times if both people are willing to listen carefully, it is possible to do more than exchange greetings and

good wishes. Even to do more than exchange information. The two people may even find out something which neither of them knew before.

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F: Anyhow, most conversations are only about whether people are angry or something. They are busy telling each other that they are friendly—which is sometimes a lie. After all, what happens when they cannot think of anything to say? They all feel uncomfortable.

D: But wouldn't that be information, Daddy? I mean—information that they are not cross?

F: Surely, yes. But it's a different sort of information from "the cat is on the mat."

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D: Daddy, why cannot people just say "I am not cross at you" and let it go at that?

F: Ah, now we are getting to the real problem. The point is that the messages which we exchange in gestures are really not the same as any translation of those gestures into words.

D: I don't understand.

F: I mean—that no amount of telling somebody in mere words that one is or is not angry is the same as what one might tell them by gesture or tone of voice.

D: But, Daddy, you cannot have words without some tone of voice, can you? Even if somebody uses as little tone as he can, the other people will hear that he is holding himself back—and that will be a sort of tone, won't it?

F: Yes—I suppose so. After all that's what I said just now about gestures—that the Frenchman can say something special by stopping his gestures.

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F: But then, what do I mean by saying that "mere words" can never convey the same message as gestures—if there are no "mere words"?

D: Well, the words might be written.

F: No—that won't let me out of the difficulty. Because written words still have some sort of rhythm and they still have overtones. The point is that no mere words exist. There are only words with either gesture or tone of voice or something of the sort. But, of course, gestures without words are common enough.

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D: Daddy, when they teach us French at school, why don't they teach us to wave our hands?

F: I don't know. I'm sure I don't know. That is probably one of the reasons why people find learning languages so difficult.

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F: Anyhow, it is all nonsense. I mean, the notion that language is made of words is all nonsense—and when I said that gestures could not be translated into "mere words," I was talking nonsense, because there is no such thing as "mere words."

And all the syntax and grammar and all that stuff is nonsense. It's all based on the idea that "mere" words exist—and there are none.

D: But, Daddy...

F: I tell you—we have to start all over again from the beginning and assume that language is first and fore-most a system of gestures. Animals after all have only gestures and tones of voice—and words were invented later. Much later. And after that they invented school-masters.

D: Daddy?

F: Yes.

D: Would it be a good thing if people gave up words and went back to only using gestures?

F: Hmm. I don't know. Of course we would not be able to have any conversations like this. We could only bark, or mew, and wave our arms about, and laugh and grunt and weep. But it might be fun—it would make life a sort of ballet—with dancers making their own music.