

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION: SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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Language rests, like an enduring flame, by changing. Speaking, the primordial form of linguistic behavior, is a dynamic phenomenon, because it occurs in time, and solely in time. Yet in normal circumstances we feel we all understand each other without too many difficulties and, what is more, we feel that this understanding occurs more or less instantaneously, without the help of essentially incremental mechanisms of online processing. We feel, in fact, that our very knowledge of the language, both for speakers and for hearers, is *not* an object of time, strictly speaking, but a relatively stable resource that we can exploit to organize and express relatively stable thoughts or convictions. This (feeling of) tremendous stability is a genuine puzzle. So is the repeated occurrence of rapid, orderly change in linguistic systems. And there is a corollary problem: how could anyone, confronted with the enormous potential for (synchronic) variation exhibited by verbal communication at all conceivable levels of organization, learn any linguistic system at all (Cooper 1999)?

At the same time, much of linguistic change, though certainly real and never-ending, also shows itself as fairly inconspicuous to most, or all, naïve language users. Even in those domains that call for rather high levels of linguistic awareness, such as (the knowledge of) lexicon, it is often very difficult to keep track of unusual or extraordinary uses of words and of how these should affect (stretch, shrink, etc.) their other meanings, or the meanings of other, related expressions.¹ The paradox of this situation lies in the realization that linguistic change need not rely on any native awareness, but that the explicit analytic awareness needed to reconstruct its workings may suggest — falsely, as it turns out — that the changes at hand are generally mere matters

¹ The difficulty includes acts of self-monitoring: it should be as troublesome to appreciate rightfully most of one's own (e.g., lexical) idiosyncrasies, or so it seems. Cavell (1976: 42) compares the peculiar effort to 'becoming aware that we have grown pedantic or childish or slow', another unlikely feat in real life. In what follows, we will draw impenitently from these and others of Cavell's observations regarding the normative and natural character of language use.

of (shared) convention, and thus ‘arbitrary’. Yet the products of linguistic change are no less structurally motivated than the input that feeds this process to begin with. It is not, in fact, that the conventional status of linguistic meanings, original or shifted, should invariably point to some inherent contingency — that we can independently use, change, invent, or suppress words and entire constructions at will, like Humpty Dumpty² (see Davidson 1986), or that, when we say what we say, there is no compelling reason *outside of us* that something particular and not something else is meant by what was said. Rather, both linguistic meaning in general and its historical change more specifically can be studied as ‘natural’ phenomena, not because they follow the laws of nature but because they lead us away from the quirks of individual (symbolic) strategizing towards and into the authentic source of linguistic authority, which is the speech community proper. It is in this light that the fact of language change itself becomes significant (if not in any straightforward empirical sense), as it inevitably shows that language also contains a ‘culture’.

The natural character of ordinary language, i.e., the notion that their language is normative for what is said by concrete speakers, contrasts most remarkably with the typical predicaments of its artificial counterparts. Artificial languages do not on the whole provide valid alternatives in the study of linguistic form and function precisely in view of their special relation with regard to what must be meant by something that is said, and who decides on this. At best, an artificial language can be seen as just one of the capacities proffered by natural language. And so we are in the firing line of one of the most heated polemics in Western thought, between those whose analyses proceed from ordinary uses of language, and those who prefer to construct artificial languages in order to root out the disturbing effects of semantic vagueness and ambiguities from the start. It is a dichotomy that culminates, in the course of the 20th century, in the paradigm clash between ordinary-language philosophy and the proponents of a formal approach to the study of language (including its change). But the traditions that these debates respond to are, of course, much older. They date back at least to the ‘scientific revolution’ of the 16th and 17th centuries. Further still, and from a more hermeneutic side, the modern philosophical insistence on ‘coaxing the mind down from

² “‘When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more or less.” “The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.” “The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be the master — that’s all.” (Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*, New York: Bantam Classic, 1988, 168–169)

INTRODUCTION

self-assertion' (Cavell 1976: 43) can already be found in Socrates' therapeutic dialogues, where private definitions of everyday notions and the apparent use of language as an expression of secret inner states (nonpublic beliefs, intentions, etc.) are revealed for what they are: linguistic illusions and, thus, departures from the moral community. It is with changes in this community or culture, and only with such changes, that individual speakers may be sanctioned to modify their own linguistic behavior, so that the language containing a culture necessarily changes with that culture's changes. It is also in this sense that the analysis of language (philosophical, linguistic, or other) has undiscovered treasures to offer, ones that could not be learned if the primary locus of language use were situated in the speaker's blissfully isolated mind.

Evolutions of language may eventually turn into revolutions, continually accompanying cultural (r)evolutions. One such cultural revolution, if extremely specialized, concerns the study of language itself, obviously. There may indeed be more than one way of revolutionizing thoughts on the nature of language. But this thinking itself will always be linguistic, too, and thus entirely subject to the same principles of linguistic flux. Linguists, philosophers, and the like, revolutionary or not, really do need to pay attention to this fact, viz., that their terminology and its underlying apparatus do *not* constitute some a-temporal object but, ideally, form the continuation of real-life practices carried out by responsible actors in a meaningful world. Whether 'scientific' or 'ordinary', the concern with language calls for the need to take a stand on this issue of time. And, inevitably, with time comes the need to determine whether proponents of one camp or another — in science, but also in all other domains of interpretation — are actually speaking one and the same (meta-)language to each other, or whether they are merely laying the foundations for yet another round of groundless conceptual confusion.

1. Language and revolution

The first part of this volume takes a closer look at the concept of revolution and its relevance to the field of language studies. Our ordinary understanding of the concept of revolution forces us to consider at least two possible domains of application. Specifically for linguists, the term 'revolution' may first of all refer to an abrupt discontinuity in our theorizing about language. Since the publication of Kuhn (1962), the interest in the structure of scientific revolutions has become a customary ingredient of the toolkit of historiographers of science, including those concerned with the history of linguistics. When we talk of scientific revolutions, what is revolutionized is the way communities of scientists construe and describe their objects of knowledge, i.e., linguistic phenomena. In this first reading of revolution, language

is not itself the object of change. History does supply us, however, with many occasions where the object of linguistic inquiry, language, is (treated as) the medium and the means for a radical transformation of the socially and historically constituted sets of social relationships in which language use is embedded. A second area of investigation, therefore, concerns the role of language in societal revolutionary processes.

Two contributions are elaborate critical reflections on what is generally conceived as the most groundbreaking transformation of (formal) linguistic thinking in the second half of the twentieth century: the Chomskyan revolution. E. F. K. KOERNER's contribution examines how this concept is exploited as a rhetorical device by members of a specific scholarly community. The idea of a radical and sudden discontinuity with the past (in particular with direct predecessors like Harris and Hockett) was actively promoted by Chomsky and his entourage. Koerner explicitly states that his work is primarily concerned with the historiography of linguistics, and thus with scientific instead of political revolutions, but one is nevertheless tempted to re-examine the concept of scientific revolution as an ideological notion, that is, as a community-based way of talking that serves to buttress certain intellectual and institutional positions within the academic field. In the second contribution, PIETER A. M. SEUREN situates transformational-generative grammar within the wider context of the cognitive revolution, and argues that it failed to draw the full consequences of its self-professed anti-behaviorism: "While the cognitive revolution brought the mind back into psychology, the linguistic revolution saw the mind but left it at the doorstep." (Seuren, this volume) The reason behind this failure, Seuren argues, is Chomsky's persistent refusal to abandon his representation of grammar as a random sentence generator, and his failure to link his theory of grammar with a theory of semantics. Generative semantics, a development of transformational grammar that did not ignore propositional content, went a long way in drawing a realistic picture of grammar as a formal mediating device between thoughts and sentences. Not surprisingly, Chomsky and his associates waged a fierce battle against the generative-semantic heterodoxy.

The two other authors in this section explore the role of language as a medium of political transformation. Both authors do so by analyzing particular historical debates about the structure and form of language, in which the participants also address the social implications that would stem from such exchanges. HELGE DANIËLS analyzes the *Fushā-ʿAmmīyah* debate, a debate about the standardization of Arabic that took place in the Middle East in the second half of the 19th century, against the background of the disintegrating Ottoman empire. In her contribution, she describes how certain advocates of

INTRODUCTION

a revolutionary political change, Christian intellectuals attempting to introduce a nonconfessional Arab identity based on a common language and culture rather than religion, pushed them to embrace a conservative linguistic position, viz., that of promoting a liturgical language to the status of state language. Her contribution thus draws attention to the essentially unpredictable ways in which language practices and political positions can be articulated.

JEAN PAUL VAN BENDEGEM, finally, turns to a debate situated at the interface of linguistics and philosophy. His contribution reviews a number of past attempts to introduce a universal language, exploring issues like the feasibility of such a venture and the qualities which a candidate for universality should in any case possess. In his closing section, the author confronts the views of Otto Neurath on this subject with those of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Neurath, who had been active in the Vienna Circle, defended the idea that it was possible to design new languages that could solve communication problems and further mutual understanding. For Wittgenstein, conversely, it seemed futile even to start thinking about such a venture.

2. *Language and time*

The second section of the present volume addresses issues of variation and change, as they constitute the prime manifestations of the temporal medium that is language (*language-in-time*). But language also talks about time (*language-of-time*): explicitly, through the availability of various temporal collocations in lexicon, and implicitly, by virtue of grammatical predications of tense and aspect. Accordingly, the notion of time in language can take on either a directly referential or more of a modal import. In general, the academic preoccupation with language will always also involve some linguists who pay close attention to time and its linguistic expression; alternatively, the awareness of time in the course of analytical work tends to prompt a clarification of our views of the nature of language itself, for all those disciplines in which language occupies a central and constitutive position. While both aspects are represented in the present volume, it is important to realize that a study of the linguistic/cultural conceptions of time, drawing on linguistic evidence, does *not necessarily* have anything in common with the theoretical interest in the time of language. One can analyze the linguistic expression of time without worrying to what extent this analysis can/should be done in and through time (cf. also Fabian, this volume).

The following themes are approached from a multidisciplinary angle. The anthropological study of language as a medium of (producing knowledge about) culture generates its own problems of temporality, which can be inter-

preted as involving different ways with time (or the temporal ways we live by). Historical linguistics is faced with problems of evolution and with reconstructing historical sequences of socio-cultural developments, which are typically handled from an internal linguistic perspective (e.g., by doing comparative studies). Here, cumulative evidence from linguistic typology, ethnography, archaeology, the study of population movement, and even genetics could provide further analytical support. Finally, there exist all sorts of conceptions of time based on linguistic representations in morphology, syntax, and discourse. Research on grammatical time in particular suggests that the category may in fact be far from conceptually basic, at least if its semantic analysis concentrates on what might be called nontemporal usage types. On a more paradigmatic note, cognitive and catastrophe-theoretic approaches are confronted, assessing the relative grammatical and lexical scopes of objective vs. subjective conceptions of time.

In the next paragraphs, we will provide brief overviews of the individual contributions included in this section.

JOHANNES FABIAN starts from the observation of a received wisdom in contemporary linguistics, i.e., the Saussurean separation of diachrony from synchrony. However, when it comes to understanding ‘language and time’, this distinction is more likely to be part of the problem than it is to offer a solution. Fabian discusses his own position in this respect from the perspective of a language-centered (not necessarily linguistic!) anthropology, remarking that any real focus on language will invariably result in a theoretical and practical concern with time — in the use of language *qua* communication, performance, and narration.

KOEN BOSTOEN’s paper is the first of two that deal with historical linguistics. Historical linguistics traditionally occupies itself with the empirical study of language change from the past towards the present, tracing developments that transform an earlier stage of a language into a later one. In the case of Bostoën, however, the focus lies on the complement of this type of investigation, whereby several synchronically separate languages can be reconstructed to a single prior language (providing they all belong to the same linguistic family). Bostoën’s study concentrates on the fairly recent evolution of the Bantu languages (Niger-Congo), an important African family covering a huge geographical area. His primary interest is historical and is of necessity linguistically oriented, simply because of the deficiency of ancient written records in sub-Saharan Africa. In the application of both typological classification and linguistic reconstruction (via so-called words-and-things studies), Bostoën proceeds with a diachronic analysis and lexical comparisons within the field of pottery vocabulary. APRIL MCMAHON’s venture into quantitative

INTRODUCTION

historical linguistics features a similar preoccupation with the reconstruction of linguistic, but also of cultural (what she terms ‘human’), histories. Her insistence on the interdisciplinary nature of this kind of research triggers the reappraisal of a challenging idea, also found in Cavalli-Sforza (2001), that a ‘new synthesis’ might manage to capture significant correlations between linguistic and genetic groupings, and thus offer clues to human histories. The main elements of criticism against this approach (dependencies of the sample populations, the long-range and speculative character of certain comparisons) are tackled, and McMahon argues in favor of including contact-induced (‘external’) linguistic changes, so as to actually reinforce the extant parallels between linguistics and genetics.

Finally, the three remaining papers (by FRANK BRISARD, WALTER DE MULDER, and WOLFGANG WILDGEN) directly address matters of time in grammar and lexicon. Specifically, the contributions share an interest in cognitive approaches to linguistic time, and in the contrast between ‘conceived time’ and ‘processing time’ as proposed in Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987). Brisard and De Mulder focus on the categories of tense and aspect in their inquiries into the nontemporal (possibly modal) basis for describing the semantics of grammatical predications of time. Wildgen, in contrast, zooms in on the physical concepts of time, motion, and force, as they are represented (talked about) in natural language. Wildgen’s emphasis lies on the selective mapping of ‘real’ (in)animate motion, or rather of its perceptual correlates, onto linguistic patterns of symbolization. His study is critical of many of the allegedly relativist claims of a cognitive semantics, in that it wants to reaffirm the authority of (universally valid) mathematical models of time, motion, and force, as well as their immediate relevance to linguistic scholarship, especially of the cognitive sort. It is also, incidentally, a perfect illustration of the paradigm clash between ordinary (‘folk’) and scientific theories of meaning and semantic analysis, as mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this introduction.

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