

# Improvising language

*The Language Myth*

By Roy Harris

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'I've gotta use words when I talk to you.' Sweeney's plaint reverberates around modern society. Our age seems keenly aware of the role of language as both help and hindrance to communication; and the consequence has been a multiplicity of linguistic theories, which influence our perception and understanding of man. That is why, says Roy Harris in his preface, 'it is important for people to understand that a great deal of impressively authoritative modern theorising about language is founded upon a myth.'

This language myth has an impressive pedigree. Harris traces it from the founder of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure, through the American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield, and his followers, right up to the present, in the work of Chomsky and other generative grammarians. He calls this 'the orthodox tradition of modern linguistic theory', and argues that it presents a view of language which is fundamentally misconceived.

So what is this myth? It derives from what Harris sees as two unquestioned tenets in linguistic thought. The first he calls the 'telementational' fallacy—that people know which words stand for which ideas, and that communication is basically only a matter of my encoding thoughts, sending them to you, and you decoding them. The second he calls the 'determinacy' fallacy—that there exists a fixed, public set of correlations between words and ideas (institutionalised in our grammar books and dictionaries), and these enable communication to take place. The view exists *par excellence* in Chomskyan grammar, where a finite set of rules generates an infinite number of sentences, the knowledge of these rules being the basis of linguistic communities.

Now this is no naive attack from an outsider. This is the Professor of General Linguistics at Oxford taking a long, cool look at his subject, and not liking what he sees. The book is really a sequel to his *The Language Makers* (1980), which examined the history of ideas about language in a long line of thinkers. That book opened with a critique of linguistics, but I never felt that it tied in well with the detailed historical discussion which followed. This weakness is avoided in the present book, where the focus on the limitations of linguistics provides a unifying and compelling theme.

Most of the book is devoted to a detailed probing of the fallacies. There's a chapter on form and meaning; another on language and thought (incorporating an illuminating discussion of the nature of translation); and a third on the way linguistics has tried to use, yet simultaneously abuse, the insights and categories of traditional grammar. The arguments are closely pursued, requiring concentration and not a little technical linguistic awareness, if their thrust is to be appreciated. But it's clearly done, in a style which neatly balances general comment with real-language illustration.

In the remaining quarter of the book, Harris presents his demythologising alternative—an *integrational* linguistics, which looks at language from the user's viewpoint. Its point of departure is the individual linguistic act in its communicational setting, focusing on what speaker and hearer actually do, and especially how they integrate linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of their interaction. The integration is crucial: Harris gives them parity of status, referring to their *contemporality*, and contrasts his view with the 'sterility' of orthodox linguistics, where the language user, speech context, and other such matters were considered uninteresting, extra-linguistic, mere performance. The result is a view of language as being constantly renewed, or created, by the interaction of people in specific communication situations. On this view, language is not a 'game' in the usual sense. For Harris, we make up the rules as we go along. There is no referee, and players must improvise. The business of linguistics should be to analyse this improvisation.

I'm fairly sure that one general reaction will be: it's an appealing idea, but will it

work? What would an integrationist account of language look like, in detail? Doubtless, this is Harris forthcoming. The present book gives only a few general remarks about the indeterminacies involved in the exercise, which the theory needs to take into account. And yet, a decade or more of research in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics (which he hardly mentions) has shown that interactional categories are the very devil to work with. Can Harris explicate his theory so as to avoid the well-known problems? Generativists, having observed the impressive list of failures to date, will sit back and wait, purring.

And what about the rest of us, the non-generativists? I fear that some of Harris's impact will be lost, by the way he tars everyone with the same brush. He frequently drops the label 'orthodox', and accuses everyone of perpetrating the language myth, of an 'unquestioning acceptance of the "fixed code" fallacy'. Well, this just isn't the linguistic world I know. I try to find a place in my linguistics for a host of people who receive no mention in Harris's book—Hymes, Labov, Quirk, Trudgill, Halliday, Matthews, and above all Dwight Bolinger, who made some of Harris's anti-structuralist criticisms 30 years ago. These people, among many others, have themselves done a great deal to attack the very myth Harris is concerned about, and they won't be pleased to find their efforts disregarded. Nor is it a fair characterisation of the science of linguistics to disregard them. There is another myth in the pages of Roy Harris's book, and it is a myth of his own devising.