BOOKS

Necessary coupling

The "connection" referred to in Roy Harris's *The Language Connection* is between philosophy and linguistics—or, as the publisher's blurb appealingly puts it, between "philosophers and linguists in the West": Harris, in truculent mood, but with considerable elegance and wit, has put together a powerful critique of the way these disciplines have established a tradition of using language for talking about language (i.e., "metalinguistically," "reflexively."). No hostages are taken. Linguistic metalanguage is seen as "meretricious," "self-serving," "tuned vision," "implausible metaphorical speculations" with "irreparable flaws" which "throw no light at all on our lay linguistic experience" and which force speech into a "metalinguistic language machine": *The Language Connection* reminds me of the drama critic who, asked to talk about a particularly emotional and challenging play, could only say: "at the end, everyone dies."

At the end of this book, everyone is certainly dead (apart from Harris, who writes of both philosophers and linguists in the third person throughout). The whole basis of metalinguistic discussion in both disciplines has been found wanting. Ever since it was first formulated in ancient Greece, Harris argues, language study has used a conceptual framework which is confused, distorting and illusory. The criticism applies equally to each discipline, because essentially the same metalinguistic framework is used by both—notwithstanding the various differences of focus which have arisen over the centuries, such as the linguistic "sentence" and the philosophical proposition.

Neither discipline has any desire to eliminate the distinctions which separate them, or to clarify the foundations of their subjects. Harris asserts, because they each have a vested interest in maintaining their separate academic identities—for each, reflexivity is a "carefully doctored version designed for their own disciplinary purposes". The two disciplines are maintaining the status quo for purely self-perpetuating reasons. "They claim a professional purpose" and demonstrate ways in which the traditional metalanguage has helped clarify the nature of language, or solve various problems. Harris hints that there may be no alternative sorting out the muddle "does not require anything as ambitious as the construction of a new error-free metalanguage... a project about which I am sceptical."

And in any case, "even the severest critics of the traditional parts-of-speech doctrine found themselves at a loss to provide any more convenient basis for comparing one language with another": "it seems that linguistic enquiry in western culture is locked into a metalinguistic framework which is highly resistant to basic change, even though its presuppositions are extremely dubious and easily shown to be so." Harris is well aware that he has to use the same metalanguage himself, though he tries to defend himself against the obvious criticism by saying that his "intention was never to call a halt to the metalinguistic games we play... but to prevent... metalinguistic illusions": If we understand these illusions, it "does not take us as far along the road as we might like towards an adequate theory of language. But at least it is a first step in the right direction".

So, does Harris give us any clues about the direction we should be taking? There are some hints. He accepts that reflectivity is central to linguistic communication, as long as it does not become "parasitic upon a more basic non-reflective function of language, something extra to the primary purposes served". In both disciplines, we see the adoption (of doctrines)..."because that is what answers to the demands of the theorist rather than because it corresponds to the observable practice of the linguistic community" (his italics). So what are these "primary purposes" and "observable practices"? Context seems to be the key. There must be no uncontextualised theorising. Harris seems to be arguing towards a social or psychological process which is shared by both disciplines, though he also quotes Ray Monk in his preface: "which is the way with models. Indeed, the one thing I miss in this book is a serious discussion of the notion of models. The term model eventually turns up in passing on page 145. Yet models, even very faulty ones, can illuminate as well as obscure. Harris has focused only on the obscure features of the traditional metalinguistic model, and seems to deny that it could ever be illuminating. Yet it would not be difficult to scan the ranks of the traditional metalinguistic model, and seems to deny that it could ever be illuminating. Yet it would not be difficult to scan the ranks of linguists who use it as a methodological tool."

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Iters which have too long been taken for granted. It is the most convincing attack on intellectual laziness and conservatism in the linguistic domain that I have read in a long time, and it left me feeling healthily disturbed, as after a good workout in the gym. It was therefore quite a relief to turn to a nice straightforward issue: the origin of language. The publisher comments about the Key Issues series, to which *The Origin of Language* (edited by Harris) belongs, that it “makes available the contemporary reactions that met important books and debates on their first appearance”: That sounds like an excellent idea, and this well-chosen selection of items on the origins of language, originally published between 1851 and 1892, certainly does that. We have substantial pieces from R. C. Trench, Max Müller (twice), F. W. Farrar, E. B. Tylor, Charles Darwin, W. D. Whitney, R. L. Garner, and two anonymous authors. It is fascinating to see the way the set of issues surrounding this topic was presented, and to see the vigour with which cases were argued. The topic excites widespread interest more than a century on. I am not so sure whether more than 300 pages of debate will attract a continuous reader. Skimming or selective reading may well be the order of the day. For student readers, Harris does not provide much help. There is no index, so it is impossible to trace individual themes or examples. And the context of individual items is not explained: an editorial paragraph saying who the author was, why he was writing, and what the gist of his piece was, would have been invaluable. Odd for Harris to leave us so decontextualised. As it is, of the present selection, some items have no sources mentioned (Trench, Muller, Farrar, Charles Darwin), and we are not told who several authors are (Trench, Farrar, George Darwin, Garner). Yet, in those days of creationism versus evolution, it is important, surely, to know, for example, that Trench was archbishop of Dublin, Farrar dean of Canterbury. The very first line of the opening piece cries out for such editorial contextualisation: it begins, “But the truer answer...”. Truer than what, we shall never know. Students of language today, who get little more than a short paragraph on each of the old theories (pooh-pooh, ding-dong, etc) will find the discussion in these pages a revelation. I would have liked a fuller introduction. The one provided deals only with the evolutionary climate of the time, and stops short (apart from a brief mention) of bringing these arguments into the present day, where new perspectives have emerged. Linguistics today, it seems, is no longer just a question of filling in the blanks of the evolutionary past. There needs to be a renewal of connection with the intellectual present, and that this volume does not do. Such books on the past need to get back to the future.

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