REVIEWS

‘The man hit the woman’

Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force of Language*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004. vii + 186 pp., £50.00 hb., 1 4039 4248 X.

Carol Sanders, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004. xii + 303 pp., £45.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 0521 80051 X hb., 0521 80486 8 pb.

The Force of Language is a Napoleonic book, short and ambitious. In the very first pages Lecercle promises us a new philosophy of language, and he reminds us throughout of both his promise and the fact that its fulfilment will be ‘utterly unpalatable to mainstream linguistics and current philosophies of language’. As if that weren’t enough to accomplish in 170 pages, once you begin reading you realize that this new thinking about language implies a new style of writing about it as well. Lecercle thinks Chomsky’s notorious ‘the man hit the ball’ is a terrible place to start when theorizing about language: the slogan and the literary work, not the simple declarative sentence, are far more typical and useful as paradigms. It is therefore apt that slogans and poetic writing are the authors’ chosen instruments as well as their chosen objects.

Actually, this is not clear when you begin reading; it only gradually dawns on you. Lecercle’s Introduction is straightforward enough, calling our attention to the kind of linguistic phenomena – jokes, expressions of affect, poetry – that are beyond the ken of Noam and Ferdinand. But after that we are launched (and launched, as we are talking of affect, is exactly how it feels) into Part I, written by Riley alone, an evocative, densely metaphorical, ‘literary’ discussion of inner speech and ‘bad words’ (i.e. insulting, injurious speech). A characteristic discussion of the colonization of inner speech gives you the flavour of it:

> For inner speech is no limpid stream of consciousness, crystalline from its uncontaminated source in Mind, but a sludgy thing, thickened with reiterated quotation, choked with the rubble of the overheard, the strenuously sifted and hoarded, the periodically dusted down then crammed with slogans and jingles, with mutterings of remembered accusations, irrepressible puns, insistent spirits of ancient exchanges, monotonous citation, the embarrassing detritus of advertising, archaic injunctions from hymns, and the pastel snatches of old song lyrics.

These sixty pages are full of interesting ideas, but the evidence for Riley’s theory of inner speech is largely introspective, and the writing mixes conceptual argument with – shrewdly judged – rhetorical gestures and metaphorical excursions.

We need a bit of help figuring out where inner speech fits into the grand plan and what we should be taking away from Riley’s compelling prose. And help is promptly at hand: Part II, written by Lecercle alone, begins by quoting passages from Riley and proceeding to a critical explication of what Riley has laid out in her own elegant terms, including a *post hoc* explanation of why her chosen topics are critical to the new philosophy of language. ‘Bad words’ are apparently the best place to start such a philosophy, and much, much better then men hitting balls, because they have force, because they wound, and because they reveal the essentially agonistic nature of language.

Even better than bad words are the writings of literary madmen, a few of whose ravings Lecercle then discusses in order to draw out their useful ‘intuitions about how language works and the way literature is constituted’. A brief critique of Chomsky, who is appointed chief representative of the ‘mainstream’ philosophy of language (the term ‘mainstream’ does an awful lot of work in this book), leads us finally to Lecercle’s sketch for a new philosophy of language, now made more concrete as a ‘Marxist form of pragmatics’.

Yet we don’t really get a new philosophy of language, unless you think that attaching a few predicates to the concept of language amounts to a philosophy. Lecercle first characterizes his view of language by simply laying out six properties ascribed to language by Chomsky and Co. (immanence, functionality, transparency, ideality, systematicity and synchrony) and insisting on six counter-principles, which the reader can probably figure out for him- or herself. Obviously an alternative account of language has to be more than the bare negation of what you disagree with, and the final chapter is accordingly devoted to the ‘concept of language we need’. But this concept turns out to be four theses that essentially condense the earlier six: language, it turns out, is historical, social, material and political.

To be fair, Lecercle makes some effort to flesh out these claims. Language is historical in the sense that it can only be understood as the 'sedimented aggregate of past and present political struggles'; social in the sense that it is the bearer of ideology and the instrument of our interpellation; material in its imbrication with the labouring body; political in that it is a vehicle of imperialism and class struggle. Nevertheless, Lecercle does not transcend the polemical starting point of his argument: in the end we are left with a set of 'slogans' no less abstract than the suppositions they're meant to counter. It's not just that these slogans are never woven together into a theory of language capable of explaining and describing the force and meaning of utterances (or whatever other unit of analysis is deemed relevant). The big problem is that Lecercle writes as if insisting that language is political, social and the rest of it in and of itself created a Marxist philosophy of language. It is, however, perfectly possible for a non-Marxist to make the same claims, and many non-Marxist linguists do so all the time. One would be hard-pressed, in fact, to find a linguist (Chomsky aside) who disagreed with the central contention that language is a social practice: Saussure spent a good part of his lectures on general linguistics insisting on this very point.

The difference should surely be that a Marxist account of language explains the force and significance of language in terms of the history and structure of capitalist societies, in terms of the particular institutional complexity that characterizes those societies and the political force-field that distends them. Just saying societies are agonistic and that language is embedded in institutions isn't enough. (Lecercle is uncomfortably aware that the agonistic conception of politics he adheres to finds its ultimate expression in Carl Schmitt, not Karl Marx.) Furthermore, as a practice or institution itself, language might have a developmental history of its own, just like labour and politics; maybe the force of language itself is transformed, in a manner we can evaluate as well as describe. Ironically, it's probably Habermas, one of the Bad, Abstract Guys in Lecercle's universe, who has come closest to this kind of theory. While there is a great deal to disagree with in the substance of Habermas's theory of communicative action, methodologically it does what a Marxist theory of discourse ought to do: it situates the order of discourse within the recent history of capitalist society, and attends in particular to the way in which the formal structures of discourse themselves have had to change and develop. By contrast, what Lecercle offers is less a Marxist pragmatics than a philosophical anthropology of language, which sketches out the structures of linguistic praxis that make possible its historical development, what Honneth and Joas once described as 'the unchanging preconditions of human changeableness'.

Yet if the book doesn't deliver on a promise it might have been rash to make, it nevertheless delivers. What really inspires and intrigues the authors is Althusser's foray into anthropology, the theory of interpellation. Lecercle's suggested elaboration of the theory, albeit drawn from an earlier book, is useful. But the most striking innovation is found in Riley's opening chapters, which, perhaps not surprisingly, fit somewhat awkwardly into the book's grand scheme. She cleverly shows that inner speech can be the lever for a general revision of both the concept of interpellation and the mechanics of insult and injury. Inner speech, as she has described it in the paragraph quoted above, is the mechanism whereby the subject performs an 'autoventriloquy', speaking to itself 'spontaneously' in a language brought into it from beyond. Her analysis of bad words builds on this idea, using defence against insult and hate speech as a test case for the exercise of resistance to interpellation. It's the power of this kind of speech that theorists like Habermas are unable to account for, and Riley deftly uses the opportunity to illustrate the weaknesses of any pragmatics too dependent on a utopian concept of intersubjectivity. Although the ideas she hazards need further testing and explication, she has nonetheless made an original and bold effort to take insults and hate speech seriously as language, rather than as its deformation, and to think through the theoretical consequences.

The polemical abstraction of Lecercle's argument makes you wonder whether anyone actually holds the views he ascribes to the notorious mainstream philosophy of language. If the *Cambridge Companion to Saussure* is anything to go by, even the father of all that is structuralist did not. Even more interestingly, it turns out that the father of structuralism is not its real father at all, but more a benign uncle who has been blamed for all the mischief caused by his would-be progeny. This correction of the received intellectual genealogy is just one of the virtues of the *Cambridge Companion to Saussure*. Publishers' catalogues these days are like matchmakers: all they seem to want to do is sell you a 'companion'. But this *Cambridge Companion* does exactly what it says on the tin: it's just what you need to have to hand on those lonely nights you spend ploughing through the *Course in General Linguistics*. First, because so many of the people who read and discuss the *Course* (like the author of this review) have no professional training

in linguistics. Second, because the *Course* itself, like Saussure's career, is a strange, composite thing, a work put together by two colleagues from Saussure's occasional written notes and the extensive notes taken by students of his lectures on general linguistics between 1907 and 1911.

The various sections of the *Companion* provide, respectively, an account of the intellectual context in which Saussure developed, analysis of the editorial practice that produced the course and of how certain key issues are dealt with within it, a series of studies on the dissemination and influence of the text in the decades following its publication, and a careful thinking through of the consequences Saussure's work has for the further development of linguistics, semiotics and the philosophy of science. Nearly all the contributions display just the right mix of philological thoroughness and theoretical rigour. What's particularly useful for the reader of Saussure is the care taken to interpret the mosaic of the *Course* through the prism of both the now-published notes to the lectures on general linguistics and the recently published *Écrits de linguistique générale* (Gallimard, 2002), which includes a long manuscript on the 'double essence of language' from 1894 (and if the mixed metaphor of a mosaic seen through a prism makes your head spin, that is my point).

One after the other, contributors draw attention to the unresolved ambiguities of the *Course*, sedimented in the conceptual pairs (*langue*/*parole*, synchrony/diachrony, arbitrary/motivated, and so on) for which the *Course* is best known. As is so often the case, Saussure's brilliance lay less in the ready-to-wear usefulness of his concepts than in their determinate fuzziness, the way in which their ambiguities continually focus our attention on the key questions facing the modern philosophy and empirical study of language. Principal of these is his concept of language itself, or rather that aspect of language that should be the object of linguistics, the language structure or *la langue*; the concept of the sign itself, arbitrary or relatively motivated, runs a close second. The epistemological and ontological issues raised by the former crop up in virtually every contribution, but they receive particular, sustained attention in articles on the philosophy of science by Christopher Norris, on the *langue*/*parole* dichotomy by W. Terrence Gordon, on Saussure's genuine interest in the study of discourse by Simon Bouquet, and on value and arbitrariness by Claude Normand. John Joseph's excellent discussion of the theory of the sign is complemented by Geoffrey Bennington's model explication, perfectly lucid and subtle, of Derrida's critique of Saussure in *Of Grammatology*. In all these discussions the issue isn't whether language is social or historical, but what that amounts to and what consequences it has for linguistics.

Naturally, these complexities become yet more evident and awkward in the use made of Saussure's writings by those who come after him. Julia Falk's article on American linguistics points out that Saussure had very little influence on the American scene until Jakobson forced him onto it in the early 1940s, at which point American linguists decided they were structuralists rather than descriptivists. Jakobson also occupies centre stage in Stephen Hutchings's account of the Russian reception of Saussure, far too much of the stage in fact, in so far as Hutchings doesn't discuss the efforts of a number of important, left-wing Russian linguists to adapt Saussure to Soviet cultural politics in the 1920s, efforts that have been the object of much interesting work in the last few years. Two contributions on European interpretations of Saussure by linguists (Christian Puech's chapter) and 'structuralists' (Stephen Ungar's chapter) point up how easy it was for this composite theory to be rerouted in so many different directions.

The lesson here is not that Saussure remains the horizon within which even Marxist linguists must work. It is that 'the class struggle in theory' may not be the best rallying call or model for intellectuals

of the Left. It encourages a sloganeering concept of theory-building, and an abstract relationship with what used to be called 'bourgeois' science. Saussure put the conventionalism of language centre stage, with all the problems that idea entailed. If his notion of the social character of language was consensual yet authoritarian, and his account of its history unpersuasive, it had less to do with his misunderstanding of language than with his misunderstanding of European history and society. Getting past or beyond him demands a new history of language as much as a new concept of it.

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