Psychology of Language

David W. Carroll

Psychology of Language

David W. Carroll
University of Wisconsin/Superior

Brooks/Cole Publishing Company
Pacific Grove, California

Brooks/Cole Publishing Company
A Division of Wadsworth, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carroll, David W., [date]
Psychology of language.

Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Psycholinguistics. I. Title.
BF455.C268 1985 401'.9 85-22393
ISBN 0-534-05640-7

Sponsoring Editor: C. *Deborah Laughton*
Project Development Editor: *John Bergez*
Production Editors: C. *Diane Brown*, S. M. *Bailey*
Manuscript Editor: *Susan Thornton*
Permissions Editor: *Carline Haga*
Interior and Cover Design: *Katherine Minerva*
Art Coordinator: *Judith Macdonald*
Interior Illustration: *Ryan Cooper*
Photo Editor: *Judy Blamer*
Typesetting: *Vail-Ballou, Binghamton, NY*
Cover Printing: *Lehigh Autoscreen, Pennsauken, NJ*
Printing and Binding: *Fairfield Graphics, Fairfield, PA*

Psychology of Language

NEW FRENCH THOUGHT

SERIES EDITORS

Thomas Pavel and Mark Lilla

TITLES IN THE SERIES

Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy*

Gilles Lipovetsky, *The Empire of Fashion: Dressing Modern Democracy*

Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*

Jacques Bouveresse, *Wittgenstein Reads Freud: The Myth of the Unconscious*

Blandine Kriegel, *The State and the Rule of Law*

Alain Renault, *The Era of the Individual: A Contribution to a History of Subjectivity*

Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*

Foreword

BY CHARLES TAYLOR

1.

THIS BOOK BELONGS to a type that is all too rare these days. By setting out a global theory of religion, of its history and transformations, Marcel Gauchet has attempted something that forebears once dared, but that today seems nearly impossible in face of the immense accumulation of historical and social scientific scholarship. The author knows full well the risks he is running. But he argues, rightly I believe, that by never spelling out the big picture we have become unconscious of our ultimate assumptions, and in the end confused about them. While recognizing how fragile these large theories are and himself drawing on an immense range of specialized research (of which the footnotes give only a partial idea), Marcel Gauchet embarks on his ambitious project, convinced that we need theory on this scale, if only to define precisely our views. Otherwise we will be like "dwarfs who have forgotten to climb on the shoulders of giants." For having undertaken this courageous enterprise, the community of thinkers and scholars is greatly in his debt.

This book is about religion, but it is also about what people often call "secularization." In other words, Gauchet tries to understand religion in terms of "the exit from religion," to grasp the phenomenon from the standpoint of those who have lived through its demise. There is a clear debt to Weber here, as the title implies. But when people talk about 'secularization,' they can mean a host of different things. In one sense, the word designates the decline of religious belief and practice in the modern world, the declining numbers who enter church, or who declare themselves believers. In another, it can mean the retreat of religion from the public space, the steady transformation of our institutions toward religious and ideological neutrality, their shedding of a religious identity.

There are two ranges of phenomena here, distinct but in some ways linked; and that obviously has suggested two kinds of theories. One makes the decline in personal belief the motor, and explains the secularization of public space as a consequence of it; the other reverses the relation, and sees the changing place of religion in social life as the crucial factor, and the retreat of individual belief as flowing from it. The first

kind of theory, focusing as it does on beliefs, has given an important role to the rise of science. Science, it has been said, has displaced religion, made the old creeds incredible, and that is what has transformed public life. The crisis felt by many believing Christians in the nineteenth century after the publication of Darwin's theories is taken as a paradigm expression of the process at work. But this kind of view has tended to give way in the twentieth century to theories of the second sort. The influence of Durkheim was important here. On this view, religion is more than just a set of beliefs. It is a pattern of practices that gives a certain shape to our social imaginary. Religion—or, as Durkheim liked to put it, the sense of the sacred—is the way we experience or belong to the larger social whole. Explicit religious doctrines offer an understanding of our place in the universe and among other human beings, because they reflect what it is like to live in this place. Religion, for Durkheim, was the very basis of society. Only by studying how society hangs together, and the changing modes of its cohesion in history, will we discover the dynamic of secularization.

Gauchet's theory is situated in this Durkheiman tradition, but he has very considerably transformed it. The earlier, belief-centered theories, he seems to argue, understated the difference between the ages of faith and the secular present. Durkheim allows for a fundamental transformation between societies with different principles of cohesion, but he stresses the continuity of belief, treating modern secular societies as having their own "religion," e.g., that of the rights of man. For Gauchet, the transformation was much more fundamental. Living in a religious society involved a very different way of being than we know in our secular age. The failure to see this comes, he believes, from the mistaken way we think of this development as "development." That is, we tend to think of religion itself as unfolding its potentialities when it moves from being "primitive" and mutates into one of the "higher religions."

Gauchet proposes that we reverse this story. As he understands religion, it was at its most perfect, its most consistent and complete, precisely in its "primitive" stage. The move to higher forms during what Jasper calls the "Axial period"—for instance, to Confucianism, Buddhism, Upanishadic doctrines, prophetic Judaism, and Platonic theorizing—introduced a break, an inner inconsistency, in the religious world. They opened a breech through which the eventual exit from religion came to be made. This exit was not inevitable (Gauchet is very much aware of the extraordinary contingency evident time and again in this history), but it can be said that the original breech was the necessary condition of our world.

So Gauchet's story is not one of a development, moving to higher and higher stages. Rather, it is a story of the breakdown of religion, a kind of break-up through stages, which eventually gave us a social reality

quite opposite to the one that existed at the outset. This means that the rise of the secular age can be understood only to a limited degree as a linear unfolding of a previously existing potential, and that it is much more important to understand the unpredictable and unwanted byproducts of religious thought and practice that later arose.

2.

So what is Gauchet's basic idea of "religion"? He starts with reflections on what is specific to the human animal. A human being is one that reflects on itself and its situation, that does not simply take up a predetermined place but redefines it. The human being is not only reflective, he is also an agent. His crucial capacity is working on and transforming the world.

In relation to this distinctive potentiality, the original religious mode of being consisted in a sort of radical "dispossession." It projected us into a world in which the order was already irrevocably fixed in an earlier time of foundation, and each of us had an assigned place in this order that we could not repudiate. In this world, our defining potentialities were in a sense preemptively abandoned. There was no question of reflecting on who we were and how we fit in; no question of transforming the order of things. This is the sense of Gauchet's notion of "dispossession," a sort of renunciation of our potential, unconsciously carried through—presumably in order to foreclose the endless search for meaning, and to establish firmly the sense of reality.

To fill out this schema, Gauchet picks up on a number of features that recur in many early religious forms. There the world order is seen as established in a past "time of origins" (in Eliade's term) that is inaccessible to us except through ritual renewal. A crucial feature of our religious consciousness is in our relation to this unrecoverable past. By this very token, however, we are all on the same footing as members of human society. No one stands closer to this origin point than others; each has his or her role. Societies under this rule partake of a basic equality contained within a coherent whole. Each part, each role, has its meaning in relation to that totality.

For Gauchet, the rest of human history, what we normally call history, is the story of the breakup of this unity. This goes through several stages, the first of which seems to be the growth of the state. Early societies, those of unbreeched religion, have often been described as "stateless." Their basic equality took the form of a diffusion of power among different roles, held together by unchallengeable custom. Once something like state power arose—with Pharaohs in Egypt. say, or Stewards of the God in Mesopotamia—the equilibrium was broken. States concentrate power

and exercise control; by nature they cannot be entirely guided by preexisting law or custom. State power cannot be innovative, especially when war between states leads to conquest and empire. The sacred web of order now mutates into a hierarchy. There are now people, or strata, that are closer to the invisible order than others. The Steward of the God, or the divine king, is the link by which the higher power of the Gods makes connection with society, and this power trickles down, as it were, through the hierarchical levels, to its lower levels.

In this sense, the dynamic of change for Gauchet seems to be political. Indeed, the drama of the actual exit from religion is largely recounted in terms of the development of the late-medieval and post-medieval European state. Where the primacy of the political seems harder to credit, however, is in between. The aforementioned "higher" religions of the Axial period all took the diffuse and variegated order of earlier religion tried to unify it under a transcendent supreme principle. This could be a supreme creator God, or some unified principles of order, like the Tao; or the endless cycle of Samsara, offering an escape beyond into Nirvana, or an order of Ideas unified by the Good. This meant that there was something beyond the order we live in. And this in turn changed the whole structure of religion, in several connected ways.

First of all, the order was no longer self-explanatory, but depended on a higher reality, or principle. Growth toward this higher reality then became possible, either through devotion or understanding. This in turn brought with it individuation, a turn toward the subject called as an individual to understand the Ideas, or approach God, or attain Enlightenment. This in turn meant that the holy was no longer in an irrecoverable past, and that there were ways of making contact with it, whether in receiving the revelation of God, or in grasping the Ideas. The relation to the past was no longer the all-important one.

Thus the religious order mutated. But it still seemed to have the crucial property of its original form. Humans were still dispossessed, in that the meanings of things was fixed in a given order, but now we could change our relation to it by becoming the servants of God, seeking Enlightenment, or grasping through reason the Ideas. And this is not without importance.

3.

The rest of the story essentially explains how certain forms arose, in which the favored way of approaching the highest reality (in this case, God) eventually wrought a destruction of the whole idea of sacred order. This is the story of the "religions that bring about the exit from religion,"

i.e., Judaism and then Christianity. In some aspects, this story—of how Judaism and later Christianity brought about disenchantment by attacking the notion of a sacred power in things and emptying the cosmos in order to confine the holy to God alone—has already been explored. But the way in which Gauchet sets it out in the second part of the book is highly original, and introduces some strikingly new and interesting ideas. I find particularly fascinating his account of the development of the modern state, which I mentioned above.

Following this, the second chapter of this second part gives an account of what it is to live in a postreligious age. The old Feuerbachian (and Marxist) idea, that humans return out of their religious and material alienations into a full possession of themselves, a kind of limpid self-understanding in freedom, is condemned by Gauchet as illusion. Our self-understanding and sense of agency still relate us to something "other," to something we do not understand and cannot transparently control. His attempt to work this idea out in relation to modern democratic self-rule is tremendously suggestive and interesting. Here in modern secular society is a form of life in which the key temporal dimension is the future, seen as something that we must shape. We are indeed at the antipodes of the original religious society, which was rivetted to the past. And yet the very nature of this controlling activity renders this future less and less definitely conceivable. Instead of being captured in a definite plan, it becomes "pure future."

Does this mean that religion is a thing of the past? Here a tension seems to emerge in Gauchet's conception. Throughout most of the book, 'religion' has meant the original socially embedded understanding of the universe as sacred order, in which humans are contained. But obviously, something has survived into the present that people also call 'religion,' namely personal faith and the collective practices it inspires. (Of course, once you move outside of the Atlantic zone, religion survives in a much more robust and traditional form. Gauchet is not at all unaware of this. Indeed, it is part of his central point that Christianity was the religion that first produced exit from religion, and so the postreligious world exists only in ex-Christendom.) Gauchet in no way wants to deny this survival of faith. He toys with the idea that it, too, might disappear, but avoids committing himself to this perilous prediction. But this issue raises the question of just what is meant by 'religion' in his discussion.

Throughout the book, 'religion' means a certain kind of shared way of life. Religion, we might say, is a form of culture. Obviously a functioning culture requires belief on the part of its members, so culture includes faith. When the culture dies, faith can be left as a residue in certain individuals. Is this the relationship Gauchet is assuming? In that case, one would predict the withering away of faith.

But the discussion in the very last section ("Le religieux apres la religion") seems to suggest another answer. Religion (the culture) preempted all those difficult questions about who we are and what is the meaning of things. With the end of this culture, these questions now cannot be avoided; and each individual is faced with them. This makes for a great unease. There are no easy answers to these questions, and so it is natural that people will search everywhere, quarrying, among other places, the religious ideas of the past. This suggests a picture, which in some ways meets contemporary experience, of a more and more fragmented and individual search for spirituality, in which the searchers are ever more mobile, not only in taking up exotic traditions, but also in altering their positions as time and experience dictate. On this view, personal religion or faith would be the attempt to answer the troubling questions that were preempted by religious culture, by picking fragments shored against the ruins of that culture, or other similar elements.

It is clear that we are dealing here with an atheist view of the matter. This is not to criticize Gauchet's approach, because it is impossible to address this whole matter while leaving the crucial question of the existence of God, or Nirvana, or whatever, totally in suspension. But it is here that I find his approach less than fully convincing, even—indeed, especially—in relation to the story he tells.

Some of the most crucial transformations in the forms of religious culture he records are due to the concerted actions of people moved by faith. The rise of Christianity is a striking example. The question must arise how these mutations in faith can be explained. Gauchet's approach seems to be that we can find the explanatory light we seek in the tensions that have arisen in the structures of religion: we saw, for instance, how the higher religions of the Axial period virtually pushed us toward an interiorized, reflective attempt to understand the single principle at the source of everything. But the nature of this push has to be further described. The tensions in the structure can only be understood in light of what the structures are doing for us, what the depth motivation was underlying the whole dispossessive move into religion. Otherwise put, we can only define the tensions in light of what we see as the point of the enterprise. For Gauchet, the point seems to have been to give meaning an absolutely firm and unchallengeable standing in our world. The tension that arose with the higher religions therefore came from the fact that they reintroduced questions that were meant to be closed.

But can the new departures in faith, of Buddha, of Jesus, or for that matter of St. Francis or St. Teresa, be understood simply in terms of the hunger for meaning? If the basic aim is just to make sense of it all, why is it that karuna or agape are so central to these traditions? Can the evolution at this level of detail be accounted for simply in terms of the struc-

tural tensions of "religion"? If so, then the explanatory primacy of these structures would indeed be vindicated. Faith would be merely a "dependent variable," flotsam on the sea of a postreligious age. But perhaps these mutations can only be explained by supposing that something like what they relate to—God, Nirvana—really exists. In that case, a purely cultural account of religion would be like Hamlet without the Prince.

While I opt for this second view, and hence cannot accept Gauchet's fundamental characterization of religion, this book is the living proof—if we still needed one—that you do not have to be ultimately right to make clear some truly profound and important features of our religious history, nor to open tremendously fruitful and exciting vistas for further exploration. No one interested in clarifying our thought about religion and the secular can afford to ignore this remarkable and original book.

Contents