THEORIZING
LANGUAGE

Talbot J. Taylor
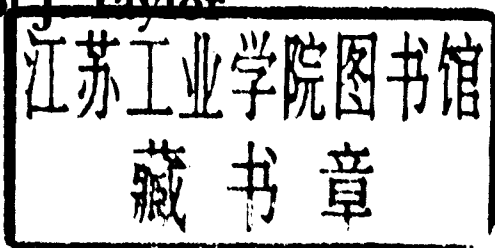
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analysis, normativity, rhetoric, history

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à Suzanne Allaire
qui m'a appris
le gout du langage
et
la consolation de l'esprit

Sources and Acknowledgments

The papers collected herein bear witness to my development as a theorist of language. Most of the papers were published previously in various journals and edited volumes over the past fifteen years. Three of the papers are published here for the first time. The final paper, published originally in *Language Sciences*, has been extensively revised for inclusion here.

Draft versions of each of these papers were presented to audiences at one or more of the following universities: the Université de Rennes II, Cambridge University, Southampton University, Oxford University, the National University of Singapore, the University of Hong Kong, Beijing Normal University, the Université de Fribourg (Suisse), the University of Cape Town, Duke University, American University, Carnegie Mellon University, and the School of American Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I would like to thank the audiences who attended and commented on these talks, and I am naturally grateful to the institutions themselves for their invitations to present my ideas to a captive public.

It amazes me when I think of all the people whose contributions were absolutely indispensable to bringing this book out. Without their talents, advice, time, assistance, patience, encouragement, and sheer hard work, the book would never have seen the light of day. In the last stages of preparation I was supported by the generosity of my department chair, Terry Meyers, and by three editorial assistants he made available to me. First among these equals, I must give special recognition to David Morrill, who shepherded every single page into its final crafted form. Shannon Mouillesseaux arrived on the scene just when I most needed her. She devoted many hours to what must have been an exasperating task of reading, editing, and proofing. I never would have finished the book without her. The same goes for Casey Cornelius who took up where Shannon left off. But I may well owe the greatest debt to my patient and generous editor at Elsevier Science and Pergamon Press, Chris Pringle.

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Introduction

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— 1 —

Enculturating Language

Theorizing language can be dangerous. Or, on the other hand, illuminating. It may be spelled with an "s" instead of a "z." Or it might just be the last book you ever read on the theory of language.

And yet, looking at it there, on the page, it is clear that none of its observable properties—18 black ink shapes against a white background—*could* resolve this ambiguity. For these properties remain invariant from one interpretation to the next: *nothing changes*. What then determines, if anything does, how theorizing language can be characterized?

We can be sure that no matter how theorizing language is to be characterized—whether as dangerously misleading, therapeutically illuminating, crassly misspelled, or boring and over-priced—all will depend on how it (that is, theorizing language and/or its characterization) is integrated into the circumstances of its occurrence. Under one set of circumstances, theorizing language will appear as a kind of discourse (compare: "political language"), under a second as a metalinguistic activity (compare: "studying language"), under a third as a matter of contested norms (cf., "skepticism" vs. "scepticism"), and under a fourth as a cultural-commercial artifact (viz., that which you are holding in your hands). In other words, from one set of circumstances to another, *everything changes*. Still, in the end, merely recognizing that it (theorizing language and/or its characterization) *can* appear under any of various different aspects may be what turns out to have been the most valuable part of the whole experience. Or that was how it seemed to me.

All the same, it would probably be better if I began not in the end, but at the beginning....

Unorthodox beginnings

At the beginning was language, whose study I began while a graduate student in Oxford. At that time, language theorizing in Oxford was in a period not unlike that experienced by the Parisian population under the

Commune. An intellectual revolution was underway. Its brilliant and icono-clastic leader was my graduate supervisor Roy Harris, an inspiring teacher and a gifted and polemical writer (see especially Harris 1980, 1981, 1996a; also Wolf and Love 1997). Within a year or so after my arrival in Oxford, Harris was appointed to the Chair of Romance Languages and then, a few months later, to the first Chair of General Linguistics at the university. Of course, in leading the Oxford revolution against "orthodox" language theory, Harris drew on the ideas of earlier innovators and iconoclasts, among whom the most important were Wittgenstein, Austin, Moore, Garfinkel, Bazell, and Firth. And he also made use of the energy and still unsullied thinking of his students, for we had not been brought up on the authorita-tive traditions, *lieux communs*, and "commonsense" patterns of thought as had those already trained in one of the various orthodox theoretical schools. Although, like that of the Commune itself, this revolution eventually failed (if, that is, the ultimate measure of a revolution's success is attainment, and retention, of political power) and "normal service" was resumed in the academic establishment of Anglo-American linguistics, some of Harris' stu-dents have turned into the most creative and original theorists writing on language today: including Deborah Cameron, Nigel Love, George Wolf, Chris Hutton, Tony Crowley, Daniel Davis, Hayley Davis, and MichaelToolan (see references to these authors in the bibliography, and to a collection of their papers, listed as Taylor 1997).

In those years Oxford language theorizing had the same naïve but ex-hilarating sense of freedom and radical innovation that is said to have been common during the Paris Commune: "naïve" because we, like the *"communards,"* were surrounded by hostile enemy forces who clearly pos-sessed the power to render our academic freedom short-lived. Neverthe-less, these circumstances did encourage creative thinking. At the same time, we were extremely critical of the ideas of all those who manifested submis-sion to the orthodox theories of the *ancien regime*, the authorities in that tradition most of all: especially Chomsky, Saussure, Searle, Lyons, Dummett, Bloomfied, Katz, and Quine.

In my earliest papers, written while I was still at Oxford, my goal was to analyze and critique the theories that were dominant in the study of vari-ous language topics: in particular, topics in linguistic stylistics, conversa-tion and discourse analysis, semantics, and the philosophy of language. Before too long, however, the focus of my critical attention had narrowed to what is perhaps the main foundational principle underpinning modern theories of language and to the methodological puzzles that derive from the adoption of that principle. This principle is what I initially called "THE PRINCIPLE OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY" (see Taylor, 1981) and which Harris came to

write of as "the language myth." He aptly characterized this metalinguistic myth in terms of two main "fallacies."

> The language myth is the product of two interconnected fallacies: the telementational fallacy and the determinacy fallacy. The telementational fallacy is a thesis about the function of language, while the determinacy fallacy is a thesis about the mechanism of language. Although logically independent, the two fallacies complement each other. Historically, too, they are closely associated.
>
> According to the telementational fallacy, linguistic knowledge is essentially a matter of knowing which words stand for which ideas. For words, according to this view, are symbols devised by man for transferring thoughts from one mind to another. Speech is a form of telementation. (...)
>
> The determinacy fallacy, or 'fixed code' fallacy (as it might alternatively be called) provides for the explanation of how the telementational process works, and indeed of how telementation is possible. (...) Individuals are able to exchange their thoughts by means of words because—and insofar as—they have come to understand and to adhere to a fixed public plan for doing so. The plan is based on recurrent instantiation of invariant items in two respects: form and meaning. Knowing the forms of sentences enables those who know the language to express appropriately the thoughts they intend to convey. Knowing the meanings of sentences enables those who know the language to identify the thoughts thus expressed.
>
> (Harris, 1981, pp. 9-10)

The Principle of Intersubjectivity assumes both that mutual understanding, conceived as the product of "telementation," is a regular occurrence and that this regular occurrence is only possible because of specific characteristics of the language used in the communicative act (e.g., Harris' "fixed code"). Language must "give" us what we "get" through communication (cf., Taylor, 1979 and 1981). I refer to this principle as a matter of *intersubjectivity* because it represents the use of language as making possible the mutual *sharing* by speaker and hearer of something represented as essentially *subjective*: namely, *what the speaker has to say*.

Like Harris, I took the Principle of Intersubjectivity to raise at least two major kinds of question. The first of these concerns the nature and determinacy of communicational understanding. The second kind of question concerns the methodological issues raised by the need to analyze language in terms of those very properties which render communicational understanding possible: that is, in terms of those properties by which language "gives" communicators what they "get." It has always struck me as strange that the first kind of question—about the nature and determinacy of communicational understanding—is more or less ignored by linguists

and discourse analysts (but see Schiffrin, 1994), although it is sometimes
to be found in philosophers' discussions of language. On the other hand,
the second, methodological kind of question is typically treated by lan-
guage theorists as a matter of analytical criteria. That is, the question be-
comes one of devising analytical criteria and procedures which will accu-
rately distinguish between those properties of language which do, and those
which do not, *matter* to the purposes for which language is used. Another
way that this has been put is to speak of criteria for identifying features of
linguistic *"form"* (or *"structure"*), thereby distinguishing it from the features
of linguistic *"substance"* (cf., Saussure, 1916).

To use a stereotypical example, one might say that in Old English it
mattered whether the vowels in some words were given a longer or shorter
duration. If the [o] vowel in [god], meaning 'God,' were lengthened to
[go:d], speakers of Old English would have taken a different word to have
been produced: that which means 'good.' In other words, vowel length was
a feature of linguistic form in Old English. However, in modern American
English, it does not matter whether one produces a long or a short [o] in,
say, the context [n_d]: [nod] or [no:d]; either way, the meaning, 'node' is
the same. Another way of characterizing this difference is to say that vowel
length was *phonemic* in Old English—it was a property of linguistic form—
but it is not in American English. There were two /o/ phonemes in Old
English structure; but there is only one in American English.

But how does the linguist identify the (*emic*) features of linguistic form?
How does she determine whether the occurrence of, say, four acoustically
different wave forms in the speech of speakers of language L indicates the
existence of one, two, three, or four phonemes in the linguistic structure of
L? How, in other words, can she determine if those acoustic differences
matter to speakers of L? What analytical criterion should she use to resolve
this issue? By what method can she identify the properties of language
form?

Methodological questions of this kind underlie all orthodox forms of
linguistic analysis. How is the linguist to determine if two words are the
same part of speech: e.g., both adverbs? How is she to determine if the
grammatical relationship between words W and X is the same relationship
as that holding between words Y and Z? How can she determine whether X
and Y have the same meaning? How can she identify the properties of
strings of words which determine whether they are or are not grammati-
cal? A language system is taken to have a formal "skeleton"—structural
properties—which underlie its observable characteristics, the phenomeno-
logical awareness of which speakers of the language reveal both in how
they use and respond to the language and in their intuitions, as expressed

in their metalinguistic remarks.

So called *"etic"* methods cannot reveal the properties of language form. (For instance, phonetic criteria cannot identify phonemic distinctions.) You need to know what the speakers know—how they "see" the language—to determine what matters in its observable features of substance. Hence the struggle to devise analytical criteria/methods that can identify these properties.

Types, tokens, and linguistic form

One analytical issue which is crucial to all versions of what those of us in Oxford called "orthodox" linguistics is that concerning linguistic TYPES and TOKENS. According to this notion, the sounds ("phones") that we utter, like the marks that we make on a page or on a computer screen and the gestures we make with our hands and faces, are merely tokens of, or instances of, other entitites—such as words, phonemes, graphemes, speech acts, or sentences. It is these latter entities which are conceived of as the fundamental units of linguistic form or structure. It is they which are said to be the properties of *the language system* which we speak (e.g., English) or of our *knowledge* of that language. Whereas the actual sounds, marks, and gestures produced by communicators are not themselves units of that language or of our knowledge. Rather, they are features of what Saussure called *"parole"* and Chomsky "performance". Accordingly, in order to understand what someone is saying, writing, or signing, communicators *must* be able to identify the linguistic types underlying their verbal performance—that is, they must be able to identify the words, phonemes, sentences, speech acts, metaphors, and so on, of which the sounds, marks, or gestures they observe are merely concrete tokens or "instances." For it is only because we identify these underlying types that we can apply our knowledge of the language to determine the meaning/effect/function of what was said. (For a full and illuminating treatment of the type/token distinction and its function in language theorizing, see Hutton, 1990).

Orthodox language theory embodies a rhetorical structure. And at the very heart of that structure is a metaphysical premise: If I am able to understand what you say to me, I *must* be able to identify the phonemes, words, sentences, speech acts, etc., of which your utterance consists in token instances. For once having identified these linguistic types, only then could I apply my knowledge of our language and determine the meanings of those types. In other words, only by this method could I *possibly* come to understand what you mean in speaking. And no orthodox linguist would challenge the commonsense assumption—encapsulated in the Principle

of Intersubjectivity—that, all things being equal, we usually understand what we say to each other. Therefore, the use of language as a communicational vehicle *must* be based on foundational relationship between performance tokens and linguistic types. In orthodox language theory the connection between, on the one hand, the Principle of Intersubjectivity and, on the other, the analysis of language in terms of relations between tokens and types is a *necessary* connection.

From the perspective of orthodox language theory, formal types *must* therefore exist in every language system and must be identifiable by language-users "behind" (beneath, inside, above) the sounds, marks, and gestures produced in actual verbal performance. It is these types, not the characteristics of actual verbal acts, which must be the subject of the linguist's analysis. Saussure insisted that this assumption had to be the "point of departure" for linguistic theory.

> *La langue* thus has this curious and striking feature. It has no immediately perceptible entities. And yet one cannot doubt that they exist....
>
> (Saussure, 1916, p. 149)

Be that as it may, how is this non-doubting linguist to identify the types on which her analysis should be based? What criteria should she use to identify linguistic types amidst the concrete activities of speaking, writing, and signing? And how can the theorist determine whether any given set of analytical criteria are the *right* ones: i.e., the ones that accurately pick out the types of which parts of speech are token instances? What criterion, for instance, should the speech act theorist use in identifying instances of an apology? Or the morphologist in identifying instances of a word? Or the phonologist in identifying instances of a phoneme? Or the stylistician in identifying instances of metaphor? For it goes without saying: if the analytical criteria chosen are inaccurate, then the analysis produced will be equally inaccurate. (See Harris, 1981, Ch.4 for the definitive discussion of this topic).

The papers included here in Part One, all written during my years at Oxford, take up and expand on the development and consequences of using particular analytical criteria in the study of language. These criteria, in each case, are the methodological consequences of taking the Principle of Intersubjectivity as an *a priori* assumption. I have been led to view the arguments in these chapters from a somewhat different perspective today, as I attempt to make clear in what follows. At the time of their writing my goal was to reveal the illusory nature of the foundations on which modern orthodox theories of language are constructed. As such, the arguments they contain both supplement and expand upon themes treated in the two

books I published during this period, *Linguistic Theory and Structural Stylistics* and (with my friend and co-author Deborah Cameron) *Analysing Conversation: Rules and Units in the Structure of Talk.*

Where does language theory come from?

When I had finished writing these books, my attention turned to certain themes in the history of Western linguistic ideas. This was to some extent a natural development, as my interest in the Principle of Intersubjectivity had already led me to those Enlightenment language theories in which the modern embodiment of that principle first took form: above all in the language theories of John Locke, the abbé de Condillac, and the Port-Royal grammarians, Arnauld and Lancelot. I was first drawn to these theories by the suggestive discussions in books by Hans Aarsleff and Sylvain Auroux (Aarsleff, 1982 and 1983; Auroux, 1979).

As I studied and wrote about various topics in the history of Western linguistic thought, my interest began to focus more narrowly on the following question: Why does Western thinking about language generate the same topics and the same problems again and again and why do those problems always attract what amount to variant versions of the same unsatisfactory "solutions"? Why do these "solutions" always draw on more or less the same set of taken-for-granted assumptions? For instance, what is it about the *episteme* of Western linguistic thought that causes such theoretical *topoi* as "the Principle of Intersubjectivity" and the type/token relation— and the methodological problems which they inevitably raise—to appear and reappear in every intellectual period? Why has Western thinking not solved these problems, once and for all, and moved on to other topics? Could it be that the problems which monopolize Western linguistic thought are *essentially irresolvable*? But why should that be? And even if it is, why haven't any of the indisputably intelligent minds who have worked in that tradition recognized this?

Influenced by my reading of Wittgenstein's later works and by the many hours of conversation with the Wittgenstein scholar Gordon Baker, I began to focus on the task of explaining what appeared to be an irresistible discursive force—akin to a magnetic field—pulling language theorizing towards the same topical poles and down the same rhetorical paths. What is the source of this powerful magnetism? In what does its magnetic attraction consist? How does it "pull" upon the discourses of language theory? How can its power be resisted?

The most straightforward approach to this explanatory task is to look for the source of that discursive magnetism in the literate and intellectual