

REVIEW ARTICLE

Michael Toolan. *Total Speech: An Integrational Linguistic Approach to Language.* (Post-Contemporary Interventions.) Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996. Pp. viii + 337 + bibliography, index. Price \$57.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Ladislav Zgusta

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

l-zgusta@uiuc.edu

The basic idea of this book is that in language 'there is no such thing as repetition' (p. 20). The idea that there are languages with relatively fixed forms and meanings arises only with the fixation of speech with the advent of writing: 'in an oral-language community, speech cannot govern communication involving speech' (pp. 20-21). [Without wishing to nitpick, let us remark for the record that there is every reason to believe that Sanskrit linguistics developed prior to the introduction of the script, when everything — both the texts of the language under description, and the texts of the languages of description, to put the matter in Firthian terms — was learned by heart.]

Why should repetition be impossible? According to the author, because we human beings have an orientedness to one another; but while we share this orientedness, or mutuality, we do not possess mutual or shared knowledge; 'we share no more than that orientedness and an awareness of that orientedness: we share no knowledge held in common' (p. 16). The second reason that repetition is ruled out lies in the author's view that every utterance is embedded in the broadest possible contexts, or ranges of context: the textual context, the situational and cultural context, the speaker's attitude toward the word and toward the object referred to, etc.; and that everything must be taken into consideration: the speaker's gestures, facial expressions, etc. It is because of the Firthian (or perhaps ultra-Firthian) all-embracing character of this notion of context that no two speakers will ever say the same thing, nor will a given speaker repeat himself, since something in the context is bound to be different. This greatly broadened scope of linguistic considerations finds expression in the book's subtitle in the term 'integrational linguistics'.

Before we can ask the question of how all this, particularly the rejection of any repetitiveness of language, could be put to use for some linguistic inquiry, the author anticipates it, and instead of continuing (at least with respect to the notion of context) where Firth had to stop and instead of pushing forward beyond Halliday, he tells us that '“integrational linguistics” names a principle rather than a method', because 'a book concerned with the inherent limitations of linguistic models and methods [which attempted] to set out an alternative methodology of its own' would likely 'run the risk of theoretical self-contradiction' (p. 23).

Perhaps the author avoids this contradiction (although the price he pays for avoiding it by abstaining from all methodology is a costly one); nevertheless, he falls into another contradiction, namely: if there is no knowledge shared, held in common among the speakers of the same language, how do I know, and how can I maintain, that my interlocutor's understanding of my utterance truly is not the same as mine, at least in its most relevant aspects? After all, if I pronounce the same utterance 'A glass of beer, please!' in a score of pubs, I may get different sorts of beer; I may get different glasses; my thirst may vary; the person waiting on me may nearly ignore what I am saying, only mechanically filling the order, or it may be a persuaded teetotaler who suffers pangs of conscience serving the Devil's drinks on the grounds of needing the money — all this and many other things may vary, yet within my experience I have always gotten my beer, never a piece of tofu instead. This would seem to be a pragmatic proof of mutual understanding of at least a certain degree. No doubt there can be and are differences; for instance, in America to get several kinds of a beverage which one would call in Europe '(strong) beer', one in America has to talk about 'malt liquor', since the volume of alcohol in beer must not exceed a certain level in America. This example would seem to show that peripheral differences in meaning do not exclude a common core of meaning, shared by several — indeed usually many, — speakers of the same language. Our author does not deny this, but in his opinion, such stabilized common cores of meaning are the creation of lexicographers (in the case of words) and grammarians (in the case of morphological forms). Again the author seems to fall into a contradiction: if there is no shared meaning between two speakers, why should there be a shared meaning between a text and a speaker? How would it be established? And if there is none, how can the text (such as that of a dictionary) influence the speaker?

Words in utterances are not tokens of an abstract type (i.e., to translate this into structuralist lingo, the word 'dog' occurring in parole is not a manifestation of an abstract lexical unit 'dog' in langue); our author tells us that the idea of some abstractness comes only with the development of writing. In a nonliterate oral community, three occurrences of the word 'dog' are just three tokens; where and how would the type of these tokens be encoded or represented (p. 136)? One would think that if on encountering yet another one of those animals, a member of that oral community calls it 'dog' again, that would be a sufficient proof that these tokens in some way belong to the same type or whatever we choose to call their coherent usage; but no, these are four tokens, four 'concrete physical particulars', not something abstract, or so we are told. In spoken languages,

we are obliged to look at language in use in 'concrete physical particular' situations, whereas in written language we can be misled into imagining that we can escape those to a pararealm of the 'purely abstract' (p. 136).

But could one not claim that the unified application of the four tokens is the result of some rule or something that governs such a regular use? No, we learn in

another passage of the book that rules are again a mere invention of the linguist (p. 271ff.). But why should written language be so perniciously different from spoken language? I do not find this question directly addressed in the book, but something further can be gleaned from what follows.

The author is reasonable enough to realize that even in his understanding of language and how it works, there is trouble for him in the situation when a child asks about the meaning of a word (e.g., 'What does *intoxicated* mean?') and understands the parent's explanation, because whatever the parent says is something like the verbal description of the core of the word's meaning, the existence of which was negated as a mere figment of the lexicographer's craft. This trap is avoided by the author's maintaining that 'within and beyond such language games, words are indeed treated as having meanings, which meanings are constituted by good multipurpose paraphrases'; the child asking about the meaning of a word (and getting an explanation) 'is using language reflexively or metalinguistically rather than simply experiencing it phenomenally' (p. 174). This claim begs the question: how does one differentiate a 'good paraphrase' from a less good one? One would say that if meaning is constituted by the paraphrase, then any paraphrase is as good as any other one; the only reasonable way for one to be able to gauge that 'goodness' is to assume that a good paraphrase is in harmony with language as experienced phenomenally. However, if that is the case, then a good paraphrase (and hence explanation of the word and its meaning offered and understood) is an abstraction from a set of observed phenomena. It seems that with this perspective, the cat is out of the bag, for what is the difference between 'metalinguistic use of language' and 'phenomenally experiencing language' on the one hand, and the contrast between 'langue' and 'parole' on the other? Or between 'competence' and 'performance', etc.? Naturally, there are differences between these pairs, but in each of them, the first member refers to an abstraction from phenomena comprised in, and referred to, by the second member. Why is it that a child is deemed to have a capacity for metalinguistic reflections, and the child-cum-parent team the capacity for producing good paraphrases of the meaning, whereas the speech community as a whole must wait until the grammarians and lexicographers create written texts? The basic fact would seem to be that until we learn something detailed about how knowledge is stored and handled in the brain, we shall know next to nothing about the ontological status of language and its functioning. However, at present we cannot look into the black box, so anyone trying to penetrate there must needs use abstraction as the pry. There is a tradition in a good part of American linguistics to get angry over the black box and throw it out into the garbage; the trouble is that what seems to be a garbage can is in reality the container for recyclables, and lo and behold, the recycled thing is soon back and ready to be a cursed nuisance again.

Such are the basic arguments against the 'cognitive determinists', who 'locate a ... program controlling language competence within each individual's mind-brain.' There are also arguments against the 'social-determinist language theorists' who 'subscribe to the view that the collective language-shaping forces

of the community are incontestably sovereign' (p. 178). If there is a social consensus at all, it is never complete, there always being at least some dissent; language games attempting to deal with the notion of 'correctness of language' are not of a linguistic nature, but are moral judgments; and language games about word meanings are not only metalinguistic — they are 'a kind of police work' and the 'checking for correctness is highly normative, disciplinary, and centripetal' (pp. 175-179). No need to be surprised by this wording: for any linguist influenced by Roy Harris (our author being one of them), this is the normal manner of discussing these problems. But while the wording quoted suggests some sinister goings-on in the area of meaning and its correctness, let us turn attention to our author's praxis. On p. 190, a passage is quoted from Sperber and Wilson (1986:51), in which S & W try to clarify the notion of ostensive-inferential communication by developing a short story about a girl and an old man; what happened between the two is of no great importance to us, the really interesting thing being that our author, after a verbatim quotation from S & W, offers his own detailed interpretation of the tale in which, however, he talks about a woman and an old man (p. 191). Why the 'girl' of S & W (1986) is called a 'woman' by our author in 1996 is obvious; and it would certainly seem to be a good example of 'police work' (in this case, self-censorship), of being 'normative' and 'centripetal' — and perhaps 'disciplinary' as well —, because the idea of influencing the reader by setting an example must have been present when the 1996 text was written, otherwise why the self-censorship? But the really important point is that our author would be the first person to claim that his act of 'police work' was motivated by the best intentions. And of course, one would be absolutely ready to believe him that such is his understanding, or moral position. If, then, a language game like this can have motives which are not so sinister (and if we admit this with respect to one person, we have to admit it in other cases as well), it would be reasonable for the author to mitigate the wording of his remarks about 'police work' and similar ones. After all, there are well-developed scenarios of how a mutual accommodation to a certain form of speech can take place on a fully voluntary basis: Bühler (1934) revived for this process the Aristotelian notion of 'poiesis', which was then further developed by Lara (1976:118f); a short discussion of it may be found in Zgusta (1980:8).

We shall not go into every detail of the contents of the book. However, another of its basic underlying ideas seems to be — even though it is not formulated as such — the principle of constant creativity as the driving force not only of linguistic change, but mainly of what the French linguists used to call *la vie du langage*: how it is used, how all the things around it function, and how all of that changes. Our author visualizes this creativity as coerced by the normative forces of the written culture, which he, therefore, dislikes. However, we are told in a charming episode about the creativity of the author's son, who on understanding the meaning of 'talkative' coined the word 'shoutative' (p. 301). If I understand the author properly, he explained to his son that *'shoutative' is nonexistent. One can consider this an inconsistency, a clash among a single person's principles (i.e. those of the author militating against those of the father); and again, the father's motives were laudable and highly reasonable: we cannot,

each of us, have a separate focus of creativity, or self-focussed centripetality. When writing *Finnegan's Wake*, James Joyce could be fully self-centripetal, freely creative, boundlessly allowing his phantasy, synesthesia, and what not to reign supreme; there are in the extralinguistic world few, if any, consequences of what he is saying and how he is saying it. If there were no centripetality, at least for a subsection of society, then the sum of many individuals considering themselves as centers, hence the sum of many self-centripetalities, would be a general centrifugality: if everybody had his own center of his own centripetality, his own creativity etc., how could anyone, including the author of this book, sign a mortgage contract or an insurance policy? And that is the case not only in societies with writing systems. Any ethnographer knows that the principle *pacta sunt servanda* 'compacts are to be kept', operates in one form or another in preliterate societies as well; do we have to suppose that it is possible to keep an agreement without both parties sharing at least the gist of its meaning?

It would seem that this is the crux of the matter. Language has many functions, one of which is the expression of one's feelings and emotions. Whether this is the most important of the functions may be a matter of diverse opinions; for our author, in any case, it is number one. Creativity can have the most multifarious manifestations and purposes, from the highly prescriptive coinage of new technical terms, to the modernization of languages, to the coinage of private expressions, meanings, and connotations in emotional utterances or in private languages. Out of the full range of these areas where creativity frequently and necessarily occurs, our author selects again the individual expression as the area of his discussion. It is this selective preference for the strictly individual over the collective that makes the book seem strange; but this strangeness is merely the result of the difference in the observational angle taken by our author with respect to that taken by most linguists.

The real strangeness of the book consists in the fact that it discusses language as deprived of a knowledge shared by a community of speakers, without mentioning philosophers like Leibniz, or Geulinx, or even Humboldt, who gave much more thought to this idea and its consequences; that it discusses personal creativity without mentioning Giambattista Vico, Leo Spitzer, Hugo Schuchardt, and Benedetto Croce (except for one quote), who wrote important works on the subject; that it talks about different values the same word has for diverse speakers of the same language without mentioning the pioneer of these studies, Charles Osgood (1957); that Toolan constantly talks about the context, while mentioning Firth and Halliday only superficially, and Pike (1954) not at all; that he talks about the cultural embedding of language (though not using this term) without mentioning Braj Kachru and his research dealing with varieties of a language transplanted to foreign cultures, nor Eugene Nida with his reasonable advice on how to enter the world of a culture unknown to us that is embodied in a language we are learning; or that Toolan sings long praises for M. Bakhtin and his 'heteroglossic' idea that the variation of human types, hence also their idiolects, is endless, with each individual being unique, and that he does this without mentioning the sociolinguistics of Labov, who tried, largely successfully,

to find the covariation of the social and linguistic types, and in a society not much suffering under the burden of literateness, either; instead, the reader gets only one cursory mention of this important scholar (p. 99). Maybe all this is the fruit of the influence of Thomas Kuhn, the patron saint of all authors disinclined to read much, who granted a general indulgence to any author who does not quote anything generated outside his own club, under the pretext that it does not belong to his paradigm (whatever that means).

Maybe, however, that assumption is wrong as well, and our author simply wished to write a highly personal book; in that he has certainly succeeded, but he will have to recall the Latin proverb, a 'heteroglossic' one, warning us that '*quot capita, tot sententiae*', which to me (and, strangely enough, to generations of people before me as well) seems to mean that '[there are] as many opinions as [there are] heads', so he should not expect much consent with what he is saying.

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