

A Touch of Crass

Geoffrey Nunberg

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And when will I reach the end of setting down the continual agitation and change of my thoughts, whatever subject they touch, when Diomedes filled six thousand books with the single subject of grammar? What can come of chatter, when the stammering and loosening of the tongue could smother the world under such a frightful load of volumes? So many words for the sake of words alone!
Montaigne, "On Vanity"

Actually (a note in my edition of the *Essays* informs me), it was one Didymos, not Diomedes, to whom Seneca attributed 4000, not 6000, books on grammar. Whatever — the notion of that many books about language by any number of authors would have been fantastic at a time when the total production of books in France was only a few hundred titles a year. You have to wonder what Montaigne would have made of the shelves of the language section of a large modern bookstore. Talk about frightful loads! There are the dictionaries of proverbs, computerese, college slang, neat foreign words that we have no equivalents for. There are all those treasure-troves of word-lore and rambling excursions down the highways and by-ways of our speech. And then there are the books of advice and admonition — books that tell you how to talk to your boss or your signifying other, books about how to write a novel or a resume, books about the depredations being worked on the language by an unholy alliance of politicians, rap singers, deconstructionists and Valley girls.

They're a motley bunch, but if you stand back far enough you can discern some commonalities. It isn't just their focus on isolated lexical oddities, on "words alone," but on words as witnesses of the contingency of language. Some of them see the language as an accretion of historical accidents, the sorts of things that have gotten us to *antimacassar* from the name of a strait in Indonesia. For others it is the product of the willful choices of people who persist in saying *literally* when a moment's consideration would remind them that they really mean "figuratively." But whether they're trading in wonder or indignation, the word-books all rest on the same perception of the precariousness of language, which makes it both liable to accident and prey to abuse. If the denotation of a word can wander unaccountably from the coast of the Celebes to the back of my armchair, what other slippages may not be going on even as I speak?

These are the sorts of things that people are thinking about when they find out you're a linguist and tell you that "language is so fascinating," with a gleam in their eye that dims by degrees as you explain to them what exactly you really do. Because of course we linguists are motivated by a different sort of wonder, which comes of contemplating the necessities that secretly underlie the diversity of speech. It's a sensibility that is much harder to convey than the everyday fascination with idiosyncrasy and ephemera, and may even be antithetical to it. I once said to a philosopher friend who was skeptical about the interest of the Chomskian enterprise, "But look, don't you think it's amazing that a child can internalize a grammar in such a short space of time?" And he said, "Not really. Now if it were something that only happened every hundred years or so...."

Yet linguists keep trying to establish a beachhead on the four-foot shelf, and two of the most creditable efforts in recent years are Ray Jackendoff's *Patterns in the Mind* and Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*. I suspect that both were published in the hope that their authors would be able to accomplish for linguistics what popularizers like Steven Hawking and Carl Sagan have been able to accomplish for their disciplines (and what linguist struggling to meet a mortgage hasn't indulged in an idle fantasy of becoming the Feynman of formal semantics or the Gould of glottochronology?) The hope isn't that unreasonable here, since both authors are eminent scholars and clear writers, and I'm happy to see that Pinker's book, which is the more general and engaging of the two, has nosed its way onto the bestseller lists.

Still, the comparisons aren't entirely apt. Biologists and cosmologists don't have to worry about establishing the scientific legitimacy of their disciplines, at least in the upper-middlebrow press, where imposters like creationism and astrology are pretty much discredited. They can restrict themselves to the job, difficult enough, of trying to make their fields accessible to the general reader. But the authority of linguists is still cloudy in the public mind. People who are reasonably literate know that there is a rigorous intellectual discipline out there somewhere, and have doubtless heard about Chomsky and his revolution (or so the publishers of these two books must have assumed when they gave pride of place to jacket blurbs from Chomsky). But they still turn for amusement and edification to all those books and columns about words alone.

This has been driving linguists crazy for a long time. More than sixty years ago Bloomfield opened his *Language* with a salvo at the "popular-scholastic doctrines" about language that "masquerade as common sense," and since then the theme has been sounded by every linguist who has ever written for a general audience. But then why do people still go elsewhere for their linguistic counsel? To listen to all the contributors to the frequent discussions of the problem on the Linguist List, all we need is more and better popularizations. Well, hope springs eternal, but the fact is that over the years

linguistics has been pretty well served by its popularizers. Jackendoff and Pinker do a first-rate job of explaining the basic principles of the science, and so have Neil Smith, Jean Aitchison, David Crystal, Dwight Bolinger, Martin Joos, Robert A. Hall, and many others. And after all this time, it's frankly hard to believe that any informational campaign could invest the field with the undisputed intellectual authority that linguists feel it deserves.

It's true that popular doctrines about language abound with myths and misconceptions about everything from the number of Eskimo words for snow to the Elizabethan English preserved in remote Appalachian valleys. And if people must draw up lists of 1000 Things that Every American Child should Know, you can only hope they'll find a place on them for some basic linguistic knowledge. But it's a mistake to assume that public discussions about language usually boil down to a kind of linguistic monkey trial, with the forces of truth and reason arrayed on one side in lab coats and stethoscopes and the minions of prescientific superstition on the other in suspenders and cigars. In fact the big questions are often less decisively empirical than linguists like to portray them. And I think the public resistance to some of the things that linguists are saying grows out of an intuitive sense that our point of view is not so much incompatible with their interests as irrelevant to them. In the end, what we have here is not a failure of communication.

For example it's a commonplace even among people who have never heard of Whorf or Humboldt that a language imposes a certain point of view on our perception of the world — "the shadow cast by language upon truth," Auden called it. People routinely appeal to this principle when they attack doublespeak and political euphemism. They cite it in arguments for the benefits of bilingual education (which provides children with multiple perspectives on the world), and also for laws banning the teaching of foreign languages (since some of those perspectives may "inculcate in [pupils] the ideas and sentiments foreign to the best interests of their country," as the Nebraska Supreme Court opined some years ago). It seems a matter of simple common sense: French is the expression of the way French people think, and one of the things, at least, that keeps them thinking as they do.

But cognitive scientists, Pinker declares, "can afford to be smug about common sense..." There is not a lot of experimental evidence to support the Whorfian hypothesis in any but its "banal, 'weak'" forms, he says (true to a point, but then you wouldn't want to let the empty category principle stand or fall on the experimental evidence, either). And besides, he says, once you set to thinking about cognition in a "satisfyingly precise" way as a process of physical symbol manipulation, you realize that the language of thought can't be natural language but is rather a universal mentalese, and that "knowing a language... is knowing how to translate [universal] mentalese into strings of words and

vice versa." From this it follows that no language gives its speakers a privileged view on experience. Or as Jackendoff, no less a universalist, makes the point, radical translation is always possible. Anything we can say in one language we can express as well in any other, provided we're willing to paraphrase some grammatical distinctions and add new lexical items to denote categories that the target language had no names for, in the way Hebrew was adapted to the needs of modern life when the State of Israel was founded.

This is a arguable position, of course, but I don't think many linguists would be willing to describe it as a scientific finding. In fact it is not really empirical at all, since it rests on a prior notion of where to look for the essence of a language, a notion that is at odds with the way ordinary people think about the question. Suppose we want to render modern English into the Tocharian spoken in 10th-century Turkistan. We explain to our Tocharian informants about notions like "call waiting" and "date rape" and ask them to come up with new words for them (and wouldn't I like to be a fly on *that* wall). The question is, would our souped-up Tocharian count as the same language the ur-Tocharians spoke? Linguists would doubtless say it did; we can change the lexis as much as we like so long as we don't fool around with the grammatical structure. But the Tocharians might demur, and who's to say they're mistaken? Or put the question this way: do you think you could come up with an empirical demonstration that will satisfy French Minister of Culture Jacques Toubon that French will remain the same language however many English words it adopts?

These questions about where to look for the soul of language underlie a very large part of the disagreement between linguists and nonlinguists. On methodological grounds, it's understandable that linguists should think of languages on the model of natural kinds, and look for their hidden essences in the deep structural regularities that yield to systematic description, rather than in lexical happenstance — in the trees, rather than the exotic flowers that bloom on their terminal nodes. But methodological commitments have a way of slipping into ontological dogmas, as if there were little more to language than the aspects of it that we are good at getting down. Pinker offers a nice example of this slippage when he calls his book *The Language Instinct* rather than *The Subjacency Instinct*, *The ECP Instinct*, or *The X-Bar Instinct*, any of which would have more accurately described the theoretical claims — though in this case I suppose we would grant him an extenuating commercial motivation, since those titles might put off the talk-show bookers.

But there's no reason for nonlinguists to perceive structure as particularly important or interesting (for that matter, they don't have a lot of reason to perceive it at all). As linguists have been at pains to point out, after all, a language isn't like a political or economic system, which can go unpredictably awry. People may have to worry about being able to pay for lunch twenty years from now, but not about being able to order it.

So whatever it is that guarantees the unbroken efficacy of linguistic structure — innate features, functional considerations, or simply the highly distributed nature of the institution — it isn't something the public has to trouble itself over, particularly when it has so much else on its mind.

When ordinary people do talk about "the language" (as in "the language is in a bad way"), what they're thinking of is all those lexical niceties and fine distinctions that language critics get themselves worked up about. Linguists tend to see these as trivial matters, and can get pretty indignant at the thought that people should take them (or more to the point, the critics who write about them) so seriously. As Pinker puts it: "when a scientist considers all the high-tech machinery needed to arrange words into ordinary sentences, prescriptive rules are, at best, inconsequential little decorations." But of course "consequentiality" is in the eye of the beholder, and it's a bit dismissive to suggest that the critical issues that people attach so much importance to are merely aesthetic matters that have no moral weight. In fact there's a liberal helping of condescension (and vice-versa) running through most of the linguistic critique of prescriptivism. Pinker's discussion is typical, but then so is just about everybody else's; grammatical theories may come and go, but on matters of prescriptivism, we all walk hand-in-hand with Bloomfield.

Take the way linguists always describe the language critics as "self-appointed" authorities (people who have "set themselves up as experts," as Pinker puts it). But "self-appointed" is just another way of saying "self-employed" — unlike us of the subsidized classes, that is, the critics derive their authority and their remuneration directly from the public. Linguists like to contend that the prescriptivists have perpetrated a vast intellectual fraud over the past 250 years, but this doesn't sit very comfortably with our avowed respect for the wisdom of the common people; evidently we are willing to ascribe to them a wealth of intuitive knowledge but very little critical discernment. Of course a lot of prescriptive dogma is simply displaced class snobbery, race prejudice, and the like, but there are also genuine critical questions involved. And we should bear in mind that historically, prescriptivism has not always been the handmaiden of social orthodoxy. The English-language prescriptive tradition owes as much to radicals like Priestley and Cobbett as to conservatives like Johnson and Campbell, and there is a larger Left tradition that has held that normative grammar is an important means of dispelling false consciousness (see Gramsci on this, for example). But for Pinker the notion that there might be a causal relation between the way we speak and the way we think is simply unscientific "radical Whorfianism."

Like most linguists, Pinker has a high time pointing out mistakes and inconsistencies in the syntactic and morphological principles that prescriptivists offer to justify their judgments. Of course they're fair game for this treatment. Most of them are

no sort of grammarians at all, and a linguist can cut through their argumentation like Michael Jordan driving the lane in a high-school pick-up game. For example Pinker makes short work of the critics who object to noun-to-verb conversions like *caveat*, *dialogue*, *host*, and *impact* on derivational grounds. He points out that this is a wholly natural and productive process, and estimates that fully a fifth of English verbs began their lives as nouns. And he concludes that critical objections like these show a lack of respect for the sophisticated linguistic abilities of the person in the street. But all that his observations really show is that the critics haven't been very skillful in explaining their judgments, not that the objections themselves are unfounded. When you think about it, this sort of argument is a curious perversion of the standard linguistic methodology. A native speaker tells us that she finds the sentence *Will appealed to Lilly to like himself* unacceptable, though things are fine if you substitute *appear*; she suggests that the difference has to do with all the *l*'s in the first version. It's easy enough to poke holes in her explanation, but we wouldn't want to conclude on this basis that the sentence is probably acceptable after all.

And let's face it; there is something a little dubious about some of these noun-to-verb switches. Take the use of the verb *to author* in "Jones has authored a dozen books on the subject." This usage was rejected by 74 percent of the members of the *American Heritage Dictionary's* "usage panel" and I have to say that I don't much care for it myself, though it isn't easy to say why. It's obviously not just because it involves a noun-to-verb-conversion (for one thing there are other uses of this verb that people find much less objectionable, such as in "She authored the bill."). Maybe the problem is that the lexicalization implies that Jones' success in getting his manuscripts published is more worthy of distinction than the simple accomplishment of writing them — it presupposes an irresponsible picture of literary fame. Of course there's nothing to stop people from concocting such a notion out of chunks of the mentalese that God gave them. But we don't have to dignify it publicly by giving it a name of its own, a license that can only help to promulgate the view. (If this be radical Whorfianism, make the most of it.) And while it may be that the usage is the result of a "natural" process, what we are dealing with is human nature in Hume's sense, not Chomsky's, something we ought to be able to occasionally rise above. (How should you respond when people object that it feels "unnatural" to use phrases like *he or she* with quantified antecedents? Well you could always try telling them, "Make an effort.")

I'll grant you that matters like these fade to insignificance when you consider them against the vast background of grammar as linguists understand it. But from the point of view of the ordinary speaker, who isn't granted the same Olympian perspective that we have, the linguist's dismissal of these questions seems simply crass ("indicating such grossness of mind as precludes delicacy and discrimination," says Webster's *Third*

International, which ought to know). It may be a methodologically grounded crassness, but we can't expect others to appreciate that.

It doesn't have to be that way. We linguists have a lot to contribute to these discussions, though perhaps less in the character of Dr. Science than in our capacity as interested observers of the passing linguistic scene (I think of Bolinger again). It's a useful and becomingly modest role, which comes at only a small cost to our vanity.

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GEOFFREY NUNBERG

Xerox Palo Alto Research Center
3333 Coyote Hill Road
Palo Alto, CA 94304
nunberg@parc.xerox.com