

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Linguistic Turns 1890–1950 Writing on language as social theory.*

By Ken Hirschkop. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. 323 pp.

ISBN 978-0-19-874577-8 (HB) £ 81.00

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Hirschkop's monograph offers a dense reconstruction of the way in which language was conceptualised and gained momentum in the scientific and intellectual sphere from the onset of structural thinking until the second post-war period in Europe. This being the aim, it covers a broad range of thinkers – linguists, such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913); philosophers, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1899–1951) and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970); Russian Futurists and literary critics, such as Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) and Viktor Shklovskij (1893–1984) – showing the process through which language was turned from being a simple object of investigation into a key for understanding and interpreting history and reality. Or, in other words, how a stance on language became language as stance.

The Introduction (“Linguistic Turns as Social Theory”), also serving as the first chapter, outlines the internal organisation of the volume and is split into two main sections – part I “Order” and part II “Myth” – further articulated in four and three chapters, respectively, *plus* a conclusion (oddly included in the last section and not numbered). While this overview deals with the content in quite a detailed way, it is in the conclusion that the real value of Hirschkop's work becomes visible (see below). It is not completely clear to me why the author felt compelled to frame his investigation under the “social theory” label. It is obvious that he intends to go beyond the simple contrastive presentation of different scientific paradigms, aiming towards a reconstruction of multiple events (“turns”), which are only comparable once it has been realised what such turns point at, given that language is not “an object to which one turned, but [...] a *problem* that compelled or demanded attention” (p.4; italics in the original). Yet it is also true that – to a certain extent – any informed reconstruction needs to do just this: to avoid being purely historical (or anecdotal) or purely theoretical. The need to provide a certain degree of narrativisation to epistemological discourse is unavoidable for any attempt at addressing the organic character of disciplines and paradigms – or, as Hirschkop wisely calls them, “spheres” – in terms of historical processes. And these processes, much like languages, develop via direct contact among their initiators, or spontaneously shared mindsets. Hence the reconstruction doesn't need to be

linear: on the contrary, it “has to be told episodically and thematically” (p.21), since “the linguistic turns make up a constellation, not a story” (ibid.). The label “social theory”, then, could be dropped without much harm; unless it designates something different – namely the intention of highlighting the social backdrop or, better said, the ideological nuance of these stances on language. I take this to be the case, which means that Hirschkop’s book follows a double path: its first task is to present the vision of language – which could be called epistemological style, philosophy or creed, as Hugo Schuchardt used to say – that informs any work in the field. The second task is to link that creed to another sphere of individual or collective belief, namely the sphere of political ideology and action. The interaction between these two dimensions is summarised by Hirschkop in three claims which form the backbone of the whole work. The first claim is that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries multiple linguistic turns occurred which need to be thought of “as a whole, as a constellation across Europe”. Yet, stating something about language entails, more often than not and more or less implicitly, a statement about speakers – speakers who were conceptualised in terms of “mass” or “crowd”. Hence Hirschkop’s second claim: how mass and crowd were thought of is to be linked to the arising awareness of “problems of social order and social division, democracy and consent, nationality and difference” (p.20). And if the problem of language echoed a problem of social constitution, then perhaps the latter could be solved by the former; perhaps – and here’s the third claim – “a force or structure within language” could transfer these qualities to reality and modernity. Thus, while it is certainly true, as Hirschkop explicitly claims, that language was conceptualised or understood as a metonym for social structure (p.20), it is also the case that the opposite holds true. This idea is explored throughout the work as the reason behind the division of the book into two main sections: the first section dealing with two nuances of the idea of “order” (order<sub>1</sub> = the idea of language and collectivity as structured totalities, and order<sub>2</sub> = the idea of a rational clarity of language supposedly informing both language and the political discourse); the second dealing with the force that allegedly threatens the orderly constitution of both language and society, but which builds their internal engine: collective subconscious, mythical thinking or, put better, what Saussure called *irraison*.

The second chapter (“Grammar, for Example, can only be Studied in the Crowd. Reason, analogy, and the nature of social consent”) sets the stage for the rest of the work. It deals first and foremost with Ferdinand de Saussure and the role he – and Neogrammarians before him – reserved for analogy in language and grammar: a topic that defined the scientific debate across the ages and had been discussed within the fields of philology, logic and psychology before entering linguistic thought. The concept of analogy is here defined in terms of unreflective inferential thinking and unconscious intersubjective behaviour.

The third chapter (“The Ship of Logic on the High Seas of Discourse”) deals with another aspect of the same issue: analogical formations and processes lamented in the analytical tradition of language philosophy as the major flaw of daily language, requiring clarification through “distillation”, but which, however, were deemed to be a pathway to its very structure by both Wittgenstein and Saussure. Although in different ways, they both pointed out the “orderliness” of language which also defined the possibilities of human interaction. As such, they both conceptualised language as always being at work (pp.95, 101): if language is a source of muddlement, it is we that are muddled (p.88).

The fourth chapter (“Saussure and the Soviets”) focuses on how Saussure was received in Russia, as exemplified by three key figures: S. Karcevskij (language does not support a revolution whatsoever), G.O. Vinokur (language can build up and direct a collective will) and L. Jakubinskij (language is, after all, in perpetual revolution, as speakers can change language at any time).

Capitalising on the idea of how the delicate balance between order and stability and productive, constant change was conceived, the fifth chapter (“On the Diversity – and Productivity – of Language”) presents three possible answers: by assuming that language is constantly productive in an unpredictable manner (Saussure); by liberating the creative essence of language by bracketing (as it were) the individuality of the speakers into a desubjectivised, urban *mass* (W. Benjamin); by focusing on the phenomenon of “heteroglossia”, by which Bakhtin baptises the fundamentally sociolinguistic insight concerning the unquiet and centrifugal coexistence of different varieties, points of views and values within one and the same language.

The sixth and seventh chapters (“Do They Believe in Magic? The word as myth, name and art” and “Myth You Can Believe In”) deal respectively with two groups of scholars. The first, which includes, among others, the names of C.K. Ogden, I.A. Richards, G. Orwell, M. Bakhtin, G. Frege and, “in a way” (p.187), Saussure, rejects the mythic and irrational forces lurking in language that might possibly lead to demagoguery and ideological manipulation, thus also rejecting logocracy or logolatry (p.167). Strategies in this direction include conceiving myth as a disease of language (notoriously Max Müller’s position); denying the reality of any “collective will” (Frege, cf. p.168); and equipping speakers with a rationalised language ideal for rectifying their thinking habits (Ogden). The second group, including E. Cassirer, V. Shklovskij, R. Jakobson, W. Benjamin and the Russian Futurists, usually acknowledges the mythical dimension to be intrinsic to linguistic structure while divorcing demagoguery and ideology from language by relegating them to its use. Here, too, the panorama of strategies is discussed thoroughly, from Cassirer’s focus on the role of symbolic form in the formation of spontaneous ontology laying at the bottom of mythical thinking; to G. Tarde’s

focus on the power of the media in rallying public opinion, mirroring the process by which human consciousness accesses the world, i.e. indirectly; to the Russian Futurists' idea of "transrational language" and, more generally, the concept of art as a technique by which to introduce disturbances into language to make it yield its immanent functioning.

After a brief excursus ("Reversing out – Sorel's Heroic Myth, Gramsci's Slow Magic") concerning G. Sorel, taking up G. Vico's idea of recourse, and A. Gramsci's development of G.I. Ascoli's insights on the sociolinguistic forces and conditions behind the formation of Italian as the national standard – the role of the media performing its "slow magic" and the cohesion of the nation (not the other way around) being the most important –, the eighth chapter ("High Anxiety, Becalmed Language: Ordinary language philosophy") takes up the alternative left open in the seventh: while in that chapter myth was deemed to oppose science, here science is considered as a possible source for myth itself (p.248). J.G. Frazer's intellectualism and Wittgenstein's critics are two obvious references, along with J. Austin's formulation of the idea of the magical force of language in terms of performative acts. Science, too, is linked to will, not to pure intellect – which means that scientific discourse ("attitude", p.250) can itself be an object of ethics, belonging to the domain of values. Wittgenstein's "uneasiness" in the face of metaphysical puzzles is, in Hirschkop's words, deep ethical distress. The only possible relief is to realise that such puzzles have a grammar since they are, in the first instance, language. This is the same stance as Austin's: what Wittgenstein called a "form of life", he labelled a "way of life" (p.270).

The conclusion ("Motorways and Cul-de-Sacs – What the Linguistic Turns Turned To") ties up all the loose ends: it seems to me that the book's goal becomes most evident once it is considered in the light of R. Rorty's, 1967 publication, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent essays in philosophical method* (pp.271, 275), which is doubtlessly one of the important references of this whole endeavour. Hirschkop's claim about the multiplicity of linguistic turns can be appreciated fully when it is contrasted to Rorty's work (p.275), and the different lineages outlined in the book – one connecting Wittgenstein and Austin on the brink of linguistic philosophy (pp.271–276), the other more "continental" (pp.277–280) – can be brought together and, to some extent, carried forward. For instance, it is only in the concluding chapter that R. Jakobson, R. Barthes, C. Lévi-Strauss and T. Todorov are discussed and situated within the linguistic turn of structuralism.

Overall, Hirschkop's navigation across the different constellations of authors and the different ways of coupling visions of language and visions of society feels compelling and organic, despite the repeated back and forth, due (or deemed to be due) to the very nature of the endeavour. Of course, his list of references could – and should – be made even broader. Let us pinpoint just some of the possibilities for further development.

The debate between Max Müller and John R. R. Tolkien on language's intrinsic power to give rise to mythology or, as the latter called it, "sub-creation", is highly relevant for Hirschkop's analysis – even more so since Tolkien's stance was *also* a political statement.

Another point that could be expanded on would be early twentieth century French anthropology, which, through the work of M. Mauss and L. Lévy-Bruhl, was intent on de- (or re-)structuring the polarity between primitive languages and primitive societies.

When it comes to international languages, it would certainly be interesting to check what kind of implicit conceptions or ideals of society and collectivity fuelled O. Jespersen in constructing Ido and Novial as international auxiliary languages.

It would probably also be worth giving some consideration to literature, especially in connection with the concept of "art as technique": the "stream of consciousness technique", theorised by William James and notoriously implemented by, among others, James Joyce in *Ulysses*, would fit particularly well with Hirschkop's considerations. The fragmentation typical of this style not only testifies to a specific take on language and syntax but was used to mirror both the internal distress and the socio-political disorder that characterised the aftermath of WWI.

Finally, it might be relevant to connect the episode, recalled by Hirschkop, of R. Jakobson gifting V. Khlebnikov a "collection of spells and exorcisms he had collected" (p.217), which showcases both men's interest in the mythic force of language, with Th. Sebeok's research on Hungarian folk magic (see his 1953 study, "Structure and Content of Cheremis Charms"). There might be some distance between the dots, but the connection is there, especially if we consider the framework within which these interests blossomed: semiotics. In light of this, one may wonder about the utter absence of semiotics in the book, when it seems to be the natural reference point for many claims about the intersection between language, communication and society in the twentieth century and possibly a linguistic turn in its own right (that is, not to verbal, natural or daily language but to "language as such"). The development of this discipline remains unfortunately untold, lurking on the brink of Hirschkop's narrative, despite its relevance for both the concept of language and for the socio-political undertones it bore.

Overall, besides the encyclopaedic reach and the number of interconnections between models and theories, Hirschkop's work has three main merits. First, it makes extremely cautious and thrifty use of the traditional pairing of "continental/analytical", as if to endorse its timely abandonment as a category for understanding language sciences in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Second, despite using the conceptualisation of language as a pathway to the socio-political

representations it conveys, it maintains focus on language itself. This allows the reader to keep in mind the fact that the relationship discussed in the book is not between language and society but between concepts of language and concepts of society and that the relationship itself is configured as tone/undertone.

Hence the third merit: it shows to what extent a theory – any theory – is linked, not just to its epistemological and methodological framework, but also to a broader (or deeper) philosophical or ideological background, by implicit assumptions that resonate far beyond the explicit goals and answers provided by the theory itself, often outliving it. The bet is that this happens because any theory is bound to reproduce the functioning of language.

In this respect, one cannot avoid feeling sympathetic to the conclusion drawn by Hirschkop, as he tries to generalise from the (mostly) retrospective considerations developed in the book:

The linguistic turns of the early twentieth century made words more than words, language more than just an instrument of communication. They focused our intention on language in ways that were unquestionably productive, but they also led us to both expect wonders from it and blame it for many of our misfortunes. We need to consider the language we use as neither wholly innocent of the world's wrongs nor as a well full of dark forces. If we expect too much of it, we are sure to be disappointed; if we fear its ordinary operation, we will never take advantage of its many talents. (p.283)

## REFERENCES

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