

BOOK REVIEW:

Language and Culture Copenhagen Studies in Language 29

Irène Baron (red.)

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This volume is a collection of eleven contributions, which all - one way or the other - discuss the relationship between language and culture, bringing to the fore the non-arbitrariness of the two phenomena and demonstrating at the same time that there is no one-to-one relationship between language and meaning. In spite of wide-ranging differences in topics, theoretical approaches and data, the articles live happily side by side, supplementing each other by comparing languages in terms of different linguistic strata spanning from phonology and graphology via lexicogrammar and syntax to socio-cultural practice and history. The leitmotif of language and culture is present throughout the volume, but becomes very clear in the four contributions concerning language and law, in which the authors successfully take advantage of the role played by intertextuality. All in all, this volume will be of interest to readers working with discourse analysis, including aspects of linguistics as well as history and culture. In what follows I shall comment on each of the contributions:

Jørgen Rischel: Culture and Language in a three-dimensional area.

The article focuses on lexical inventiveness in a low-status ethnic group on mainland South East Asia, where minority languages and cultures are neglected at school leading to cultural superiority of the dominant population. Of particular interest is the code-switching when a speaker belonging to an ethnic group moves from forest life to city life and in the new environment uses a colour scale that is different from the one needed and used in the forest. The implication of this seems to be that identities change when language changes. Another interesting point is

that meaningful interaction can be made even in communities which use a restricted code or use language sparingly.

Michael Herslund and Irene Baron: Language as World View.

This contribution deals with how reality is represented differently in Danish and French. An attempt at describing – rather than explaining – how different languages subdivide the world in different ways. The authors see language as ‘our only point of departure and our only tool for structuring the material and conceptual world’. (p. 31). The authors look at motion verbs assuming that these can lexicalize four main semantic components, viz. motion, path, manner and figure and demonstrate that Danish and French verbs vary in their semantic potentials when it comes to motion verbs. Danish has more precise motion verbs than French while French uses more general verbs for motion, which makes it necessary to add external elements such as adverbials or gerondifs, in order to make up for the lack of meaning rendered in the French verb. But the situation is then different when it comes to Danish and French nouns where Danish nouns tend to be underspecified hyperonyms whose most important features are constituted by their FUNCTION unlike in French where nouns tend to have a more precise meaning in their role as co-hyponyms. According to the authors, the determining feature is the physical aspect, or what they refer to as CONFIGURATION, rather than the function in French nouns. They see this as a result of the two languages having different views of the world, one being more concerned with function, which has fewer semantic features and the other one being more concerned with configuration, which involves more semantic features and thus makes the nouns more precise. The verbs and nouns discussed here are not directly related to each other, and the two parts therefore seem to tell each their story. Besides, it would have been interesting to see how vague verbs trigger precise nouns (in French) and how precise verbs trigger underspecified nouns (in Danish).

Andrei Mikhalev: Strata of the linguistic World Picture.

This article lays out a semantic framework for describing the Linguistic World Picture (LWP) in terms of a specific representation of meaning by means of a given language. Based on a discussion of different language strata, viz. phonetic, morphological, lexical and syntactical it is suggested that world languages demonstrate both ‘universal tendencies’ and ‘individual peculiarities’ and that each stratum contributes to the entire pattern of meaning. The meaning that is located in each stratum gradually becomes less diffuse as we move down the ladder of strata from the phonetic stratum to the lexical stratum where words tend to limit potential meaning, if they are ‘actualized’. This shifts the discussion focus from grammar to discourse, and the important point is made that culture determines language typologization to a greater extent at the discourse strata than at the phonetic and morphological strata. World languages thus demonstrate ‘universality of concepts’ but ‘individualization of categories’ along the lines suggested by Herslund and Baron for nouns that are based on function in some languages but on configuration in others.

Vladimir Leitchik: The relations entre culture et langue: Fonctions Communes.

Discussing the relationship between language and culture, this article lists a number of culturally determined functions and language functions and groups them into three sections, viz. culture and language enabling the exchange of information between individuals and society, culture and language determining human behaviour and culture and language as instrumental in safeguarding individualism in society. Language, including signs at different levels of abstraction, is shown to carry cultural knowledge and common to the two areas are a wide variety of communicative functions. On the basis of carefully structured and well presented arguments, the author concludes that while a number of functions manifest themselves differently in different cultures and languages, the vast majority of functions are shared between culture and language.

Michael Herslund: Essence du langage, types linguistiques et systèmes métriques.

The essential point made in this article and exemplified through a comparison of ancient French and 17th century French metrical poetry is that linguistic structure determines expression form. Taking his point of departure in semiotics, assuming that all meaning has an expression plane and a content plane, the author offers examples of V2 languages, in which the verb always occupies the second position in the clause, and SVO languages which are structured with Subject, Verb and Object in a given order. He then demonstrates how changes from ancient French to classical French have affected the rhythmic and prosodic patterns of poetry. While the phrase is reproduced and structured hierarchically in ancient French metrical poetry, metrical poetry written in classical French is different in that it prefers a linear structure. In both cases, not only phonetic systems but also grammatical systems are carried over, thus succinctly reflecting the incarnation of culture in language. A very interesting contribution with an untraditional perspective on language and culture.

Nora Galli de' Paratesi: Diglossia and the spoken/written language rift in Italian.

This article introduces the reader to the history of diglossia. Defining diglossia as language with a prestige function opposed to language with an information function, the author takes the reader through the history of languages with high prestige, viz. Latin and written Italian, to languages with low prestige, viz. oral Italian and English. This development is shown as one of political orchestration - first through Reformation, which aimed at making the word of God accessible to the common man and next through the Ciceronian period when a language was introduced for intellectual exchange. The aim of simplification and accessibility that began with Reformation was, however, taken up by the Royal Society in Britain, which recommended plain prose in English to make science comprehensible to those who did not know Latin. Latin thus created a distance to the people while English was the common man's language. This distinction was upheld in written and oral language. The author reaches the very interesting conclusion that as a consequence of

the history of diglossia, which suggests that ‘the written form is normatively ‘pure’ and the oral one ‘wrong’ and ‘impure’, written language is still more formal than oral language in our day.

Iørn Korzen: Hierarchy vs. linearity. Some considerations on the relation between context and text with evidence from Italian and Danish.

In this article, the author narrows the object of analysis from language history to a more detailed comparison of Italian and Danish. On the basis of a corpus of 27 written and 27 oral Italian and 18 written and 18 oral Danish reproductions of two Mr. Bean texts, the author finds that Italian is characterized by hypotaxis (hierarchy) while Danish is characterized by parataxis (linearity). This result, which is supported by previous research, is thoroughly discussed on the background of a text-context model which includes sociological as well as textual parameters and some basic cultural and social differences are highlighted. These suggest that Italian society is generally more elitist than Danish society, which is mirrored even in oral political discussions that tend to be more formalized than similar Danish ones. The author concludes that both written and oral Italian is more formal than Danish, an observation he relates to the Italian diglossic situation, in which informality was not common in written Italian, perhaps due to the absence of a non-dialectal spoken language.

Lita Lundquist: Interpretation of culture and culture of interpretation in law and linguistics.

In an interesting comparison of judicial and linguistic interpretation of meaning, in which is the Danish legal expert and philosopher Alf Ross’ ideas on pragmatics are brought into play with pragmatics in the linguistic sense, the author argues that pragmatics is the great divide between the two in that it belongs to culture in judicial methods and to language in linguistics. The problem addressed is that of semantic ambiguity and the need to distinguish between objective fact and subjective meaning. Both disciplines use language for interpretation, but in different ways. While linguistics aims at predicting how meaning is conveyed – be it subjectively or objectively - law is intended to present objective fact. This, however, causes problems because law statutes depend on language for their very existence, and as language has a cultural component, meaning becomes ambiguous and the question consequently arises whether meaning should be interpreted ‘on discretion’ as is the case in law or by preferred interpretations as suggested by one pragmatist, Levinson. The author characterizes Ross’ approach to semantics as utterly pessimistic and points out that linguistic theory has developed much since his day. She mentions functional linguistics as one theory that offers solutions to the problem of meaning ambiguity. However, no specific solution is offered in the conclusion, which puns that ‘while Ross’ legal method aims at investigating language in laws, the linguist’s goal is to discover laws in language’.

Anne Lise Kjær: Convergence of European legal systems: The role of language.

The issue is raised whether it is possible for Europe to develop a common legal language when it does not have a common general language. The author therefore

explores ‘under what circumstances it is possible to speak the same language across legal languages’ and thus indirectly touches upon cultural difference. Among the problems raised in the article is that legal actors belong to different legal traditions, which makes it difficult to transfer meaning from one system to another. It is argued that due to the unstable nature of legal concepts, which tend to change with the change of legal experience, a dynamic model for legal interpretation is needed. The author advocates a model along the lines of critical discourse analysis, in which the dimensions of social practice and discursive practice shape and are being shaped through the constant negotiation among translators and legal actors about the situated meanings of legal concepts. Thus, the point of view expressed in this article is less pessimistic than that of some legal scholars, who contend that understanding between lawyers is impossible because of the wide variety of European languages and legal systems. Therefore, according to the author, what is needed in Europe to ensure legal integration is not a common legal language, but a common legal discourse. The article is well argued, but one might have expected the problem of translation to receive more attention because of the centrality of this discipline to the problem discussed.

Viktor Smith: Linguistic diversity and the convergence of European legal systems and cultures: Is Legrand’s pessimism justified?

The problem of translation is addressed to a larger extent in Viktor Smith’s article, in which Legrand’s overall pessimistic position on convergence of European systems and cultures is discussed. Legrand holds that ‘as long as languages differ – together with the world-views encoded into them – there can be no unified culture and no unified law’. This idea amounts to saying that translation is not possible. To counter this position and following Roman Jakobson, the author argues that language does not need to be an obstacle, but may become one in adverse situations such as when pre-legal understandings of the world differ from one culture to the other. That language is not necessarily an obstacle is shown with reference to the communicative pressure that overrides language differences. If a speaker seriously needs to express something, neologisms are invented and ideas reworded across cultures and languages. The argument is taken further by invoking Louis Hjelmslev’s ideas of form and substance which in linguistics are seen as part of a larger ‘functional net of dependencies’. The author includes in this net of dependencies the possibility of *acting* in certain ways. It thus becomes possible to consider three elements in a form/substance/function relationship, viz. pre-legal understanding of the world, linguistic means such as grammar and syntax, and technical legal concepts, which amount to a legal meta-language. The author thus argues – successfully - that in addition to the highly flexible tool of language, cultures must share a cognitive basis for the convergence of European legal systems to be possible.

Irène Baron: Diversité linguistique et cultures juridiques: les langues constituent-elles un obstacle à l’intégration européenne?

Pointing once again to the problem of harmonization in legal Europe, the author compares differences or ‘décalages’ between Danish and French language and Danish and French law. Referring to explorations of verbs and nouns in Danish and

French by Herslund and Baron (same volume), the suggestion is made that Danish is an endocentric language with concrete verbs and concrete verb-derived nouns, while French is an exocentric one with abstract verbs and abstract verb-derived nouns. This leads the author to conclude that reasoning in Danish is based on induction while reasoning in French is based on deduction. Similar explorations of Danish and French law suggest that Danish law is interpreted by way of induction while French judges use deduction as their approach in lawsuits. This seemingly comparable situation of language and law makes the author conclude that there is a co-relation between the two domains, which needs to be considered in European law harmonization efforts in order to prevent miscarriages of justice. The points made in the article are interesting, although not entirely convincing – especially because Danish and French nouns are being compared with a different result in the article by Herslund and Baron. Here it is argued that Danish nouns are more abstract than the French ones without drawing a clear distinction between verb-derived nouns and genuine nouns. This is, however, as minor point in an otherwise well-presented argument.
