REVIEWS


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Kenneth Burke, the great rhetorician, literary critic, sociologist, grammatologist, and one of the very few major theorists of language in the period they cover who doesn’t appear in this brilliant new intellectual chronicle by John Goldsmith and Bernard Laks, has an evocative parable of human existence. He calls life an ‘unending conversation’ at the historical moment we are born. It’s like a cocktail party, he says, for which we are all, each and every one of us, unavoidably late:

When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your ear. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending on the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (Burke 1941:110–11)

G&L give us an allegorical party, too, vibrant concentrations of conversational gravity swirling through the room, merging with, spinning away from, or sweeping past one another. Conversations rupture. Conversations continue. New voices come. Old voices go. But some of the old voices also endure, leaving their concepts and perspectives behind, some in little slivers of terminology, some in grand ideational skeins fanning out across the room, carried aloft by the new voices. Some old voices, too, have a special trick. They leave robots behind to repeat their utterances verbatim, robots called books.

In G&L’s version, the party happens on a hotel patio. They man the concierge desk, an invaluable service. We are all coming late, remember, and the conversations are going full throttle when we get there. G&L meet us with a vast schematic chart of the past conversations. No one can retrace all that has gone on before we arrived, but guides like these two can plot out some of the bigger and more consequential conversations in enough detail to give us a much better sense of where we have been, and therefore a much better idea of what we are talking about when we talk about linguistics. You can see a tiny corner of their schematic in Figure 1.

We are in that allegorical party now, you know. This journal is one of the more important conversational hubs—‘near the beer’, as G&L’s schematic tells us (576). We have mingled our way through the swirl of theoretical terms and along the philosophical currents that make up linguistics to get here. Let me tell you a bit more about this book before you move along.

We should acknowledge, first, that G&L’s patio is a decidedly Euro-American patio. There are no samosas or suya at the snack table, no saki at the bar. G&L adopt a thoroughly conventional and unchallenged notion of linguistics, as the scientific, item-and-arrangement study of the natural human products known as languages. This view sees linguistics as growing directly out of nineteenth-century European philology, in the special hands of a few giants. At this point you might be inclined—or if not you, some other gentle reader—to ease away and avoid this book as one more tired entry in the Monumental White Men History of Ideas genre. That would be a mistake. I certainly would not claim that the Euro-American trajectory of linguistics is flawlessly correct, nor that it cannot be enriched and corrected by many of the traditions it has scorned or ignored.1 But our contemporary field is the result of what Versteegh (2006:2792) calls ‘the unified

1 Kees Versteegh’s (2006) article, ‘The study of non-Western linguistic traditions’, in volume 3 of Auroux et al. 2000–2006, is a useful point of departure for anyone interested in those alternate traditions and their possibilities for enrichment and correction of the Euro-American trajectory. Volume 1 of the same set also has

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If we study history to know better why we say the things we say about language, it is this tradition we must first understand. And whatever else this book might be, it is not tired. It sparkles with insight and energy.

But wait a minute. Back on up. Conversations?! On a sunlit patio? That sounds like a much different narrative from one you would find in a book called *Battle in the mind fields*, which begins with forebodings of open warfare. ‘[T]he characters in this story are, for the most part, a feisty and pugnacious cast’, our authors tell us at the outset. ‘They come prepared for battle, they rarely take prisoners, and they enter the fray defending the faith’ (1). But the drums and fifes are pretty

several articles dedicated to specific non-Western traditions. See also Itkonen 1991 and Kniffka 2001 for somewhat different attempts at pushing on the Euro-American trajectory from outside.
quiet throughout the book, let alone the cannons, and 500+ pages later we find our authors directing us to look back over the history they have told through the analogy of an animated but civil gathering on a sunny terrace, scholars chatting excitedly in amiable clusters.

The lesson of G&L’s patio parable may be that hostility is not quite the determining factor in the mind fields that their title and their dire early warnings suggest.

The story of the book features two distinct but interpenetrating schools of linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century—European structuralism and American structuralism—with another volume on the way promising to trace their influences in the second half of that century. The authors trace conversations back deeply into the nineteenth century, and neither of these two schools shows up in earnest on the patio for 300 pages, in a 700-page book. They go deep, G&L. They also go quite broad. We get to hear plenty from and about comparative philologists and Neogrammarians, but we also get richly grounding accounts, as Fig. 1 illustrates, of philosophy, psychology, and logic, a bit of mathematics, a little anthropology—hence, the mind fields of the title—alongside social and political history, some history of technology, and a good deal of biography for the featured players, Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Edward Sapir, and Leonard Bloomfield.

There is much anguish, strife, and even violence in G&L’s chronicle, of course. The twentieth century was a brutal one. But that brutality was tearing up and rearranging the social fabric all around our featured linguists, not the disciplinary fabric they were conversationally weaving. Jakobson and Trubetzkoy were driven out of Russia. Jakobson stayed one step ahead of the Nazis all across Europe. Trubetzkoy was harassed on his death bed by the Gestapo. There were two world wars and a major revolution. In contrast, linguists were working things out among themselves pretty smoothly.

G&L repeatedly stress the importance of disagreement in honing and refining our theories. ‘[A] living discipline is a quiltwork of disagreements’, they point out early on (x). But a quilt is not a battlefield. Disagreements rarely reach the pitch in this book at which metaphors of warfare are appropriate. Of the great many hugely valuable intellectual genealogies G&L map out, with their various lines of connection (see Fig. 1), I recall only one ‘hostility’ connection in the whole book.

The appropriate setting for this history of early-twentieth-century linguistics (1900–1940) would indeed seem to be a patio, then, rather than a war zone. So why do our authors frame it in hostility? Perhaps it is just that Mingling in the mind fields does not have the swashbuckling appeal of Battle in the mind fields. But I have another guess for the titular billing they give to the argument is war framing of their chronicle, concerning events of more recent linguistic vintage in which our authors were personally engaged and which feature prominently in the second volume. I outline that guess at the end of this review. In the meantime, the narrative that our authors begin with, warning of pugnacity and mayhem, they end (for the time being) with a more accurate characterization as a ‘megaconversation’ that has been governed overwhelmingly by harmony (576). What happens in the chapters between?

Well, of course, a lot of talk. G&L are voluble themselves (mostly a good thing; they are graceful, considered, engaging writers), but one of the great virtues of this book is that in and among their clear paraphrases and helpful interpretations, G&L also quote very generously from their sources. We get to hear brilliant accounts of central concepts directly from the scholars—often deftly captured insights but also loose characterizations and occasional absurdities. We hear from giants like Jakobson and Sapir but also from work-a-day academics, like the rest of us, many of whom have left their mark in a signal paper or two, most of whom you will never have heard about before. A few quotations from landmark publications will be familiar, but we also see our discipline emerging through obscure and incidental pieces—memoirs, personal letters, tributes. The research into this volume is quite breathtaking, running deeply into the nineteenth century and broadly across the disciplines to chart out the foundation upon which twentieth-century linguistics builds. G&L give us characters and feelings as well as concepts.

Especially entertaining among the quotations is a series of thirty testaments, from 1838 to 2007, proclaiming that linguistics has finally, at long last, after so long in the wilderness, become
a science (8–15). When these quotations get to the twentieth century, a revealing feature emerges in that this finally-a-science achievement is regularly attributed to the work of an epochal Great Man—Ferdinand de Saussure, Franz Boas, Bloomfield, Antoine Meillet, Noam Chomsky.

On the deft-insights side of the ledger, we can put William Dwight Whitney’s exquisite comparison of natural and artificial languages:

A language is, in very truth, a grand system, of a highly complicated and symmetrical structure; it is fitly comparable with an organized body; but this is not because any human mind has planned such a structure and skilfully worked it out. Each single part is conscious and intentional … [a] real language [is] fundamentally different from the elaborate and philosophical structures with which ingenious men have sometimes thought to replace them. These are indeed artful devices, in which the character and bearing of each part is painfully weighed and determined in advance: compared with them, language is a real growth; and human thought will as readily exchange its natural covering for one of them as the growing crustacean will give up its shell for a casing of silver, wrought by the most skilful hands. Their symmetry is that of a mathematical figure, carefully laid out, and drawn to rule and line; in language, the human mind, tethered by its limited capacities in the midst of creation, reaches out as far as it can in every direction and makes its mark, and is surprised at the end to find the result a circle. (106–7; see also Whitney 1867:50–51)

Over on the absurdities side we find lessons of a different sort, chiefly the ironclad assurance that some of our most natural and automatic assumptions will crumble into dusty, misbegotten prejudices in the future. Here such an assumption reveals itself in Max Müller’s encouragement to study Chinese for what it can tell us about ourselves, and about Others:

Let no one be frightened at the idea of studying a Chinese grammar. Those who can take an interest in the secret springs of the mind, in the elements of pure reason, in the laws of thought, will find a Chinese grammar most instructive, most fascinating. It is the faithful photograph of man in his leading-strings, trying the muscles of his mind, groping his way, and so delighted with his first successful grasps that he repeats them again and again. It is child’s play, if you like, but it displays, like all child’s play, that wisdom and strength which are perfect in the mouth of babes and sucklings. Every shade of thought that finds expression in the highly finished and nicely balanced system of Greek tenses, moods, and particles can be expressed, and has been expressed, in that infant language by words that have neither prefix nor suffix, no terminations to indicate number, case, tense, mood, or person. (120; see also Müller 1868:13–14)

Müller’s paean to the infantile glory of Chinese indexes a preoccupation in nineteenth-century scholarship that is acutely relevant at this moment in our current century, the preoccupation with answering the deceptively bland questions, ‘[W]ho are we? And what makes us different?’ (228). There were clear answers all around the privileged voices who were asking these questions among themselves—slavery, imperial oppression, religious and ethnic stratifications in class structure—but those conditions were data to them, at best, where they were not just irrelevant. The real answers were to be found, as Müller blithely believes, in racial determinism. He was not alone. Racial determinism suffused linguistics.

We should not forget that the favored Nazi term, Aryan, comes directly out of Indo-European studies, coined by Friedrich Schlegel from a Sanskrit root for ‘noble’, and it was quickly twisted toward ethnocentric ends by cultural philologists (80) because it provided a perfect racial contrast with the term Semite. This tradition sponsored the Christian theology that fed Nazi ideology, marking ‘the Semitic race [as] ... an inferior composition of human nature’ (Ernest Renan, 1855, quoted in Heschel 2008:35). The racial determinism theme becomes most uncomfortable in G&L, at least to this reader, in their account of the importance to Trubetzkoy and Jakobson of a sociohistorical philosophy, called Eurasianism. It included views that would be at home in Mein Kampf. Here is Trubetzkoy:

The destructive consciousness of the Jews is a neurosis, a neurosis of a particular sort, which draws its origin from the feeling that there is an abnormal relation between Jews and goyim, a feeling reinforced by the influence of the Jewish milieu, which suffers from the same neurosis. (506; see Trubetzkoy 1991 [1935]:285)

G&L are careful to point out that Trubetzkoy’s racism is not biological racism, but social and cultural racism. Trubetzkoy’s cure for the pathology of Jewishness, therefore, is not the biological
erasure favored by Hitler but a social and cultural erasure, assimilation; so, genocide, just not genocide of the body. But one can soft-pedal metaphors of diseased ethnicities only so far before one ends up at eugenics and death camps.

Eurasianism raises for me the most prickly question about G&L’s commitment to integrating social and personal history so thoroughly with scientific and disciplinary history. ‘Perhaps it is possible to read Trubetzkoy’s and Jakobson’s work on phonology without any understanding of their broader interests or the questions that motivated them’, G&L say. ‘[W]e have, after all, been reading [Trubetzkoy’s] Principles of phonology that way for decades’ (536). But that is a feint. They discount such an understanding as:

a thin reading which misses much of what Trubetzkoy valued in his own work. His goal was the development of a movement allied with Russian cultural nationalism, and his interests were in philosophy, ethnology, culture, and ethnolinguistics. (536)

Thinner undoubtedly, but too thin for a working phonologist? ‘Yes’, our authors say a bit further along, too thin: ‘there is no hope of understanding what [these linguists] thought and what they wrote if we do not understand the cultural milieu in which they lived’ (571). I am not entirely sure I agree with them. Is a reading of Aspects of the theory of syntax (Chomsky 1965) too thin, absent, say, a knowledge of Chomsky’s opposition to American foreign policy? No, would my quickest, and shallowest, answer. Absent Chomsky’s rationalist attraction to ‘Cartesianism’? Absent knowledge of his program’s extensive military funding? Its connections to machine translation? Its roots in discourse analysis? Its integration with cognitive psychology? Its lineage in the grammar + dictionary descriptions of the Boasian tradition? … ?

Maybe not all hope of understanding such texts is lost when we eliminate social and philosophical context, and maybe eliminating some contexts makes our readings thinner in more limiting ways than eliminating other contexts. But what such a thoroughgoing history of ideas as Battle in the mind fields offers us is the chance to sort out for ourselves what is relevant, and how relevant it might be for our own understanding. I still do not feel my understanding of Trubetzkoy and Jakobson, the people, is certainly richer, and I am also appreciative that my knowledge of pre-war Russian social philosophy is now richer as well.

A defining feature of conversations is that they happen among people, and another of this book’s great virtues is the attention G&L give to the humanity of the actors driving the history to which we are heir. In and among the push and pull of concepts we get revealing and distinctly personal portraits of these remarkable men (not surprisingly, women are extraordinarily few and far between in this chronicle, and none ever approaches the center stage; there is a significant cameo by Ada Lovelace, a walk-on by Mary Haas, but little else; see xv).

I have telegraphed my verdict on this book repeatedly by this point, so it will not surprise you, but let’s make it explicit: you should read Battle in the mind fields. If you have students at the graduate level, you should recommend that they read it. I cannot imagine any linguist, or aspiring linguist, or anyone with even a mild interest in the history of thought, not coming away feeling hugely gratified that they spent their time between the covers of this book.

Taking my lead from G&L, here is a sampling of quotations from them that tell you as much about the book as I can. The first two are elegant accounts of their methodology, the third just an example of the way they can epitomize something epochal in a few nimble sentences:

There is a force that we can feel when we read the work of giants who have preceded us, an energy that comes with it, an ability to make us think today. At the same time, the most profound contributions have always been the result of a thorough knowledge of orthodoxy and its dogma mixed with a passion for heterodoxy. There is no deep mystery why this should be so. It is the simple result of the fact that no one thinks alone or starts over from scratch. (8)

We have tried to ride the current of time like a surfer on a breaking wave, staying in the narrative present, and rarely looking either backward or forward except as the past and the future emerge in the imaginations of the thinkers themselves—each of those thinkers holding tight to their surf boards as they ride their waves in. (574)
History abruptly interfered with the Moscow Linguistic Circle. The Russian Revolution toppled the government, the czar was deposed, the socialists took the reins of government, Lenin’s party overthrew Kerensky’s socialist regime. The world shuddered, and then it turned upside down. (524)

But I promised you my theory of why an account of such an overwhelmingly collegial flow of ideas is framed in terms of warfare. My data comes mostly from the final chapter, where the forthcoming second volume is anticipated. That volume will feature two highly acrimonious episodes at whose centers we find Chomsky: the eclipse of Bloomfieldian structuralism and the post-Aspects fractionation of generative linguistics. Those episodes—nobody’s idea of patio parties—most fully account for the combative framing of the entire two-volume project. G&L were there for some of the action and heard many a war story first-hand, perhaps while hanging out around the beer.

The Battle project is personal for them, the post-Aspects period still fresh in their minds. G&L make no attempt to hide their personal investment, nor the idiosyncrasy of many of their scholarly choices. Quite the opposite. Battle is no putatively objective, bare-bones record of events. Our authors regularly remind us that their narrative and thematic emphases are ones that they are not sure we would make in their shoes, or even that they would necessarily make themselves on another day. In the preface, for instance, they note their own enthusiasms and the climactic conditions of their early professional lives: ‘We were ourselves children of a revolution’, they say (16), speaking of the Chomskyan upheavals. ‘[W]e were there ourselves, we burned that midnight oil’ (17). The fervor that shaped their personal and professional histories clearly shaped this two-volume project as well. It has an unmistakable trajectory that is not simply chronological.

Everything in the two volumes points inexorably toward the GENERATIVE SEMANTICS episode of the late 1960s and its repercussions. That is where their history ends. Narratively, it is the climax. But they also bill it as ‘the most complex case of rupture and continuity’ in either volume (597), advertising it as the culmination of their interests, after which they promise to deliver their lessons about the ‘principles of ethical living and scientific progress we have drawn from these reflections’ (597). The episode has also been much on Goldsmith’s mind over his career, forming the sole subject of another one of his excellent collaborations (Huck & Goldsmith 1995).

One of the book’s starker idiosyncrasies arises here, too, one that is particularly difficult for your reviewer to miss—the author, as he is, of a book on the generative semantics episode entitled The linguistics wars (Harris 2021 [1993]). G&L remark offhandedly that this most notorious of late-twentieth-century ruptures in linguistics ‘came to be known as the “generative wars”’ (597), the peculiar term they will presumably adopt as common currency in volume 2. It’s not just me. I have consulted Google about this usage and Google also finds it odd, the last thing one would expect from historians of ideas.

Google, an unsubtle but still revealing corpus instrument for charting the flow of lexical traffic, returns roughly 30,000 hits for linguistics wars and a thousand times fewer hits for generative wars—twenty-eight, to be precise—most of them to events that do not even implicate the linguistic sense of generative (e.g. Brighton 2019). In fact, Google could find only one relevant use of that phrase that does not originate with G&L, in an obscure blog post that had earned sixty-one views before I visited and pushed that number to sixty-two (Halitsky 2006).

Beyond perplexing the author of The linguistics wars (who, I should point out, did not invent that phrase; I got it from the groundbreaking Linguistic theory in America (1986 [1980]) by Frederick J. Newmeyer, who credits one of the warriors with the coinage, Paul Postal), this stark oddity should trigger a little nervousness in the book’s readers. It did in me. The authors’ confessedly idiosyncratic approach gives the book much of its appeal on a page-by-page, sentence-by-sentence level. Not only does conversation form the ‘basic unit’ (575) of their approach, but it also informs their tone. They talk to us directly all the time, even playing little tricks now and again. At one point, for instance, they give us two quotations from the same linguist, a ‘very distinguished figure’, but turn it into a guessing game (‘we’ll let you know who he was after you’ve read what he wrote’; 28–29). Their personalities drive the prose.

But there is also some reason for wariness with scholars who make arbitrary choices for unrevealed reasons. As much as I love this book, as much as I feel I have learned from it, as impres-
sive as the research is, I cannot help but be somewhat uneasy about its reliability. If G&L can make a claim so bizarrely skewed about the common name of a well-known episode in the recent history of linguistics, what other peculiarities populate the record they offer? Looking ahead to volume 2, I am not entirely convinced that anything other than recency bias and the authors’ personal investment makes the generative semantics episode more complex than every other moment of rupture and continuity in linguistics over the century they examine. Living through an episode, as G&L lived through this war whose name they dare not speak, provides much greater sensitivity to complexity and nuance than visiting archives and reading other people’s accounts. But who cares? If it is not the most complex episode, it is certainly the most relevant episode for the current shape of our field.

The generative semantics movement precipitated the rupture of an apparently imminent disciplinary hegemony coalescing around what Chomsky called ‘the standard theory’ into two antipodes. One largely continued the tradition of autonomy, grammaticality, and elaborate rule systems that Aspects foregrounds, building toward government and binding theory, mutating thereafter into the minimalist program in ways that partially echoed generative semantics. The other pursued semantic integration, context, and data-fidelity that played in the background of Aspects, flared into generative semantics, and grew toward cognitive linguistics. However accurate the broad strokes of that outline is, it is of course far too simple a picture of our recent history, as I am sure we will hear about in the second volume. I, for one, can hardly wait.

REFERENCES


