

*FLYING KITES CAN BE DANGEROUS:*  
A SYDNEY REALIST'S EVALUATION OF  
POST-1970S THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

by  
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My tribute to Carl Bache's career in Linguistics discusses briefly the psychological and philosophical implications that have been claimed for three ambitious theories of language: Chomsky's 'rationalist' model, Derrida's 'deconstruction', and the view that language determines both thought and 'reality' – Kenneth Gergen's 'constructivism'. Each of these theories amounts to a revised version of established anti-realist philosophical epistemologies. I criticise each in turn as subjectivist and/or relativist. To the extent that any of the three yields coherent empirical predictions about linguistic behaviour they are inconsistent with how language is learned and/or used. In the present context, I recommend paying attention to how language works rather than to what 'it' is. I discuss functionalist semiotic methods such as Michael Halliday's. His tripartite model is epistemologically agnostic but consistent with the empirico-realist study of language in social context. By studying language-in-use, Halliday has clarified the very questions that post-war structuralist and revisionist philosophers have tried to address by theorising about the nature of language and mind. I judge the philosophical modesty (even the naivety) of Systemic Functionalist theory as commendable. Unlike its three predecessors, it avoids the traps of idealism and logical incoherence. It has therefore yielded a highly fruitful body of linguistic and other semiotic knowledge. Without intending to revolutionise the field, Systemic Functionalism has achieved just that.

*1. Introduction*

During the thirty-plus years that Carl Bache has worked as Professor at the University of Southern Denmark, the discipline of Linguistics has been subject to at least three potentially revolutionary meta-

theoretical attacks. In this paper, I discuss briefly the psychological and philosophical implications that have been claimed for these ambitious theories of language. In the hands of Structuralists and Post-Structuralists alike, I argue, linguistic theory has generally done little more than posit egregiously idealist concepts that lead into philosophical *culs de sac*. When shorn of their postmodern trappings, the supposedly revolutionary new paradigms are revealed as the disinterred remains of positions once held by Bishop Berkeley, John Locke or Edward Sapir.

However, the good news is that despite the grand and grandiose proposals made by various revisions of de Saussure, a more modest, pragmatic approach to studying language *has* revolutionised the discipline during the period of Carl Bache's career. Attention to *how* language *works* rather than to *what 'it' is*, has clarified, albeit largely inadvertently, the very questions that structuralist and revisionist philosophers tried to address by theorising about the nature of language and mind. I judge the philosophical modesty (even the naivety) of 'functionalist' theory as commendable, and I focus on the example of Michael Halliday's work.

Some prominent psychologists and social theorists have taken Halliday's approach as a license to postulate language as a *mental cause* of all sorts of phenomena in what I regard as egregiously idealist (as opposed to realist) ways. So I encourage functional linguists to resist invoking Halliday to bolster 'constructivist' epistemology that mistakenly proposes that 'reality' is 'discursively', 'socially' or 'linguistically' *determined*. Down that path lie subjectivism and relativism. By contrast, realist epistemology stresses that language is a part of objectively knowable reality and that the criterion of truth or falsity of statements applies to linguistics as it does to all logically coherent knowledge claims.

Theorists as diverse as de Saussure, Chomsky and Derrida have drawn from their theories of 'what language is' profound implications for understanding the precise nature of cognition – as patterns of

differences that constitute mental concepts; as 'deep, species-specific mental predispositions' or cognitive 'structures'; as a mental process of indefinite meaning deferral – '*differance*'. However, contrary to these metaphysical hypostatizations, I argue that Linguistics *as such* is largely irrelevant to metaphysics, irrespective of its apparently psychological claims. The assertions made by generative structuralists, by post-structuralists, as well as by psychologists like Kenneth Gergen, who are 'social' (and that means also) *linguistic* 'constructionists', fail to undermine what I will call 'realist' epistemology. Recent linguistic theory and meta-theory do not, I believe, show that natural language reflects universal, innate structures; nor does language or 'discourse' 'construct' social or any other kind of 'reality' (except in a weak, metaphorical sense), and (*pace* Derrida) language **can** allow people to communicate unambiguously, objectively, and therefore truthfully. Instead I commend functionalist semiotic theories, such as those of Michael Halliday, because they avoid, perhaps by default, the subjective idealism and logical incoherence of the three positions I criticise. That is, Functionalism is agnostic with respect to epistemology and ontology. Unlike structuralist and post-structuralist analyses of language and thought, Functionalism (unless it is used to justify the position that 'ideas, including verbal ideas [sic], create, cause or construct reality'), is not committed to idealist self-contradiction, and its propositions can be empirically contested.

## 2. Neo-rationalism (*Chomsky's Structuralism*)

Rarely has a short thesis had such a profound impact as Chomsky's 'Transformational Generative Grammar' (TGG, Chomsky 1965). His shot across Linguistics' bows seemed to many to shatter the empiricist assumptions of Western thought. Especially in the decade after its celebrated publication, TGG was claimed to define

something essential about humans as a species. It proved that humans were biologically endowed with innate neural equipment that determined, or at least limited, the possible grammatical form of all natural language, and hence, of knowledge in general. This represented a revival of epistemological 'rationalism' (insofar as it implied 'innate ideas') and it seemed to disturb the generally accepted empiricist assumptions of unreflective realism, the 'default position' in the behavioural sciences. At that time a rationalist view of mind stood in stark contrast to the behaviouristic principle that all human behaviour was learned. Psychology described stimulus-response relationships, the organism being conceived of as a 'black box'. For this reason, Chomsky challenged academic Psychology at its very foundations. It is certainly true that he helped to expose as anaemic the pretensions of any theory that could not explain how humans learned natural languages, why these took a limited range of forms, and why all 'normal' language-learning showed similar patterns and pace. During the 1970s this led to renewed interest in psycholinguistics and in developmental questions especially. And it formed a paradoxically Anglophone force towards the 'linguistic turn' in epistemology, although the latter paradigm resulted mainly from very different, French, 'Theory' (Bell 2010).

Chomsky's 'computational' model seemed to demonstrate that no human language could be acquired by simple associative learning (as behaviourists had assumed): language was a special case, not just one among many complex sets of learned habits linking stimuli and responses. Arising in tandem with rapid developments in the theory and engineering of digital computational devices, Chomsky's algorithmic analysis of the formal features of natural grammars placed the study of language front and centre of cognitive psychology's reaction against behaviourism during the 1970s.

However, forty years on, few experts in cognitive psychology would argue that transformational grammars have any precise

epistemological implications. Indeed, other than suggesting that humans can learn complex combinatorial skills and that these may involve concatenation of discrete elements (as also happens in improvising jazz or playing tennis, it could be argued), the psychological implications of the 'Chomsky Revolution' have come to be seen as rather banal. At least in hindsight, it might be claimed that neo-rationalist theories of language are of minimal interest for epistemology and for meta-psychology. Moreover, from the late seventies, Psychology, including psycholinguistics, moved on from the formalist/computational model, partly because experimental and observational studies provided little or no evidence that justified the postulation of the kinds of mental processes that literal interpretations of Chomsky's model suggested – 'deep' versus 'surface' sentence structures, and the distinction between a mentally-stored 'competence' that is employed in linguistic 'performance' of potentially infinite utterances (via recursion, for instance). Whatever happened cognitively when people spoke, it could not fruitfully be described as transforming of simpler 'kernel' or 'subject-verb-object' pre-structures. Psychologically, and perhaps linguistically, TGG seemed to multiply unobservable entities willy-nilly, and the model's ad-hoc complexity came to be seen as a dead end.

These arguments against Chomsky's 'strong thesis' of innate 'universals' in language (and in cognition generally?) are well known. However, they have not killed off his neo-rationalist influence. American philosopher Jerry Fodor, for example, has developed a theory of innate 'mentalese' as the basis of knowledge, including linguistic knowledge (Fodor 2000; See also Cain 2002). His one-time collaborator, Jerrold J. Katz, defends a version of 'Realistic Rationalism' (2000). However, as these authors exemplify, by the end of the century the influence of Chomsky's epistemological ideas had moved away from mainstream Linguistics into Cognitive Science and Philosophy schools.

### 3. *Post-structuralism and Deconstruction*

Following, but independently of Chomsky's revision of Linguistics' foundations, an equally radical French movement rumbled epistemology's tectonic plates. Jacques Derrida philosophically *de-constructed* Ferdinand de Saussure's general theory of language. Derrida threatened to demolish all the old certainties about language and meaning, rationalist and empiricist alike. Language, he claimed, is not only incapable of expressing true or false propositions, it is always duplicitous and indeterminate. Had this thesis succeeded, then Linguistics (and social sciences generally) might have gone out of business. Derrida and his followers seemed to believe that those ignorant of deconstruction inhabit an unknowable ontological realm, mistakenly thinking that reality can be represented or even referred to unequivocally using natural language.

Derrida's philosophical parody of de Saussure's foundational 'structuralism', paradoxically called 'deconstruction', echoed the then fashionable relativism proposed by Foucault, albeit approaching meta-theoretical questions about language in a very different way. Both Foucault and Derrida saw meaning as subjective, not relational. Both saw language as a prison house of ideological constraint – a 'gestapo of structures' to use filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's label. Derrida argued that sentences could never be directly propositional or referential. Meaning, he claimed, involved no 'positive' terms – that is, an utterance did not involve any direct relations with phenomena that existed independently of the language used in the utterance. Claims of objective, empirical truth were impossible, therefore. Nevertheless, Derrida also wrote as though *his* theoretical ideas were true (not just 'true'). For example, deconstruction asserts that (it is true that) all utterances undermine, sometimes even contradict, their user's purported sense. Yet the actual connotations or implications that inadvertently subtend an utterance can be excavated and revealed to some extent by 'deconstructive' textual reading. These

readings are, presumably, true or false. They are not arbitrary or meaningless, or intended to be judged only aesthetically or for their consistency with Derrida's own principles.

One of the principal pseudo-empirical claims Derrida made was that language involved a mental or cognitive process he called '*differ-ance*' – the indefinite deferral of 'meaning' (*pace* de Saussure). Such a process meant that no utterance could be completely analysed as a simple proposition, even in a particular context. There was always something 'left over', something unspeakable – empirical description was necessarily inadequate to its linguistic task. So, moving beyond de Saussure, Deconstructionists argued that language could not be analysed as a static system structured around diachronic and synchronic relations of differences – the arbitrary or conventional contrasts between semantic or phonological elements that the founding father of structuralism had proposed.

Derrida's criticisms of de Saussure are unexceptional, although, ironically, he commits his 'deconstructionist' theory of language to idealisms just as deeply as did his French predecessor. As John Maze (2001/ 2009b) points out, both writers assert that 'differences' *as such* can be known, even though neither theorist allows that 'mind-independent' or language-independent entities or situations exist that *could* exhibit *particular empirical* differences. As Maze argues, 'differences' must be particular *relations* between qualities or entities, etc. Humans cannot perceive differences 'in the abstract', so to speak, only differences *between* aspects of *mind-independent entities and situations*. It is these entities that they must ultimately know, not an image or concept of them, to put the matter bluntly in realist terms. Second, insofar as Derrideans wrote as though their own sentences were to be judged as true or false, they could not be proposing a *logically coherent* theory of language because they reserved the claim to truth for their own utterances and denied it in others. Or, perhaps, they were happy to live with self-contradiction. Equivocation about the criterion of truth renders deconstruction self-defeating.

Derrida's theory of language has been subjected to intense scrutiny in many other Anglophone commentaries. The most trenchant, perhaps, is Robert Grant's rather intemperate critique that summarises what he sees as Derrida's two principal 'poststructuralist' errors:

One is to suppose that conventional designations cannot genuinely refer. They can and do ... so long as we agree on what they refer to ... The other, closely related, error is to suppose that the only 'real' reference could be to a 'thing-in-itself', that is, to 'ultimate' reality.

Echoing Maze, above, Grant stresses to the contrary that the only reference we have or need is to "things in their relation to man" (1996: 275-6).

Grant exposes Derrida's idealism as self-defeating. Echoing the criticism raised by Maze, above, he points out that Idealists deny we can be aware of 'mind-independent entities having properties of their own' (entities that are not 'always/already' mental or conceptual). Yet this commits them to the view that 'there is nothing for our perceptual processes to grasp'. Language cannot be a mode of inter-subjective communication if *relational* aspects of linguistic reference are collapsed into *mental* 'entities', as Maze puts this point (2009b: 183). Derrida does just this, assuming that the 'objects of knowledge are all ideas or mental images, the end-products of sensory experiences'. For the French post-structuralist, ideas and mental images seem to be *all and only what we know in themselves*. Derrida claims we cannot know things in 'full presence' – in, or as, their real selves (to put this in other words) whether presented in language or as objects to the senses. The logically and empirically independent (referential) world cannot be directly perceived. It is always 'mediated'. Differences in perception, it seems, are created by what signs mean to the subject who perceives: 'From the mo-

ment there is meaning, there is nothing but signs', wrote Derrida (Derrida 1977, quoted in Maze, *Ibid.*: 187).

As this aphorism suggests, Derrida, just as much as de Saussure, endorsed an epistemological thesis consistent with the highly influential 'social constructivist' or 'social constructionist' movement that during the 1970-80s resurrected the venerable Sapir-Whorf 'linguistic relativity' hypothesis. On this view, as in Deconstruction, language is seen as a necessary condition for perceptual and other cognitive phenomena. That is, semantic features of particular languages determine the way people think, perceive and remember. So in that sense, language is said to 'create', 'produce' or 'construct' reality. A realist critic, by contrast, would point out that if language *is* reality, logically it cannot also be *the cause* of itself. It cannot constitute objective, mind-independent reality because it could not then *refer to real situations and phenomena as logically independent* parts of the relations of 'knowing'. To put this epistemological point bluntly: one can't simply 'know', one can only 'know something' – knowledge is relational, and language must at some point be referential.

In retrospect it is clear that Derrida's influence on Anglophone Linguistics was episodic at best, indeed, more apparent than real. This is because Derrida's radical ideas gatecrashed the 1970s Continental-*philosophical*, rather than the Anglophone-*linguistic*, party. Few Anglo-American linguists read post-structuralist literary-philosophical writing, so they were less perturbed by his iconoclasm than they might have been. Derrida's influence has been most obvious – at least at a rhetorical, if not at an analytically philosophical level – in literary and cultural studies, including gender studies. Here the epistemological certainties that Derrida claimed to overturn included 'Logocentrism', Western metaphysics' unspoken but assumed system of concepts (habitual linguistic binaries, for instance). Deconstructionism claimed that Logocentrism grounds oppressive politics; it is as though language literally 'produced' realities and was itself an agent of social relations. Ironically 'Logocentrism' stood accused of

reifying language, and language stood accused of embodying patriarchal and other political implications or connotations.

By the end of the 1970s, two radically different theories – one Anglophone that promised rationalist epistemological clarity, the other Francophone and deconstructive of all epistemological certainty – had forced the discipline of formal Linguistics to reconsider its methodological – that is, its philosophical – foundations. Psychology was becoming increasingly 'cognitivist' rather than 'behaviourist' during this period, and each of these radically contrasting proposals about the nature of language seemed to rattle the iron cage of realist epistemological complacency. At the same time, influential Anglophone writers took on Deconstruction's epistemology to subvert patriarchal or other oppressive ideological language (Salih 2002). They assumed that language was a *causal factor* in 'constructing reality'.

#### 4. *Linguistic Constructivism ('Social Constructionism')*

The simple statement that 'language produces reality' is ambiguous. It may imply that entities and processes do not exist independently of the meanings that language users ascribe to them. Or, less strongly, it may mean that phenomena can never be known directly because language always intervenes, so to speak. On the latter view there can still be no such thing as objective knowledge, although an independent ontological realm is at least conceded. But this does not untie the epistemological knot. On analysis, these two interpretations are revealed as logically equivalent because *both must deny what they assert*. That is, linguistic constructivism claims as objectively true the proposition that objectively true propositions cannot be claimed. Language always actively determines, never neutrally reflects, 'reality'. Unfortunately such self-contradiction has not impeded the proliferation of what is usually called 'social constructionist' claims

in the Social Sciences, including Psychology and Linguistics. In these disciplines' recent epistemologies, constructivism is a popular version of what I've called the 'linguistic turn', and which I criticise below as leading to a methodological dead end.

Some theorists influenced by constructivist views of language seek to avoid the trap of self-contradiction by resorting to the tactic of placing 'reality' or 'the real' in scare quotes. This allows them to speak about '*so-called* reality' and therefore to equivocate about the ontological implications of their epistemology. That is, they hope to say that ideas/language have knowable effects on what people claim to know or believe, but that reality still exists independently of those beliefs. However, this does not seem to help to avoid the impasse, because the theorist still seems to be arrogating to him/herself the right to objective knowledge anyway: why should s/he be exempt from the subjectivism and relativism s/he attributes to others? Second, how could s/he know that reality exists in any form unless at least some aspects of material reality are the direct *objects* of perception and thought, not the *result* of them? In short, linguistic determinism as a psychological or epistemological principle is incoherent because it relies on collapsing into 'ideas' and/or 'words' themselves the entities that they are related to. So despite the rhetorical equivocation of 'reality in quotation marks', linguistic determinism as a version of constructivism is necessarily idealist and relativist. If reality is 'created' linguistically, then objective knowledge is impossible and the objects of knowledge-claiming statements (or propositions) are our own 'ideas', which are, as it were, mobilised when we speak or think in words. And, it seems to follow, all we can contest about knowledge claims (such as statements of the 'laws of nature', descriptions of cancer cell division, etc.) is their 'coherence', their 'authenticity', or their aesthetic form – *not* their truth or falsity.

Despite equivocating about such crippling limitations, various forms of linguistic relativity and social constructivism came to dominate much of the epistemology of the Social Sciences (including

Psychology) during the 1980s-90s. They remain influential especially in emerging 'cross-disciplinary' academic fields such as Cultural Studies, (see Salih 2002, Bell 2010, Hibberd 2005). Their appeal persists as the most undergraduate-friendly pseudo-epistemology in the 'post-modern' era.

One theoretical strand of the renewed preoccupation with language as causally powerful went so far as to analyse human subjectivity and identity – especially ethnic and gendered aspects of identity and 'the subject' (psychological, not grammatical) – in exclusively semiotic ways. Trading on the ambiguity of the term, 'the subject' was said to be 'created in discourse', 'interpellated in language', and hence *subject(ed)* to dominant ideological, taken-for-granted assumptions of the culture (recall Derrida's critique of 'Logocentrism'). The claim that all aspects of psychological identity must be understood 'discursively' or semiologically, is labelled 'Culturalism' by Terry Eagleton (1997). Semiotic or discourse/linguistic-determinism has found a sympathetic home within academic Psychology, and not only in the newer cross-disciplinary fields exemplified by Cultural Studies. But it has not gone unchallenged. Sydney Realist psychologists, John Maze (above) and Fiona Hibberd, for example, see it as an idealist *reductio ad absurdum* of anti-realist epistemology generally. Hibberd, in particular, criticises Kenneth Gergen's widely influential version of linguistic determinism in Psychology by showing that (amongst other logical problems) its denial of empirical truth and his assertion that propositions cannot refer to mind- or language-independent objects leads to relativism and 'nihilism with regard to truth' (Hibberd 2005: 121). She argues that it is logically mistaken to claim that the 'social construction' of linguistic terms and concepts has general *ontological* implications. In this, her argument is consistent with John Maze's critique of Derrida (summarised above). Both Realists show that to maintain logical coherence the referential truth or falsity of propositions must be considered in all epistemological analysis. Language cannot 'float free' of the world it refers to, even

allowing that many verbal factors are causally relevant to people's psychology. (These are different questions, which I discuss, below, in relation to Halliday's Systemic Functional Semiotics).

Hibberd quotes Gergen to illuminate this point:

It is my present contention that propositions relating to the mental and the physical world are essentially analytic [true by definition, or in terms of their verbal form only – PB]. That is they represent the extension of a system of linguistic equivalencies (*sic*). Their truth value is neither derived from nor dependent upon observation. Rather it is dependent on and derived from linguistic systems of definition (Gergen 1998: 37, in Hibberd, 2005: 121).

Yet Gergen allows that language acquires meaning 'through socio-linguistic practices'. This would seem to be at odds with its 'analytic' status of being *disconnected* from the world to which it is supposed to refer. Hibberd points out that the defence of knowledge claims as 'always/already' language-dependent leads to a kind of ontological dualism. For example, Gergen asserts that social constructionism (his term)

... is ontologically mute. Whatever is, simply is. There is no foundational description to be made about an 'out there' as opposed to an 'in here', about experience or material. Once we attempt to articulate 'what is there', however, we enter the world of discourse (1994: 72 in Hibberd 2005: 169).

Hibberd sees this as endorsing the view that all knowledge is limited to an internally self-referring world of discourse, a closed system of language – the 'world of discourse' – in which meaning cannot 'be grounded in anything external to that system' (2005: 169). For

Gergen, as for many psychologists and sociologists who endorse a newly minted version of relativist truth, we can only know things through the 'linguistic fore-structure' that mediates the enquirer and the object of knowledge. Even the most naïve student might ask: How then did we get to know this fore-structure? Was it pre-structured by some other mentalistic 'filter', and so on, *ad infinitum*? (This is not to deny, of course, that what people say and the circumstances in which they say it, are causally relevant to psychology and to social interactions. My point is that studying these aspects of language use need not presuppose an anti-realist epistemological position, cf. Halliday, discussed below).

The three linguistically based philosophical revisions I have discussed raise more empirical questions than I've had space to address: How could a baby learn a natural language, one might enquire of Gergen; one could ask Derrida how people could ever use language communicatively without releasing a never-ending river of connotations every time they speak. Of Chomsky, the question arises of how speakers could perform the computationally complex 'transformations' that psychologists interpreted as mental operations when they 'empiricised' his theory. Without rehearsing further logical or empirical obstacles to constructivism here, I want to emphasise that such questions highlight just how central language, discourse and semiotics became to debates in the Humanities and Social Sciences during the last third of the twentieth century. I believe they show that the 'linguistic turn' cultivated a peculiarly grandiose rejection of empirical language study by endorsing an anti-realist epistemology, one espoused through a multitude of 'theoretical' publications (Bell 2010).

##### 5. *Functionalist Linguistics – Epistemological Agnosticism*

Debates about language and epistemology are not necessarily discussions of actual linguistic phenomena. So, parallel to the grand

movements I've discussed, many linguists continued the modest yet rewarding study of how language is actually structured and used. The past forty years have seen a revolution at this level as well. Many continued to see linguistic communication as their object, and analysed the 'semiotic resources' (including language) that humans deploy when they share and transact meaning with others. Methodologically, the most radical of these turned out to be MAK (Michael) Halliday. He followed the tradition of Basil Bernstein and Dell Hymes by exploring language in use – language in social context, language as a means of communication, *language as one potentially causal aspect* of human interaction – in short, language as 'social semiotic'. Halliday was not concerned to effect some general intellectual revolution. He did not write about language as the key to unmasking the metaphysical pretensions of Western thought, nor about the innate neurological equipment that might pre-structure all natural languages. To the extent that Western philosophers explicitly influenced his approach it was British 'Speech Act' theorists such as J L Austin and H P Grice. Significantly, Austin's seminal work was titled *How to do things with words* (Austin 1955/1975)<sup>1</sup>.

Much of Michael Halliday's academic career was spent at the University of Sydney, home to deep traditions of realist philosophical analysis. 'Australian Materialism' and 'Sydney Realism' are names given to overlapping epistemological 'schools' that developed at the University of Sydney from the 1920s. Sydney Realists propose a version of 'direct' or 'situational' Realism that rejects all forms of idealism and mentalism insofar as these posit a non-relational view of knowledge and deny the reality of mind-independent situations that humans come to know. My discussion of relativist and idealist epistemologies above has drawn on the work of John Maze, perhaps the most brilliant of the Situational Realists to write about psychology and language during the past four decades. I have also abstracted some of Sydney-based Fiona Hibberd's arguments that highlight the logical problems that beset language-based social 'constructionism'



(which I've called 'constructivism', perhaps the more usual term in the Social Sciences).

Halliday sought to understand how human semiosis 'worked', language being one set of semiotic resources that allow meaning to be *realised* (made *actual* or *real*) between participants interacting in particular *social contexts*. He broadened the concept of 'text', but made its definition pragmatic rather than narrowly stipulative and fixed. Texts (units of meaning that could be abstracted for the purpose of analysis) were necessarily *contextual*. So linguistic elements could be studied in relation to others as their context, or vice-versa. Utterances were one of indefinitely many kinds of texts, distinguishable for the purpose of analysis. But semiotic processes were just that – events that occur between and amongst semiotic participants. Utterances are not reducible to cognitive pre-structures, nor do they encode mental phenomena that only the high priests of deconstruction can divine. They occur as real social processes; they do not illuminate some further level of reality (there are no good arguments for believing that 'levels' of reality can be coherently distinguished, anyway). So Halliday's 'Systemic Functional Semiotics' (SFS) can be judged 'realist' on a number of grounds. He allows that one of the three 'meta-functions' of semiosis (meaning making) involves representation of or reference to what he calls 'processes' (think verbs) and 'participants' (think noun phrases) that are user-independent, not themselves semiotic concepts. And, although many have employed his approach to mount what sound suspiciously like 'social constructivist' analyses, his theory does not imply that 'ideas' (either 'in the head' or outside, in 'texts') *create* 'reality'. Because semiotic events are actual situations and their textual products are real phenomena, they do not imply an idealist or relativist epistemology. At a general level, Halliday's tripartite functionalism relies only on an empirical (observation-and-generalisation) methodology, and hence assumes the conventionally realist ontology that empirical science generally presupposes.

Epistemologically and ontologically, one can read Halliday's 'default position' as pragmatic-realist: he described regularities in semiosis by assuming that the phenomena he analysed were actual situations or events and that they could be known objectively. One can describe how, and ask why, certain linguistic or other semiotic options are selected in certain contexts, taking into account social roles, situational factors, generic conventions, etc. Paradoxically, SFS illuminates the very issues that linguistic determinists and deconstructionists *misunderstood* – questions such as how social relations are implicated in all communication; how circumstances affect semiosis; how semiosis affects situations; how texts encode or realise sub-texts. And, extended beyond language, how *inter-modal* and *multi-modal* communication 'works' in various situations (as advertising, as web-pages, etc.).

Contrary to the theories I have discussed in previous sections, SFS stands or falls by *empirical* criteria. Semiosis is studied objectively – comparatively, historically, developmentally – in terms of Halliday's meta-functional analysis that subsumes formal lexico-grammatical analysis, for example. Theorising is 'low-level', pragmatic, comparative and testably empirical. As such, Halliday's Functionalism attends to observable aspects of actual semiotic relationships and situations. It provides theoretical tools and concepts that illuminate many non-linguistic semiotic systems, so a multitude of monographs and research papers have extended social semiotics to domains such as music, advertising, graphic lay-out and photographic representation, cartooning, and the 'grammar' of mediated interviews – to name but several. It is sharply ironic, given that Derrida's followers had claimed to excavate ideological-linguistic bedrock, that it was critical *functional* linguistic analyses (e.g., by Norman Fairclough and others) that most lucidly exposed how 'ideological' frames structure various social texts. Without resorting to metaphysical befuddlement, functional semioticians have helped to display forensically the symbolic machinery of power by examining particular communicative situations in detail.

SFS does not rest on a psychological model in the sense that it presupposes any particular concept of cognition as such. It does not 'explain' by reductively outlining the 'causes' of linguistic behaviour. But it does explain in another sense: it provides theoretically informed descriptions of interrelated semiotic variables or factors relevant to communicative encounters. Because it is based in part on contrastive concepts (e.g., the way participants are placed in visual advertising layout as 'given' rather than as 'new' information), SFS always emphasises the *contingency of choices of elements* and hence of their likely *communicative effect*. And it does so without assuming that language or any other semiotic resource is a closed system to which empirical truth is irrelevant. At a more mundane level, it avoids the mantra that 'language makes subjects', and allows that humans subjects make language by using its various resources to communicate with other humans – not too 'revolutionary' perhaps, but a good starting point for a coherent meta-theory.

### 6. A Realist's Conclusion

I have cited two 'Sydney Realists', John Maze and Fiona Hibberd, in my critique of the linguist Chomsky, the philosopher Derrida, and the psychologist Gergen. I endorsed a realist epistemological view that all theories of language purporting to explain 'how the mind works', or how language is encoded in the brain, insofar as they are 'relativist' and/or mentalistic, turn out to be logically incoherent. The question of their empirical truth cannot arise because they are predicated on the assumption that language cannot refer to knowable aspects of a mind-independent world.

I have argued, necessarily briefly, that several structuralist and post-structuralist theories centred on language are ultimately incoherent, idealist or self-refuting. In very different ways, Chomsky, Derrida

and Gergen perpetuate dualistic approaches to cognition. They misunderstand that language use must ultimately be referential, and they deny that knowledge is always relational. Language cannot be understood as a mental computational apparatus that is sufficient to generate infinitely many rule-based 'utterances' (Chomsky), as a mental form of indefinitely deferred meaning without 'positive' terms (Derrida), nor as a repository of representations that 'constructs' reality (Gergen). By contrast, because functionalist semiotic approaches assume an empirico-realist epistemology, I see them as productive – they allow empirical test. So it is appropriate that Michael Halliday worked at the faux Oxford University of Sydney for much of his illustrious career, because its Philosophy and Psychology schools have long promoted realist answers to fundamental epistemological questions.

I believe that the success of Linguistics as a field within semiotics during the past three decades has been the result of its modest meta-theoretical assumptions and hence its avoidance of dogmatic and general philosophical presumption. To understand how people use semiotic resources to convey meaning amongst themselves within particular kinds of social and textual contexts is ambition enough. Linguists need not commit to rationalism, constructivism, positivism, neo-behaviourism, nor, indeed, to any other fashionable or arcane metaphysical position.

Carl Bache's productive career has been spent arguing and writing about real linguistic matters, about the forms and purposes of actual language use. I think he has been wise to ignore the claims of the Grand Theorists who have dominated the Social Sciences during that period. While some of his colleagues and adversaries may still crave metaphysical support from the theorists I've discussed, they risk flying dangerous epistemological kites – dangerous because they are not tethered to the ground of reality. To turn de Saussure's terminology against all idealist linguistics: however high a *signified* may fly into the Danish clouds or the blue Antipodean sky, it does

not thereby change into a *signifier*. Like words themselves, kites aloft seem lighter than air, but they are not lighter than being.

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*Author's note*

**Carl Bache** has visited Sydney many times to research, to write and to present conference papers. Between trips to the beach he has occasionally engaged Michael Halliday in linguistic debate. I suspect that Carl has been influenced (perhaps against his better judgement) by the realist and pragmatic approach to language and philosophy that prevails in Sydney and to which Halliday has inadvertently contributed.

Throughout his career Carl has assiduously applied himself to the technical analysis of language, becoming a 'linguist's linguist'. He is keenly interested in studying language for its own sake, not as a pretext for grandiose theories of knowledge or society.

I don't think he's ever owned, let alone flown, a kite of any shape, either in Odense or in Sydney. But he owns a small boat, and I've spent an hour or two sailing with Carl on Kerteminde Fjord, near Odense. And I've walked with him and his family on the beach at Fyns Hoved. As professors are inclined to do, we've discussed linguistic matters on some of these enjoyable occasions.

Because I could never compete with Carl's linguistic expertise, I've contented myself with provoking him philosophically. Our many conversations reflect Carl's background as a student of English Linguistics and my education in the psychology of language, backed by realist philosophy at the University of Sydney.

I've written mainly about psychological and social aspects of language and communication in the context of Media Studies. My more general interest has been methodological and philosophical issues in the social sciences. My most recent book is *Confronting Theory – The Psychology of Cultural Studies* (2010).

**Notes**

1. Austin 1955 refers to the William James lectures which were published in 1962. 1975 refers to the edited version by Urmson and Sbisà.

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