Summer 1988

Reviewed works: The Philosophy of Language in Britain: Major Theories From Hobbes to Thomas Reid. by Stephen K. Land; The Figural and the Literal: Problems of Language in the History of Science and Philosophy, 1630-1800. by Andrew E. Benjamin; Geoffrey N. Cantor; John R. R. Christie

James C. McKusick
University of Montana - Missoula, mckusickj@umkc.edu

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eng_pubs

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
outside London, "scarcely stirred" (in John Cannon's words).

It should also be mentioned that Newman can be very dismissive of other scholars' work (characterized, in one instance, as "mere words and twaddle," p. 90). While this may make enjoyable reading (or writing) for some, such rhetoric is punctured by a more judicious assessment of what has and has not been accomplished. As mentioned above, nationalism has not been totally ignored by historians. Similarly, when Newman laments the absence of a "revisionist account of English social history in the eighteenth century, an account giving full emphasis to the social conflict that increasingly divided the country" (p. 90), one wonders what he thinks historians (or some of them) have been doing in the nearly twenty-five years since The Making of the English Working Class first appeared.

Newman is certainly right in drawing attention to the importance of nationalism in the period. His book's flaw is accepting a simplistic model of historical change. As Albert Hirschman wrote in The Passions and the Interests, "To portray a lengthy ideological change or transition as an endogenous process is of course more complex than to depict it as the rise of an independently conceived, insurgent ideology concurrent with the decline of a hitherto dominant ethic." Newman's picture is of the less complex sort. Once this is recognized, the book has much of importance to say, especially about the languages of politics in the later eighteenth century.

LAWRENCE E. KLEIN

University of Nevada, Las Vegas


Some of the most interesting and important recent work in the intellectual history of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has concerned itself with the philosophy of language in relation to science and literature. This kind of work promises a fresh understanding of the linguistic and figural basis of the conceptual categories employed by major philosophers during this period. It has become increasingly clear that speculation concerning the nature and origin of language is not merely a digression or afterthought in the work of Locke, Berkeley, Adam Smith, or Thomas
Two recent studies examine the various ways in which problems of language are intrinsic to the era’s most vital intellectual issues.

Stephen Land’s *The Philosophy of Language in Britain* examines the work of several major British philosophers, focusing particularly on Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Adam Smith, Lord Monboddo, James Harris, and Thomas Reid. Land tracks down virtually everything these authors had to say about language, and he attempts a comprehensive statement of their linguistic theories while also remaining sensitive to the context and occasion of each passage. The declared intention of this study is to provide a close analysis of each major theory, “with comparison and cross-reference among them on basic issues, so that the outlines and fundamental assumptions of each can be displayed” (p. 2). The underlying assumption of this methodology seems to be that such close analysis of each author must precede the study of historical relations and the development of ideas from one author to another. And indeed there has never been such a painstaking analysis of what these authors had to say on the subject of language. But the book’s methodology remains open to question on the ground that there is no such thing as ahistorical understanding, since any attempt to abstract the pure ideational content of a given theory must be conditioned by its own anachronistic frame of reference. *The Philosophy of Language in England* is strongest when it situates its chosen authors in a specific historical context, and weakest when it seeks to assimilate their linguistic speculations to modern theories of structuralism and generative grammar.

The chapter on Locke illustrates the strengths of Land’s method. This chapter seeks to refute the conventional historiographical view that Locke’s philosophy of language belongs to an empiricist tradition radically opposed to Cartesian rationalism. On the contrary, says Land, Locke’s linguistic theory is entirely compatible with the doctrines of rationalism, particularly as represented by the *Grammaire* of Port-Royal (1660), which sought to illustrate the innate logical faculties of the human mind through the descriptive categories of universal grammar. Although Locke denies the existence of innate ideas, he acknowledges the universality of logical faculties, and he regards language as an index of those faculties in much the same way as the universal grammarians. Language, for Locke, “is essentially a reflection of its ideational base” (p. 32). Locke explores the consequences of this view in the third book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), which develops a theory of language that Land terms “semantic idealism.” The major premise of Locke’s theory, according to Land, is “that the meaning of a word depends upon the corresponding idea in the mind of a speaker” (p. 59). Words do not refer directly to things, but only to ideas. As a result, it becomes very difficult to tell whether a word has the same meaning for two different speakers, since my idea of “gratitude” may not be the same as yours, and we can hardly resolve our differences by pointing to a concrete physical object. Only by rigorous logical analysis and careful definition can we reach agreement on the meaning of words. Land places Locke convincingly in the rationalist
tradition of linguistic theory, since for Locke the ultimate criterion of lexical reference is not empirical but logical.

The chapter on Berkeley, on the other hand, exemplifies the main weakness of Land’s method. This chapter, entitled “Berkeleyan Theory: Structuralism” develops a reading of Berkeley that is comprehensive and well-grounded in Berkeley’s scattered reflections on language, but depends for its major distinctions and emphases on modern structural linguistics. According to Land, Berkeley developed the conceptual basis for “the first significantly non-Aristotelian grammar in the Western world” (p. 129). “In his work, almost two centuries before Saussure, we encounter a recognizably structural approach to meaning—a theory in which words signify ideas and the meaning of an idea is determined by its place in an ordered structure or ‘language of ideas’” (p. 130). The first half of the analogy—that “words signify ideas”—is hardly unique to Berkeley, and must be derived from Locke. The second half of the analogy—that “the meaning of an idea is determined by its place in an ordered structure”—is merely a consequence of Berkeley’s premise that all words are arbitrary signs. For Berkeley, an idea must exist in differential relation to other ideas, since it has only an arbitrary connection with the thing it denotes by a word. But the doctrine of linguistic arbitrariness may also be found in Locke, or in Aristotle for that matter. There may be striking resemblances between Berkeley and Saussure, but these are best explained as a result of their common participation in a tradition of Lockean linguistics that places great stress on linguistic arbitrariness and the relation between words and ideas.

The Philosophy of Language in England remains a remarkably informative and useful book, particularly because of its detailed, rigorous analyses of particular authors. It seeks to redeem from obscurity the linguistic speculations of James Harris, whose Hermes (1751) was in its time the most widely-read British contribution to universal grammar, and Lord Monboddo, whose six-volume treatise Of the Origin and Progress of Language (1773–92) proposed a persuasive alternative to Condillac and Rousseau on the origin of language. Land also examines the theories of Adam Smith, whose Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages (1761) developed a genetic model to explain the differentiation of the parts of speech, and Thomas Reid, whose Inquiry into the Human Mind (1764) and Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man (1785) advanced a “common sense” philosophy that posited cognitive universals in order to refute the skepticism of Hume. Linguistic universals provide Reid with a major source of evidence for these cognitive universals.

Land’s approach to these theorists might be termed “reconstructive,” since he seeks to describe the systematic body of thought that underlies their often fragmentary and sometimes incoherent statements about language. His discussion of Adam Smith, for instance, attempts to “iron out” apparent contradictions in order to yield “a highly coherent theory” (p. 141). A radically different approach is taken by a collection of essays
entitled *The Figural and the Literal: Problems of Language in the History of Science and Philosophy, 1630–1800*. These essays are avowedly deconstructionist in their approach to linguistic theory in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Taking their cue from Jacques Derrida's *White Mythology* (1971) and Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979), they seek to unravel the neat distinction between literal and figural discourse in order to demonstrate the essentially rhetorical status of logical categories. Rather than “ironing out” inconsistencies, they acknowledge these as ineluctable moments of self-difference within the text of philosophy. As John Christie puts it in his excellent introduction, this method of reading “recognises as problems, as areas of opacity, what otherwise [would] remain transparent and invisible to interpretive understanding” (p. 2).

Within this general interpretive framework, the essays in this volume develop a variety of approaches to the problematic status of writing and rhetoric in science and philosophy. *The Figural and the Literal* is most interesting in its implications for the history of science, a discipline that is currently being reconceived under the influence of Thomas Kuhn and the more general rebirth of interest in the figural basis of scientific discourse. The freshest and most provocative of these essays seek to subvert the old-fashioned positivist view of “progress” by rereading scientific texts with an eye to their central metaphors and discursive strategies. Less successful, on the whole, are the essays on canonical texts by Descartes, Locke, Diderot, and Hume, largely because the figural basis of this material has already been fully exposed by Derrida and de Man.

Two of these essays deal with the establishment of a distinctive scientific discourse among the first members of the Royal Society. Jan Golinski's essay, “Robert Boyle: Skepticism and Authority in Seventeenth-Century Chemical Discourse,” examines the role of eyewitness testimony in Boyle's accounts of chemical experiments. Boyle's new science of matter, as expounded in *The Sceptical Chymist* (1661), relies for its discursive authority on the direct narration of actual experiments, supported by eyewitnesses, and seeks to undermine the credibility of more traditional accounts of abstract chemical principles. Golinsky argues that Boyle's much-vaunted “experimental method” is as much a textual strategy as it is an empirical practice. Boyle's colleague John Wilkins, a fellow-member of the Royal Society, is the subject of Tony Davies's essay, “The Ark in Flames: Science, Language, and Education in Seventeenth-Century England.” John Wilkins shared Boyle's dissatisfaction with traditional modes of scientific discourse and invented a new philosophical language that would enable the communication of experimental results to bypass the troubling medium of ordinary language. Wilkins's *Essay Towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668) is utopian in its desire to replace spoken language with an international scientific notation that would be absolutely precise and unambiguous. Davies claims that this utopian scheme subverts the materialist and realist epistemology of the Royal Society, since “it is not nature that is 'real' in Wilkins' book but his invented language” (p.
For Wilkins the authority of scientific discourse depends on a textual strategy that rejects spoken language in favor of a taxonomic system that can exist only in writing.

The nature of scientific discourse is further examined by Geoffrey Cantor in his essay, "Weighing Light: The Role of Metaphor in Eighteenth-Century Optical Discourse." Isaac Newton's *Opticks* (1706) introduced the proposition that light rays are "very small bodies emitted from shining surfaces" (p. 132), and throughout the eighteenth century this "corpuscular hypothesis" was an accepted part of scientific discourse. Cantor traces the vagaries of this hypothesis, arguing that the metaphor of "particles" was constitutive of scientific discourse, since there was no "literal" expression to which it referred. The corpuscular hypothesis was also generative, since it led to further experiments to determine the mass, size, and velocity of the supposed particles of light. Cantor concludes that the literal/figural distinction is inadequate to distinguish scientific from literary discourse, since both are vitally metaphorical, and he notes the crossing-over of scientific metaphor into William Blake's poem, "Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau," which satirizes "Newton's Particles of Light" as a gross misunderstanding of the spirituality of light in "the beams divine" (p. 133). Cantor's essay points the way for future research into the problematic relation between science and literature in the eighteenth century.

John Christie's essay, "Adam Smith's Metaphysics of Language," is likewise preoccupied with the crossing-over of metaphors between different types of discourse. Christie examines *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) from the standpoint of Adam Smith's earlier essay on the formation of languages (1761), arguing that "Smith conceived of economic development . . . through a model developed in his study of the systematic signification inherent in science and language" (p. 221). Smith describes the development of the parts of speech as the result of incremental innovations by successive generations of speakers. Just as language develops in communicative power through the invention of the parts of speech, so too does the market increase in size and complexity through the gradual division of labor. Smith's economic theory, in short, is based on the same model of social development as his theory of language. The larger historical implication of this argument would seem to be that Smith's economic theory (and, by extension, the ideology of capitalism) is grounded in a metaphor derived from Smith's inquiry into the origin of language.

Christie's essay tends to support the view that linguistic speculation emerges as a dominant locus of cultural and ideological formation in the mid-eighteenth century. In this way his essay enables us to reexamine the importance of linguistic theory for intellectual history. The two books discussed here are among the best recent studies exploring the significance of speculation concerning the nature and origin of language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The growing interest of scholars in the
history of linguistic theory will ultimately provide a more adequate understanding of the complex relations among the discourses of science, philosophy, economics, and literature.

JAMES C. MCKUSICK

University of Maryland, Baltimore County


Glendower: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.
Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call them?

I Henry IV, III,1: 52-4.

On first reading, American Silhouettes is liable to seem expository rather than analytical, a deft contribution to a minor genre, a set of profiles artfully cut from black paper for our historical pleasure and quiet edification, contemporary criticism's version of fancy, in other words, an eighteenth-century performance blinking in our odd light. Were this the case, I would have little to object to (the red dye on the cover comes off on one's hands), and the rest would be summary. In a series of six vignettes featuring five focal figures, Albert Furtwangler sketches the American Founders—Franklin, Adams, Washington, Jefferson, and Marshall—vexed by ideological crisis, and responding with more assured and coherent understandings of themselves. These enhanced self-conceptions then serve as examplary public models, to a certain extent for the Founders' contemporaries, perhaps more deeply so, Furtwangler suggests, for us, since we also inhabit a confused time. Read this way, American Silhouettes supplies a cogent and unusually intimate portrait of the men in their time, a frequently moving portrait, most powerfully so in the chapter on John Adams and the Novanglus/Massachusettensis debate; less so in the chapters on Jefferson and Franklin, where the real person seems to remain outside the circle of Furtwangler's light, though this is not due to some flagging of his sympathetic intelligence. Rather, like Melville and numerous others, Furtwangler is stopped at the border of the real Franklin, a border Franklin drew and continues to guard.

Furtwangler is a subtle writer, though, and there is more than group portraiture going on in this book. The underlying argument is introduced in the subtitle: Rhetorical Identities of the Founders. Contemporary decorum has presumably dictated the substitution of Founders for Founding Fathers, but the latter term would be more appropriate, given the particular kind of problematic origination the book addresses. (Furtwangler uses