

ON 'A SEARCHING REVIEW'

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In 1993, Gunther Kress published the paper 'Cultural considerations in linguistic description'. The paper was the first Pitt Corder Lecture. Presumably, then, the views it expresses are ones that are not unique to Kress.¹ The paper is notable for a casual dismissal of mainstream theoretical linguistics. It is also notable for its vagueness, for its unsupported assertions, and for certain statements to which there are obvious objections. I will try to justify this assessment in the following paragraphs.

Kress begins by quoting Pitt Corder remark that 'I am enough of a purist to believe that 'Applied Linguistics' presupposes 'linguistics'; that one cannot apply what one does not possess' (1973: 9). This suggests that applied linguistics must draw on what is normally seen as linguistics. Kress goes on to make it clear that this is not his view. Rather he believes that applied linguistics needs a new theory of language, and that it can provide such a theory itself. He remarks that '[i]n very many ways, it is here, in our work in Applied Linguistics that a new theory of language is being produced' (1993: 5). He also says that 'I am certain that by the end of this century we will have produced more than the outlines of a theory adequate to our present tasks' (1993: 22). One wonders whether he thinks this prediction has been borne out.

Following Pitt Corder, Kress uses the term 'linguistic linguistics' for mainstream theoretical linguistics, 'an approach which focusses on formal properties of language'. He remarks that it is 'essential to subject linguistic linguistics to a searching review' (1993: 2). It turns out, however, that his idea of a searching review is one which does not mention any examples of linguistic research or any living linguists (he does mention Saussure). It is rather like a searching review of the film industry which mentions no films and no film actors except Charlie Chaplin.

One objection that Kress advances against 'linguistic linguistics' is that it is an 'a-social theory of language'. There is some truth to this. The main focus of mainstream work is I-language, the speaker's mental grammar, and it is standardly assumed that mental grammars do not include social information. Rather, this is seen as something separate interacting with purely grammatical information. A number of researchers, e.g. Hudson (1996, 7.3), Bender (1999), and Paolillo (2000), have argued against this view that social information is inseparable from purely grammatical information. It may be, then, that there is an important criticism of mainstream work here. It seems, however, that Kress wants to say much more than this.

Elaborating on the basic criticism, Kress claims that the a-social nature of mainstream linguistics 'produces normative theories and makes it into a normative discipline: whether it does so via the social categories of *convention*, or *appropriateness* or *institution*, or does so via psychologically-oriented explanations based on notions of

mental structures, cognitive schemata, etc.’ (1993: 5). It is not at all clear what this means. One possibility is that he is suggesting that mainstream work is covertly prescriptivist. This charge has been made before, for example in the writings of Roy Harris.² As far as I can see, there is no basis for the charge. Certainly Kress presents none.

Kress also remarks that ‘[q]uite plainly, most of the questions presently dealt with in psycholinguistics, or in cognitive linguistics, or in Applied Linguistics, need to be dealt with in any account of language - but seen as culturally and socially produced’ (1993: 6) He does not indicate what questions he has in mind or what he means by ‘culturally and socially produced’. He apparently believes that somebody is doing something wrong, but since he doesn’t say who or what, there is really nothing to discuss here.

Kress goes on to remark that ‘linguistic linguistics’ cannot provide ‘any revealing account of the production of text’ (1993: 6). He is clearly right here for the simple reason that no linguistic theory could provide a revealing account of the production of text. A text is presumably any piece of speech or writing which has some degree of coherence. Thus, texts will include the American Declaration of Independence, *Hamlet*, an episode of *Eastenders*, the words on a tombstone or a beer mat, an advert for soap powder, what I said to my neighbour yesterday, etc, etc. The idea that some theory could provide a revealing account of the production of all these things is bizarre. There are, of course, people who are concerned with some of them. Thus, there are political historians who are interested in the production of the American Declaration of Independence and similar documents and literary historians who are interested in the production of *Hamlet* and other literary works. Does Kress wish to argue that some kind of linguist could do a better job? Surely not.

Since the idea that linguistics should provide an account of the production of text seems so obviously absurd, it is natural to wonder if Kress perhaps meant something else. Perhaps he really meant that linguistics should explain the linguistic features of texts. In fact, there is an obvious explanation for the linguistic features of a text: that they are the features that the speaker/writer judged would be most likely to convey her intended meaning. Of course, we could ask why particular features are likely to convey the intended meaning, and in some cases linguistics might be able to say something useful. Linguistics might help if we ask why a passive sentence rather than an active sentence is used in some position, or why we have a cleft sentence rather than the related simple sentence somewhere, or why we have one discourse connective rather than another. But in some cases linguistics cannot help. Kress highlights the fact that what some refer to as the white ‘settlement’ of Australia others refer to as the white ‘invasion’. If we ask why some use one term and others the the other, the obvious answer is that some believe one term is more accurate while the others believe that the other is more accurate. We could go on to ask which is in fact that the more appropriate, but then we would need a historian, not a linguist.³

A second broad criticism of mainstream linguistics is that it is a-historical. Kress writes that ‘[I]inguistic linguistics remains an a-historical enterprise, focused on structure or

system rather than on the production or changes of the systems or structures' (1993: 8). It is far from clear what he means here. If the production of the systems refers to language acquisition then this has been a major focus of attention within mainstream linguistics. If changes of the systems refers to historical changes these too have been an important focus of attention.

Kress goes on to consider the quite different ways in which a particular story is presented in two different newspapers. This leads him to conclude that 'the hitherto accepted model of the autonomous, homogeneous linguistic system, with its core of syntax and phonology, can no longer be sustained' (1993: 13). It is quite unclear why he thinks the data he cites justify this conclusion. It is unclear in fact whether he has any idea what mainstream linguists mean when they claim that there is an autonomous linguistic system. The reference to a 'homogeneous' system is particularly puzzling since mainstream linguists generally see the linguistic system as modular, hence non-homogeneous. Perhaps he remembered Chomsky's famous reference to 'a completely homogeneous speech community' (1965: 3) and got confused.

Next, Kress suggests that '[i]ndividuals experience these texts in their social occasions of production and from that experience build up particular representations of what 'their' language is. This is not a comfortable view and has effects right at the level of syntax' (1993: 13). In support of this contention he considers a newspaper story about a boy who 'was taught on his own because his parents could not afford a uniform'. He asserts that some readers will treat *afford* as a transitive verb while others will treat it as an intransitive verb. What he actually shows, however, is that some readers will interpret the subject of *afford* as agentive while others will not. It seems, then, that he understands the terms transitive and intransitive quite differently from most mainstream linguists.

Kress also suggests that 'the theoretical linguistic commonsense continues to be that all language users have access in the same way to the same language system' (1993: 15). He provides no evidence for this claim. Essentially, he is claiming that theoretical linguists are not aware of the existence of dialect variation. Typically, he presents no evidence for this contention.

Two pages later, Kress asserts that '[t]he language of a society which has been characterized by structures of institutionalised differences of power along lines of class and gender, among others, is necessarily gendered, and 'classed' To ignore this history and its effects is to leave language and linguistic theorizing in the domain of past and still existing power distributions, *and* as one of its potent supports' (1993: 17). Mainstream linguistics does not concern itself with these matters. Thus, Kress is claiming that mainstream work is a 'potent support' of 'existing power distributions'. It is hard to take this idea seriously. Would Kress claim that any research in any discipline which does not attend to issues of class or gender is a 'potent support' of 'existing power distributions'? If not, why is linguistics different? And if we are such a potent support for the status quo, how come they don't give us more money?⁴

Later, Kress suggests that ‘... changes to syntax have to be explained from a social/textual point of view’ (1993: 18) It is not at all clear what this means. What, for example, would a social/textual approach to the loss of verb-second in English look like and how would it be better than mainstream approaches? In the absence of answers to such questions, it is hard to take his remark seriously. It would be more plausible to suggest that changes to lexicon ‘have to be explained from a social/textual point of view’. Certain changes to the lexicon clearly have a social explanation. There is an obvious social explanation for the fact that English has extensive terminology relating to computers nowadays but had none a hundred years ago. However, there is no obvious social explanation for some lexical changes. Consider, for example, the change of certain elements from verbs to auxiliaries in the history of English.

One other remark of Kress’s deserves some comment. Early in the paper, he suggests that ‘we’ (presumably applied linguists) are ‘nearer to seeing language as unitary phenomenon’ (1993: 2). He calls language a ‘social practice’ (1993: 8). It seems, then, that he sees language as the practice of speaking and writing. The idea that this practice is a unitary phenomenon is extraordinary. Speaking and writing have different properties, which must be explained in different ways. Consider a concrete example. A man is speaking. His sentences are consistently verb-final, his words are slurred, his speech is punctuated by yawns, and it is entirely concerned with football. Each of these facts calls for a different kind of explanation. In all probability, his sentences are consistently verb-final because he is speaking an SOV language such as Japanese or Turkish, his words are slurred because he is drunk, his speech is punctuated by yawns because he is tired, and his speech is entirely concerned with football because he is a football fan. All this seems rather obvious. It is very odd, then, that Kress believes that language in his sense is a unitary phenomenon.

If the foregoing criticisms are sound, this is a deeply flawed paper. How did such a paper come to be written? The obvious suggestion is that it was written for an audience who would not question a casual dismissal of mainstream linguistics, who would not ask what was meant by various claims or what the evidence was for various propositions. I suspect, then, that it tells us something about British applied linguistics.

There is much that is unclear in the paper but one thing that is clear is that Kress is not interested in the questions that mainstream linguists are interested in. He is interested in the role of linguistic communication in society and in particular its role in supporting or challenging the status quo. Something like the sociology of linguistic communication would be an obvious label for such work. Why, then, does Kress want to call such work linguistics? And why does he feel the need to dismiss mainstream linguistics? Presumably he sees the term linguistics as a valuable one and he wants to appropriate it for his own use. I don’t think we should let him.

FOOTNOTES

1. It is clear, however, that some applied linguists are critical of some of his work. Thus, Widdowson (1998) includes some strong criticism of the ideas of Hodge and Kress (1993).
2. See Borsley and Newmeyer (1997) for some discussion.
3. Interestingly, Chomsky (1986: 278-9) discusses the superficially similar question of how American involvement in South Vietnam has been labelled in mainstream US journalism and scholarship. He notes that this is never referred to as 'the US invasion of South Vietnam', which he argues would be appropriate. However, he does not imagine that he is doing linguistics when he discusses this matter.
4. Obviously, the best known figure in mainstream linguistics is Chomsky, and of course he is also one of the most famous radical intellectuals in the world. Thus, Kress is committed to the interesting idea that one of the most famous radical intellectuals does academic work which is a 'potent support' of 'existing power distributions'. One wonders whether he thinks Chomsky is a knave or a fool.

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