More importantly, perhaps, the work on categorisation discussed here has a relevance to literary theory and aesthetics which has not, to my knowledge, been so far considered. Rosch and likewise Putnam (whose work is discussed in Chapter 6) argue that the use of prototypes or stereotypes in our categorial thinking is not an unfortunate aberration, but actually necessary and central to it. Hence, we could reasonably expect literary and other artistic works both to deploy stereotypes as exemplars of a category, but also expect that those literary works which set out to defamiliarise or estrange us from objects will deploy peripheral or doubtful members of a category to focus our attention on that category. So, for instance, in Thomas Keneally's Schindler's Ark, Oskar Schindler is not a prototypical moral hero; and an Allen Jones table is doubtful as between a table and a metaphor for the position of women. Again, the effect of a Borges taxonomy on Foucault (Foucault, 1970, p. xv) occurs, as he recognises, just because the alleged taxonomy cannot be made to fit the pattern with which we are familiar and which, Berlin and Rosch argue, is universal: animals cannot, except in fiction, be categorised into '(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame ..., (n) that from a long way off look like flies'.

E.D.B,  
University of Sussex.

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References


Experimental psychologists are often accused of using elaborate laboratory methodology to arrive at simple common sense conclusions. Nobody should accuse James Deese of this, however, since his methods of studying language production are both simple and common sense. Most psychologists of language construct models of how we speak and understand, derive predictions from their models, and test the predictions in experiments. Deese listens to ordinary language, and simply describes what he hears.

"Thought into Speech" reports a lengthy project in which Deese (who teaches psycholinguistics at the University of Virginia) and his assistants recorded, transcribed and classified some 25 hours of spontaneous speech. This quite ordinary and unelaborate procedure led them to a number of common sense conclusions, for example: speech communicates not only literal messages but also covert ones; extra-linguistic devices such as pausing can serve linguistic functions and pragmatic functions simultaneously; syntactic devices such as choice of tense can be used to express speaker attitude. The book reports no laboratory experiments (although there are some simple confirmations of common sense predictions, for instance that long, syntactically complex sentences are harder to recall verbatim than shorter, simpler ones) and no instrumental measurements (although pause durations were measured in a small sample of utterances). The analysis is descriptive, and the descriptions are subjective.

Nineteenth-century scientists had to settle for such research methods by default; so do researchers in underfunded laboratories still; but Deese embraces them by choice. He feels that the experimental tradition in psychology has told
us "virtually nothing about how language is processed", and that current psycholinguistics is as sterile as its predecessor in the psychology of language, verbal learning theory. Deese's solution is a voluntary return to nineteenth century methodology, importing from the twentieth century only the tape recorder, so that he can listen to the same speech repeatedly.

Nineteenth century researchers, of course, did not produce detailed models of cognitive functioning; and nor does Deese. He has "little confidence in formal models except as kinds of rough guides"; he feels that psychology's goal of understanding mental processes is "hopelessly unattainable", and that the only prospect of future insights lies with neuropsychology. That is, he has knowingly departed from current psychological practice not only in his choice of methodology, but in his philosophy of science - he opts for a reductionist position, in which very few cognitive psychologists of today would care to join him.

As if philosophical and methodological isolationism were not enough, Deese even seems to be trying to warn off potential readers - he explicitly suggests that his observations may have only very limited generalisability. "Thought into Speech" is subtitled "Psychology of a Language" because, its author repeatedly warns us, it describes not the use of language in general, but the use of one register (public debate) of one dialect (standard educated) of one regional variant (American) of one language (English). Deese hesitates to extend his conclusions to other registers of the same dialect, let alone to other languages.

But is speaking American English really so unlike speaking other languages? For instance, is it really so unlikely that multiple functions of hesitation pauses might be characteristic of other languages? Luckily, relevant evidence is available. Deese is not the only researcher to have undertaken to describe a large corpus of spontaneous speech in recent years; a similar project is, for instance, the Survey of Spoken English based at University College London under the directorship of Randolph Quirk. Quirk, in collaboration with Swedish colleagues, has made his transcribed material publicly available (Svartvik & Quirk, 1980), so that there are already many studies in print which have made use of it. These studies suggest that Deese's modesty is unnecessary - his speakers behaved just like the London speakers.

One exception lies in Deese's prosodic descriptions of his material. In many ways this too parallels previous accounts: for example, he found topic shifts ("new paragraphs") to be typically accompanied by raised pitch and amplitude, as did the instrumental measurements of Edinburgh speech reported by Brown, Currie and Kenworthy in 1980, and of Boston speech by Menn and Boyce in 1982. But the intonation contours which Deese heard at the ends of sentences seem to have been unusual. At the ends of sentences and phrases speakers' intonation tends to drop towards their baseline; this is known to prosody researchers as the declination effect. If speakers want to signal something special, e.g. a question, they can do it by using rising pitch. Yet in marked contrast to the results of previous studies, Deese reports that 42% of his speakers' sentences ended with neither falling nor rising pitch. Thus it would appear that speakers of educated American English engaging in public debate are prosodically quite like other speakers - except that they fail to show a declination effect.

This seems, alas, rather unlikely. Instrumental studies have never found a high proportion of level contours. It might therefore be necessary to take at least the prosodic descriptions which Deese reports with some caution. This caveat highlights the problem with all such large, descriptive studies. If the entire corpus is published for all to exploit, there is no doubt that the work is useful; the volume of research which the Survey of Spoken English has inspired, for instance, is adequate testimony that linguistics considers Quirk's project to have made a valuable contribution. If the raw data remain unavailable, however, the reader can only gauge the reliability of the published summary descriptions by comparing them with previous studies. Where they replicate previous results, little has been learned. Where they fail to replicate previous results, one must choose, on some principled basis, which result to believe. Many will
base their choice on methodology, preferring to believe results from replicable, controlled, or instrumental studies over subjective descriptions. Thus it is almost inevitable that a book like Deese's will have little impact on its field. This is a pity, for a great deal of hard work has gone into the project. Perhaps it is not too late to encourage Deese to keep up the good work a little longer and either publish the corpus material, or buttress his subjective descriptions with more objective measurements. He might also be encouraged to flesh out many of his brief observations about the nature of speech production. For example, Deese's corpus apparently contains a large number of very wordy utterances, in which embedded clause follows embedded clause. Syntactic elaboration of this kind is deplored by prose stylists. Deese rejects such a blanket prohibition - the rule-makers have not recognised, he claims, that wordiness can serve to indicate politeness. Deese himself seems not to have recognised what is most interesting about this observation, namely that polite wordiness is more common in spoken language, and that this is one way in which speech differs considerably from writing. The present material could well have shed light on the ways in which effective uses of spoken versus written language differ. Like the book as a whole, this is something of a missed opportunity.

Note

This is an expanded version of a review which originally appeared in the Times Higher Education Supplement, June 1984.

References


Commentaries on structuralist and poststructuralist poetics can be divided into two categories: there are those which impose rigorous philosophical demands on the reader by attempting to present the theoretical issues on a level which approaches the difficulty of the original discourse, and there are those, like Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's, which seek to transcribe post-Saussurean thought into more recognisable and accessible terms.

Student-orientated commentaries, especially shorter ones, inevitably tend towards the latter course. The problem with explaining new and difficult theoretical positions lies in the nature of explanation: to present something in intelligible, familiar terms is always, to a certain extent, to recuperate it into the idiom of orthodoxy. Radical new ideas can only exist as footnotes to our old ones, so commentary on them serves to soften their impact. Catherine Belsey confronts this problem in the introduction to her New Accents book Critical Practice: 'The undertaking (making new theories accessible without transcribing them back into everyday discourse) is in a sense contradictory: to explain is inevitably to reduce the unfamiliarity and so to reduce the challenge of the post-Saussurean positions'.

As a series, New Accents has focussed on this recent (largely structuralist