

By the way

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A n t o n i B u c h n e r

Language speaks, not I. It would be funny to believe that a vise is turning the screw. From the point of view of language we are just its instruments, transmitters. The more you believe you are simply a user, the more you are exposed to being used. At any rate we are first of all trying to speak correctly.

What is language speaking? It speaks by itself, i.e. it repeats its grammar and its syntax, keeps watching whether an adjective is after a noun or before it, whether the dots are in their proper places. Sense and meaning depend obviously not on the language itself but on the corresponding reality. But what is real?

No reality proceeds in closed sentences or chapters, and no structure of the universe corresponds to the structure of sentences with their “if”, “when” and “because”. The most curious things happen after the pages of a book are turned and the cover is closed. Section is always vivisection. Mythology is present in the endeavour to tell the truth. Ergo: a text corresponds to no reality.

So we let the things happen, and use the form “it is”, e.g.: the composer XY was born in 1672. It is then called “fact”. Objective, impersonal, spiritless, stiff upper lip. But what about anything more than “facts”, that for themselves, as one knows, are objectionable?

Generally language is violated in two ways:

The first one is when somebody tries to speak or write about something special. You believe you write what you know or at least you know what you write. Do you? It is practically impossible to delineate and to distinguish what you know from what you don't know. Nobody is inclined to admit that he or she doesn't know the difference, because unknown is unknown. The unknown has no limits. But you still keep writing because you have made up your mind to write about something special (for example about music).

Repetitions are unavoidable, translations pretend to be faithful, things called new don't have a word for them in one language, names and structures are borrowed from another language. Passive or active voices are easily confused with each other. Writing or speaking is often fighting

with the language, sometimes against the language. The case of “automatic speech” confirms rather than denies this observation. Obviously other criteria than its own determine the importance of a text.

The second violation is the claim of authorship, putting a signature to a text. An honest poet declared: What can I answer to the question “How are you”. “I don’t know. Today I suddenly realized that almost everything I’m saying is a quotation, literal or remembered. I’m quoting words of my spouse, my father, the TV, my grandmother, today’s or yesterday’s newspaper”. Some of these quotations are called “jokes”, told and retold. Other collections of quotations are called “scientific”: a work of accumulating data taken from different sources. “How can I put my signature to such a text”, asked the poet. How can I use the pronoun “I”? And who is authorized to say “we”?

Of course, there are also improper applications of language. Language can easily be misused for banking, commerce, in the natural sciences, as an addition to mathematical, physical or chemical symbols. Even music gets along with notes and can be understood without words. Practicing music you hold your tongue, unless you are singing words, without interpretation, unless you are acting.

But maybe – it is the other way around: it is literature (both prose and poetry), with its exaggerations and extrapolations, that is abusing language, whose essence and origin are these simple words, actual gestures, such as “and” and “plus” or “minus” and “up”, the by-words and shortcuts. So the past is present in the presence.

And the final word is only imaginary.

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