REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

The Linguistic Wars

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> *The Linguistic Wars,* Randy Allen Harris, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 356 pages.

THIS IS NOT A BOOK ABOUT TECHNICAL WRITING and it is not a book that those concerned about technical writing should necessarily read. However, technical writing instructors will find it a stunning example of erudition and clarity. It renders extremely difficult specialized knowledge accessible to the general educated reader.

What does this book do? In his Preface Harris describes the book as follows: "This book — 'popular science' look at linguistics by way of narrating an influential dispute in the sixties and seventies — attempts to clarify what linguists do, why they do it, and why everyone else should care about what they do." This suggests that the discussion of the dispute between Noam Chomsky, on the one hand, and the generative semanticists — Ross, Lakoff, Postal, McCawley — on the other, is somehow secondary to the discussion of linguistics in general. Yet I found that the dynamics of the dispute (which Paul Postal labelled "the linguistic wars") and the linguistic questions it raises dominate the general discussion of linguistics. What is so special about this particular dispute? First, it encompasses some of the key linguists and key theories in syntax/semantics in the two decades that witnessed the most significant developments in linguistics in this century. Second, it illustrates how paradigm shifts are intertwined with the personalities and politics of the researchers who create these shifts. Third, it really was a "war" that reverberated throughout linguistic conferences and publications.

Harris certainly captures the excitement of this extremely heady time in modern linguistics. But does he present the dispute fairly? I think he does, though as one who lost her linguistic head to Chomsky's *Aspects of the*

Theory of Syntax I felt that the generative semanticists got rather more credit than their work deserved. And my reaction is probaby further evidence of the emotionally charged responses to theoretical questions that were typical of this era.

Generally this book is extremely well written. Harris' explanations of linguistic points are always accurate and remarkably clear. If some general readers find it tough going in places, it is not because of Harris, but because of the difficulty of the material he is explaining. His accounts of the arguments between the key players are lively and to the point and provide the specialist reader with many details that were certainly not general knowledge outside the "inner circle." Not all readers, however, will like Harris' tendency to intrude and to shift register abruptly, as in the following passage about how Chomsky introduced transformations to complement phrase structure rules (the "they" in the passage):

> That is, they may be adequate as flat descriptions of the data, in the way that randomly ordered lists adequately describe all the elements of a compound, but they lack the simplicity and concision found in a chemical formula.
>
> Lo, in the east, a transformation.
>
> Several transformations, in fact; a small flock; and Chomsky shows how they can, rather effortlessly, clean up after phrase structure analyses.
>
> (p. 43)

There is a similar shift when Harris describes the response of linguists to A.S.P. Woodhouse's criticism of structuralists' attitudes to correctness as follows :

> Linguists responded like chimpanzees waving their scientific genitalia from the other side of a watering hole, as in the exclamatory polemics of Hall's *Leave Your Language Alone!* (1950) (p. 75)

But these are minor quibbles. This wonderful book is a tour de force of scholarship and a magnificent demonstration of a talent for synthesis and clarity. To present a linear account of the central developments in syntax/ semantics in these two decades would be a formidable task, but to do so while also analyzing the clashes of personalities must have been extremely daunting. A very crude measure of the scholarly scope of this work is the fact that of the book's 356 pages, fully 50 are notes and 30 are "works cited."

What is particularly charming is the ease with which Harris also draws on or alludes to various other sources throughout the book (*Hamlet*, Confucius, Voltaire, Huxley, Heraclitus).

As a study of paradigm shifts in modern syntax/semantics, this book is ideal for those interested in intellectual history. However, it is probably best suited to those who lived through this period and current students of linguistics who can gain from it an amazingly rich understanding of the most important period of twentieth century linguistics.