Review of David Justice, The Semantics of Form in Arabic, in the Mirror of European Languages.

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For all its many vices, the artificial intelligence strategy of implementing theories of cognition as computer programs has the virtue that the failures of a theory are more difficult to hide in programs that account for behavior by producing it than in descriptions that only suggest how behavior could be produced. The notion that the structure of action in the world is determined by internal representations lies at the core of cognitive science and is assumed by much of anthropology as well. Over the years, researchers in artificial intelligence have put this common-sense theory of action to the test by implementing it in a wide variety of programs. In some contexts, mainly those with reliable regularities where the system itself is the only actor, these programs perform impressively. When they face the sorts of environments that people confront, however, environments constituted by the actions of other people, the best-laid plans often go awry. In this book, Lucy Suchman takes a very close look at a program that is meant to interact with people and shows both that it fails and why it fails.

She shows that plans, no matter how detailed or complex, are simply not sufficient to account for the structure of real situated human action, arguing that “Structure is an emergent product of situated action, rather than its foundation” (p. 57). In addition to plans (or other kinds of internal representation), the rich and unpredictable context of the action itself is required to account for the organization of situated action. The heart of the book is a very original analysis of interactions between pairs of users and an expert help system that is embedded in a state-of-the-art photocopy machine. Suchman presents clear analyses of many breakdowns in the interactions between users and machine, showing for each one that the interaction fails because the widely assumed “common-sense” theory implemented in the machine is not an adequate theory of situated human action.

This work is not an indictment of the project to simulate intelligent interaction. Instead, it is a pointer to some issues that will have to be faced and some assumptions that will have to be abandoned if progress is to be made. The intended audience appears to be primarily cognitive scientists, many of whom see no place at all for anthropology in a science of cognition. It is therefore a genuine pleasure to see a book that makes a real contribution to cognitive science by way of an anthropological analysis of interaction. Because the theory it challenges is implicated in a good deal of anthropological thinking, anthropologists, especially those with cognitive and linguistic interests, will find much of value in Plains and Situated Actions.


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This erudite and thought-provoking volume will be of interest not only to Arabists but to linguistic anthropologists in general. Justice’s central concern is a version of the Whorf hypothesis that language is determinant of other aspects of culture. But rather than focusing on the possible influences of language on thought, Justice is interested in connections between language and language use, or langue and parole. He explores the conjecture that, for aesthetic reasons, speakers of a language will choose to employ semantic classes for which their language provides clear, complete lexical and syntactic paradigms, thereby making these paradigms even more easily available for further development and use.

Justice tests this conjecture by analyzing aspects of the lexical and morphosyntactic structure of Arabic (mainly Classical Arabic, with some reference to Modern Standard) which have struck students of the language as especially exotic and which are relatively “well-profiled” and “well-rounded.” Some of these analyses lend partial support to Justice’s conjecture. He suggests, for example, that the availability of clear, regular ways to encode
duality on various levels (from obligatory dual number-marking to stylistic options involving balanced, two-part clauses and sentences) means that duality is likely to be chosen as an esthetic resource in discourse. Uses of duality in turn reinforce the various dual paradigms of the language.

More often, however, Justice’s analyses suggest that pastoral and langue are relatively independent. For example, he asks in several chapters whether there is something about the structure of Arabic which encourages the sorts of apparent redundancy that have often been noted in Arabic prose. The answer, Justice says, is no: There are historical and sociological reasons for lexical accumulation and syntactic pleonasm, but no strictly linguistic reasons. In fact, repetitive figures are routinely used in European languages as well, languages whose structure is very different from that of Arabic.

The author is to be admired for not forcing his analyses to yield unequivocal results. He is dealing with a very tricky set of questions, about how language and discourse are related and about how esthetic enters into the relationship, and asking these questions about a language whose speakers are extraordinarily sensitive to real and imagined linguistic “orientalism.” He might have been able to make more progress if he had been less susceptible to the structuralist tendency to reify language as an entity existing apart from and prior to discourse. As long as the focus is on what “the language has” rather than on what speakers of the language do, I doubt that really convincing answers to questions like Justice’s will be forthcoming. But his meticulous linguistic analysis and thorough multilingual scholarship are excellent correctives to any number of vague and inaccurate claims that have been made about Arabic and the “Arab mentality,” and the book encourages readers to think carefully about some crucial, unresolved issues in linguistic theory.


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This arresting work consists of seven essays, five of which were previously published. Though it suggests what a “postmodern anthropological” might be, it is for the most part a critique of Western common sense and its rationalization in science. According to Tyler, Western thought is grounded in a “visualist ideology of referential discourse” (p. 207) that can be traced back to the Greeks. Tyler attacks this ideology from several directions. Following Whorf, he argues that “Things, both as fact and concept, are hegemonic in Standard Average European language and thought” (p. 149; emphasis in original). The hegemony of things makes activity and process functions of objectified agents which can be visualized as spatially discrete, even static. It also prompts scientists to locate and structural order in timeless “structures,” such as language, culture, and society, all of which are, according to Tyler, "nonsense" and absurdly described in the "illusory realism" of scientific prose (p. 207).

Following Derrida and Walter Ong, Tyler relates this hegemony of things to the primacy of the text in Western culture. The "movement from speech to writing" has taken us "from the social to the conceptual...from action in the world to contemplation of what word we have of it" (p. 64). "Textualization" transforms a situation in which words and action are inseparable into one in which the written word "re-presents deeds and things and is not itself a harmony of them" (p. 64). The text becomes a privileged object, and the structure of texts becomes confused with structures thought to exist beyond the text. Accompanying textualization is an increased reliance on mimetic or correspondence theories of truth. These epistemologies understand human thought as inner pictures of outer objects, and privilege nonfictional literary genres, which use "plain style" to report facts about the world, over genres that make a virtue of nonrepresentational tropes. "Plain style is the unspeakable," Tyler tells us, "it erases the traces of speech," of the word as action in the world, and pursues abstract truth and a mimetic representation of the way things are (p. 8).

The Unspeakable is a brilliant and sweeping contemplation of "an episteme that "keep[s] getting reinvented" (p. 126)—from Plato and Aristotle to Peirce and Saussure. To escape that episteme, Tyler suggests a recipe for postmodern ethnography: "a cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke...an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality, and thus to provoke an aesthetic integration that will have a therapeutic effect" (p. 202). Tyler is unsure how such an ethnography is to be achieved in writing, but, in a cri-