Review of Robin Lakoff, The Language War

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Book Reviews


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Lakoff's central argument in this book is that public discourse in the United States, in the absence of a unifying external threat, has become increasingly adversarial and ideological, and that "culture war is language war" (p. 253). Her goal is to show how linguistic analysis can illuminate the mechanisms by which unnoticed, everyday linguistic strategies can serve as power plays or acts of resistance. Her material is a series of events that were the focus of attention and the topic of debate in the United States during the 1990s, starting with "political correctness" and debates over hate speech and ending with the Oakland Ebonics controversy and the Clinton impeachment. The book is written for non-specialists, although some of the discussions of linguistic concepts might be too condensed for people who have never given any previous thought to language. Lakoff is explicit about her own liberal political stance, and her characterizations of conservative ideologies and behaviors, while often witty, sometimes cross the line into sarcasm. This is unfortunate, because it means that some people who could learn a lot from this book will find it too infuriating to read.

For each of the controversies she discusses, Lakoff illustrates the ways in which the debate was really about control over language and meaning, about who gets to decide how words should be used, how stories should be told, what the true meaning of an event is, and, in the case of the controversy over Ebonics, what counts as a language. She suggests, for example, that one of the reasons conservatives disliked Hillary Rodham Clinton when she was First Lady was that she refused to fit her life to familiar narrative plots for wives, mothers, and First Ladies, and in doing so crossed genres in new and confusing ways. She shows how debates between people who want to outlaw hate speech and people who think all speech should be protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution are in fact debates about how and when talk is action. She claims that the jury's acquittal of O. J. Simpson can be seen as a rejection of the entire language game in play in the judicial system. The strongest analyses are those that are most closely focused on actual instances of discourse.

As she makes these arguments, Lakoff brings to bear a variety of concepts from linguistics and discourse studies, including framing, speech act theory, genre, definitions of dialect and language, and "exomeration," or the way in which the elision of the role of the dominant in the construction of discourse makes the status quo seem neutral. Lakoff does not refer to a larger theoretical framework for her analyses, but what she is doing is (at least in an informal way) what most people in the field would call discourse studies or (critical) discourse analysis. Non-specialist readers whose curiosity is piqued by what Lakoff does might have benefited from more of an indication that there is a huge body of other scholarship to explore. In addition
to several well-known popular books by her student Deborah Tannen, whose work Lakoff does refer to, there are other nonspecialist books that deal with the roles of language in public life, such as Deborah Cameron's *Verbal Hygiene* (Routledge, 1996) and *English With An Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in The United States* by Rosina Lippi-Green (Routledge, 1997), as well as a growing number of textbook level discussions of systematic methods for using linguistic discourse analysis in service of cultural critique.

In talking about her goals and methods in the book, Lakoff repeatedly returns to the question whether this sort of work is really linguistics; whether linguists really have the right to engage in the political world in this way. For many of us, comfortably drawing on the resources provided by our linguistic training in a range of interdisciplinary endeavors, these are no longer burning issues. In no small part, this is due to the risky pioneering work of people like Robin Tolmach Lakoff, who started insisting on the discursive construction of sociopolitical reality long before most linguists had ever heard of Foucault or Fairclough.

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This book grew out of a symposium on Language Ideology at the 1991 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. I remember the original symposium very well for its groundbreaking and exciting atmosphere—thrilling in the way the panelists highlighted the critical and highly complex role that language plays in constructing and contesting everyday realities, and the focal role that studies in language use should take in developing anthropological and social theory, particularly concerning practices of dominance and difference. One of the major goals of the book is to "reposition the anthropology of language in a research agenda addressing the social-historical processes that link face-to-face communities to national and transnational spheres" (p. vi). The organizers and participants adopt a "relatively unconstrained sense of 'language ideology' " (p. v) and this, in my opinion, helps to foster comparison across languages, groups, and research perspectives. The authors engage the issue of ideology from not only multiple and sometimes very different perspectives, but in a careful engagement with specific local issues and ethnographic materials from a wide range of societies and settings.

An excellent introduction by Kathryn Woolard organizes the volume, and also stands on its own as a discussion of what is meant by language ideology, and how this notion transcends discussions of beliefs about language use, linking to identity, personhood, aesthetics, morality, epistemology, distributions of authority, and social