Review of Randolph Quirk, Words at Work: Lectures on Textual Structure

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Unamuno’s attitude appears predominantly negative throughout. A basic opposition looms between the circular, essential, puristic nature of rationalism and life (that is, according to the author, “sicología”), with the novelist generally on the side of the latter. In Niebla the opposition is part of the inner struggle of Augusto, in whom an existentialist posture becomes a pole countering the scholastic one. It is similarly concentrated in Joaquín in Abel Sánchez. Amor y pedagogía, perhaps the least questionable and most overt representation of the ideological antinomy under examination, is seen as “la lucha de una ciencia con la vida” (40), in which “la ciencia de la escolástica ya no podía producir más que muerte” (53). A valid emphasis is placed on the importance of Paz en la guerra as a revealing work for examination, and on its intrahistoria over its historia (that of the Carlist uprising), although here again the author’s particular thesis is perhaps slightly overstated: “una guerra más tomista que carlista” (39). That this early novel variously reflects the young Unamuno’s resentment of sterile scholastic pedagogy is certainly one of the most plausible contentions made by the author.

Not many readers of Unamuno will be inclined to accept this kind of thesis as a corrective to previous interpretations of the works dealt with here. The very problematical nature of Unamuno’s works resists exclusive interpretations by keys or formulas. At an opposite pole to this kind of approach is José Luis Aranguren’s “plurilicure” of Unamuno (of Abel Sánchez), which reflects the kind of perspectivist relativism inevitably produced by the metaphysical enigmas and the novelistic ambiguities inherent in Unamuno’s narrative, testimony to which is his own “Prologue” to the Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo. The Tomás of Juan and the Juan of Tomás are not the real Tomás or Juan, but as Ortega y Gasset pointed out, these individual perceptions are not necessarily wrong, simply not exclusive, and reality must be examined in its overall context to be accurately apprehended.

If we cannot properly speak of a “methodology” in these studies, one principal method is discernible, the use of additional texts by Unamuno, chiefly essays and stories, for purposes of illustration and confirmation. This produces some interesting comparisons. However, chronology is disregarded, changes in the author (such as his religious crises) are never mentioned, precise contexts are not studied; adequate analysis, synthesis and conclusions are lacking. The secondary sources cited often seem selected at random and fail to support the author’s theses. The presentation is awkward: quotations are sometimes strung together without being sufficiently interrelated (esp. in II, III); footnotes can be more of an interruption than a clarification when one encounters up to six notes in five consecutive sentences (41). The somewhat unconvincing nature of these essays is partly attributable to a lax style, abundantly punctuated, for example, by the much abused adverbial nuletilla, “bien,” and the vagueness of expression, seen in such a sentence as the following: “Volviendo a lo del paisaje en la novela esta [sic] allí también sirviendo deceo los sentimientos y evolución de lo humano, en lo cual también se trata de algo constante en don Miguel . . . .” (17).

The studies on San Manuel Bueno, mártir afford a welcome change of approach, but to point out the originality of this work would lead us to the same area as that of its limitation, its theological theme, one little pursued by others in Unamuno today. In dealing with it Díaz-Peterson shows both close familiarity and enthusiasm.

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Sir Randolph Quirk, President of the British Academy, is one of the most distinguished students of the English language. As senior co-author of *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* and *A Concise Grammar of Contemporary English*, he is familiar to many. The present volume consists of the texts of eight public lectures which Quirk delivered in 1985 and 1986 in Singapore. Quirk is concerned in these lectures with explaining the characteristics of clear, effective communication, written or spoken. His explanations are based in the sub-field of linguistics sometimes called pragmatics: the study of the role of linguistic and extra-linguistic context, and of potentially or actually interacting audience, in shaping discourse.

Quirk begins his first lecture by pointing out that "... the greatest and most abiding difficulty about human communication is that it is human" (9). Unlike a mathematical formula or a machine-language instruction to a computer, a human utterance is never completely explicit or unambiguous; words and sentences do not contain their meanings. Speakers and their audiences (or writers and their readers) must therefore cooperate with each other as they jointly create meaning. Speakers organize their messages to take into account what the audience knows and expects; audiences choose interpretations which fit what they know about speakers. The remaining lectures are about how this cooperative process affects the specific linguistic choices which speakers and writers have to make.

Beginning a communication always involves linking the new with the old, the world of the message with the world of speaker and audience. Speakers connect their utterances with what has gone before in various ways. A discourse can be linked to an ongoing interaction, by beginning with a question ("Guess what?") which presupposes the presence and attentiveness of a potential answerer. A discourse can be linked to a familiar genre, by beginning with a formula ("Once upon a time . . ."). The definite article can link a discourse to an ongoing world of familiar objects and events ("Only weeks after the disaster in Mexico . . ."), and ongoing topics are placed first in sentences, before being connected with new comments about them.

In addition, speakers build temporal and locative bridges between their worlds and their audiences', "from the addressee's here and now to whatever there and then may be entailed by the discourse" (73). Quirk points out that more English prepositional phrases are used to specify location than for any other function. Audiences need absolute orientation (names and coordinates of places; calendrical specification of times), but even more, audiences need relative orientation: where and when things are located vis-à-vis themselves in the world they must temporarily enter. Audiences use their real experience as a basis for their expectations about relative location (which direction is up and which is down; the trajectories of coming and going) and relative time (which events usually precede which others; the reference of past and present tense relative to the present time), and communicators who need to foil these expectations as they create new literary or rhetorical worlds must do so carefully.

Discourse, then, has to be connected to the extra-textual world of things and times. It also has to be connected intra-textually; speakers and writers must guide their audiences along, by means of organizational cues internal to their discourse. Quirk shows how choices of words, options for sentence structure, and possible styles of
rhetorical organization can help or hinder the cohesiveness and clarity of a text.

But the author of even the most elegantly organized message still depends on the
good will of the audience for its interpretation. Intentional misinterpretations are
always possible ("Could I ask you to take out the garbage?"/ "Sure, you could
ask . . ."), and unintentional misinterpretations are frequent. In order to insure
their audiences' good will, speakers need to be modest, and to treat their address-
ees with respect. In informal discourse, and, increasingly, in more formal writing,
the audience's participation in sense-making can be actively solicited by such means
as the use of I, you, and we. In speech, well creates rapport. Vocative choices ("Dr.
Smith" versus "John") signal relations of prestige or solidarity. Printed discourse
often makes use of the "co-operation-seeking mechanisms" of speech, and "Plain
English" movements which attempt to simplify government documents and legal
contracts often do so precisely by making the writer-reader relationship more equal
and friendly.

Another important aspect of polite deference to one's audience is appropriateness:
choosing words and structures which conform to the audience's expectations.
Quirk makes the interesting point that stylistic appropriateness sometimes conflicts
with ease of processing, as for example in some journalistic writing ("the 19-year-
old rookie right-hander"), where too many modifiers precede the noun, making too
much information appear to be familiar to the reader; or in literary criticism, in
which authors sometimes distance themselves excessively from their readers. Like
other modes of etiquette, such as formal clothing styles or silverware usage, norms
of appropriateness change, and communicators must continue to learn new regi-
sters. When standards of appropriateness are dictated by law or by other recog-
nized authorities such as publishers, this may be relatively easy; when appropriateness
and ethics are intertwined, as with the capitalization of Black or the usage of
the generic he, for example, the communicator's job is more difficult. But like every-
thing else in the process of communication, sensitivity to linguistic racism or sexism
is ultimately rooted in sensitivity to one's audience.

Words at Work is a gently eloquent, intelligent, and entertaining book. It will
probably not find a wide audience, however, as it is too elementary for most dis-
course scholars and insufficiently explicit for use as a textbook. This is a shame:
Quirk's attempts to base prescriptive suggestions about effective communication
on descriptive analyses of language use ought to be taken seriously. Students of
writing and literature could be enormously empowered with the knowledge that,
as native communicators in English, they already control the basic strategies of ef-
efective writing and critical reading, that what they are engaged with in our classes
is not a set of new, esoteric skills but simply an attempt to become more conscious
of what they already do every time they talk or listen.

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