

Écriture and language reform

J.P. Delaporte

Summary

Often misread as a document of semiotics, Barthes' *S/Z* rejects every concern with a generalisation of semantics in favour of a novel theory of syntax. This latter is construed as a rewriting of a text in order to foreground syntactical rather than semantical referential devices. The result is an implicit contrast between a manifest and a latent level of syntactic organisation, showing realism to be the corrigible result of a semantic/referential organisation designed to deny its overdetermination by a syntactic order. Barthes' attempt to elucidate latent syntactic order is compared to identical procedures in the writers associated with the critique of metaphysics in the name of formal logic. Every attempt to deploy reading to the end of foregrounding latent syntactical devices is argued to be inescapably imbricated in an idealisation of the object language. The syntax thus elaborated is won at the expense of effacing the material coordinates of the signifier which it organises. An alternative mode of investigating latent syntactical properties which is neither semiological nor reconstructionistic is required. Such a procedure may be found outlined in the work of Quine and of Foucault.

Opsomming

Hoewel dit dikwels verkeerdelik as 'n semiotiese geskrif gelees word, verwerp Barthes se *S/Z* veralgemenings oor semantiek. Dit bied 'n nuwe teorie oor sintaksis wat gesien word as 'n herskrywing van 'n teks om referensiële middele uit te lig. Die resultaat is 'n implisiete teenstelling tussen ooglopende en latente vlakke van semantiese organisasie. Barthes se verduideliking van lg. vlak word vergelyk met die skrywers wat verbind word met die metafisiese kritiek, gekoppel aan die formele logika. Die betrokke sintaksis word behandel en 'n alternatiewe metode om dit te ondersoek word voorgestel, gebaseer op die werk van Quine en Foucault.

Roland Barthes' *S/Z* is widely regarded, and for good reason, as one of the most distinctive and distinguished documents of European literary semiotics. It is not surprising then that the close resemblance between the objectives and procedures of his project and those of the celebrated critique of metaphysics, promulgated by Russell, Wittgenstein and Carnap, should remain unnoticed.

In *S/Z* Barthes demonstrates that the realist style appears as a seamless coherent procedure, which reveals its limits to a sceptical examination as incoherences and contradictions, which no further gesture within realism can overcome. It is a language revealed to have an ambiguous epistemological status due to its descent from a procedure which is in essence non-realist, its invisible armature of the writerly announced only in dispersed and unsystematic contradictions. Realism necessarily effaces the workings of its own productive principle, forcing it to operate under restraint; the name given to this ensemble of systematic restraints is the realist style. It is imposed with such ubiquity that the features of the text which escape it confront the reader only as incoherences and gratuitous silences. For Barthes the collective term for this principle which realism pre-eminently disallows is 'écriture'.

Realism in its narrative modality is, for Barthes, primarily to be understood as the productivity of constraints, so severe as to constantly threaten the underlying *écriture* with internal dissolution. Realism is not a technique but a much less substantial operation, at best a widespread effect located in a limiting apparatus, a ratio of the readerly to the writerly, where the former is dominant. It can never become the object of knowledge without at the same time being shown to be a deficient and dependent form, an asceticism imposed on writing which writing would never impose upon itself.

For this analysis two procedures are necessary, one revealing a limiting and the other a productive operation. Everything productive in the text must be explained in terms of writing, everything ambiguous, sparse, and deforming, emerges as realism, as a residual effect. The result in which writing is simultaneously limited and occluded is achieved, Barthes argues, through making the relations between signifiers appear to primarily depend on the form of their relations to the referent. Thus every intra-significatory order is denigrated as secondary. While such orders make up the writerly by exceeding their relations to the referent in scope, complexity, and type, until syntax governs all possible referentiality, an overcoding of such a syntax by referents nevertheless remains possible and can be achieved by excising every syntactically valid feature which is formally correct but non-assertive. Globally, the result is the celebrated primacy of representation. However, it will remain possible to locate syntactically extendable procedures well in excess of their referential overcoding: this is the celebrated discovery of the writerly underlying realism.

The spontaneous utopia of realism is thus the belief that we can make a coherent unity of 'meaning' and 'experience', the signified and the referent based not upon the syntactic capacity of language (with its ideal expression as *écriture*), but on the basis of language as assertion primarily. When, through the laborious route of delineating the limits (as the five codes which a representational regime instantiates across writing), Barthes finally shows *écriture* to be the realist text's truly productive instance, he also dispels the metaphysics of representation, by showing it to be parasitic upon that which it is impossible to represent, namely, the ideal order of signifiers cleaved from their signifieds and referents. He argues that as consumers and purveyors of realism we have taken an incoherent principle as a foundation and reveals that its incoherence, as well as its claims to coherence, are no more than the effects of that which it endlessly seeks to subordinate to itself. Representation sets limits to what can be said, by insisting that whatever can be said at all must be consonant with assertive procedures. Within such limits however, everything incongruous within representation is seen by Barthes as a privileged symptom of the indomitable presence of writing, of syntactic primacy and its productivity which can never be represented without falling back into the folds of the realist order. If it could be rigorously extended, such a syntactic series would corrode realism and its claims to autonomy from within. Precisely this project constitutes the force of *S/Z*'s demonstration.

However, this project parallels the ambitions of logical positivism exactly. Carnap argues that sentences in ordinary language concerning such topics as

knowledge, being, truth, and reference, operate in the same way and are in semantic and grammatical form indistinguishable from those which make up less exalted statements about events, things, and the furniture of the world. Accordingly, philosophy makes no headway because it does not possess a language pure enough to radically account for itself, to render the standpoint from which it questions neutral. Philosophical formulations remain inextricable from ordinary language with its indelible ambiguities.

Thus in the strict sense, ordinary language produces the problems of philosophy by making it appear that a special range of topics, apparently based on problems of truth and reference exist. These are the questions which tax epistemological analysis. For Carnap such questions are merely the effects of unperceived logical and semantic difficulties in the structure of ordinary language which, beset by its own opacity, by its limitation to the signified and the referent at the expense of its own logico-syntactic structure, remains permanently unable to excise from its fabric by any possible circumlocution. In being expressed as problems of assertion and of meaning, mere ambiguities of syntax disguisedly emerge as the most elevated problems of knowledge. If ordinary language could be purified of ambiguity, it would be seen as a sparser fabric of operative propositions. Every residue exceeding the syntactic demands of this structure would then clearly be seen as metaphysical. In a language cleaved from metaphysics, that is, in an ideal language, truth and reference would no longer present philosophical difficulties. As problems they would dissolve leaving behind only technical questions of logical form. The way to obviate the difficulties of philosophy is to accept as valid only those aspects of our language which sustain an ideal propositional structure and reject the rest. Ordinary language might appear consistent and seamless before the cracks which philosophical scrutiny produces, but it is a question of appearance only.

As is the case with Barthes then, for Carnap two procedures are necessary in analysing a particular problem. Firstly, to account for the apparent solidity of the discourse, to better outline the aberrant vicissitudes of terms which prove foundationally refractory to it. Secondly, an ideal language must be provided capable of demarcating the fundamental constituents of discourse from the effects of its misappropriation. The upshot is that it is only through presence of a latent ideal language that overt statements can be diagnosed epistemologically and semantically defective. The spontaneous errors of language are mapped only as far as the network of ideal procedures against which their shortcomings can be measured. If language works at all, this is due to its unacknowledged dependence upon a more ideal substructure which is seldom manifest.

What is clear then is that both the realist style and ordinary language are seen as little more than symptomatic fields, ubiquitous pretexts from which the task of language reform must take its bearings and departure. Beyond their wholly deceptive self-sufficiency, their glistening semantic and referential surfaces, lie the effaced but endless workings of an ideal order, of relations tying signifiers to signifiers, a logic expressed as grammar, *écriture* or syntax.

The relation of the writerly to the readerly exactly parallels the relation of ideal to ordinary language. As both realism and ordinary language are terminally ambiguous and ultimately unable to account for themselves, they may both be theorised only as the effects of error, as a misappropriation of the power of writing and the careless and surreptitious disfigurement of the syntax of the proposition. For Carnap, it is logical syntax which must be mapped in the place of the manifest locutions of ordinary language if the latter's pitfalls, its treacherousness as an ontological/metaphysical map, are to be avoided.

For Barthes, the manifest realist style misleads the questioner into primarily posing questions concerning that which the text seems to be about, its expressive and descriptive modalities. Only a complete diagram of the productivity of writing underlying the economy of assertive/semantic effects may analyse the realist text accurately, as a productivity overcoded by an ensemble of constraints. Rules of an idealised syntax of narrative style and not the elements of a possible experience, explain the *vraisemblance* of Balzac's text.

For positivism, the reconstruction of ordinary language obviates the problem of doing metaphysics and ontology, substituting for them the semantic and syntactic mapping of terms in univocal locutions. Similarly, Barthes argues, we should not ask what realism is but we should proceed to elucidate its ontological and epistemological concomitants. We could only legitimately conceive of realism as a deviation from the syntactic well-formedness of a language which only incidentally refers and means. The same mechanism of occultation is responsible in both positions for producing the object of their analysis – illusion. The place and function of what positivism calls 'ideal language', is what more recent Europeans rediscover as *écriture*. Both account for overt aberrations in terms of hidden distinctions between the double strata of languages, ideal and actual, as slippages in a propositional or a writerly machine.

Whenever an argument turns to one language as a source of error and to another as a source of its rectification, that position can only attempt to reform discourse from within. It is clear then that Russell, the early Wittgenstein, Carnap, and Barthes, embark on comparable projects of immanent and piecemeal critique, which ultimately leaves to language reform the uneasy task of the diagnosis of all locutionary error measured against a singular and ideal criterion. Preoccupations with *écriture* and ideal language converge, to somewhat surprisingly find their most recent and celebrated champion in Derrida, who advocates the endless critique of actual utterances in the name of an ideal criterion at once real and unstable.

Derrida argues that any scientific work aids in deconstruction. For him, the position of a purified system of notation as a means to escape metaphysical error is similarly attractive. Standard deconstructive procedure amounts to the surreptitious rendering of language in ideal terms, and assumes that in the process its original metaphysical operations will be laid bare. He pushes the relations between signifier, signified and referent to the fulcrum of their ambiguity, and despite his affirmation of a singularly immanentist solution,

and his vivid disavowals of any ideal language which may be stated in advance, he is in this doing little more than pursuing the ideals of Carnap through the techniques of Barthes. Derrida combines the liquidation of metaphysics with the search for a purified modality of notation. Deconstruction amounts to little more than addressing oneself to the aporias which occur between all available locutions and their foreseeable paraphrase in a language according primacy to the syntactic, either as logic or as *écriture*. Both the positivists and Derrida represent a condition in which language is primary, and to free one's discourse from error is to make the transition not to some other non-linguistic terrain, but to a site of linguistic reform, that of ideal language. In short, the importance of a purified language has to do with its capacity to correct error *via* a demonstration of the mischances of the linguistic, or its proposal of a foolproof syntax.

Since Peirce (but equally since Frege), syntax as a procedure for the resolution of problems of truth and reference (of all semantics), and the problems of necessity and non-contradiction (all of logic and all of grammars) has been exalted. Above all else, the mysteries of the proposition and the project for a universal semiotic are the two forms by means of which the modern concept of the syntactical has asserted its dominance upon questions of truth and logic. It is not surprising then that meaning and reference, but just as much and for identical reasons, realism as a style, should face the stringent interrogations of a thought basing itself upon the ideal of a pure syntax – attained as ideal language, but also as *écriture*. Nor is it surprising that Derrida should come to subordinate all questions of ontology and necessity, of truth and of logic, to an endless critique involving their total assimilation to questions of syntax, of writing as the solution, but also the condition of possibility of all the aporias of knowledge.

Syntax as our fundamental resource in reforming the errors of knowledge now appears as the limit beyond which the question of all positive knowledges cannot pass. Objections to this condition are inevitably construed as a wish to return to realism and its ontological freight, or to a naive handling of texts, which has none of the blessings of deconstruction. The cumulative effect of the preoccupation with syntax both as ideal language and as *écriture*, has been to render a concern with logic and truth, with reference and signification, with quantification and with predication, as at best old-fashioned. Yet it is only by raising the question of the epistemic status of writing and ideal language together with the old-fashioned questions of truth and objectivity that the critiques dominant in these areas will be able to pass beyond the scepticism and the myriad hypostases which threaten to engulf them.

The seemingly modest efforts of Quine and Davidson to further decompose syntax into a function of truth and logic, and to refer the question of semantics away from its customary syntactic arbitration towards its truth-conditional analysis, seem to parallel Foucault's endeavours in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to free the statement from the sentence, the proposition, and the performative utterance.

Could it be that we are finally awakening from the spell of ideal language and of *écriture*, and of their mutual vector, deconstruction, to a novel task,

one apparently unthinkable today: that is, from the critique of metaphysics in the name of syntax, to the critique of syntax as a metaphysics?

Note

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