

Robin Tolmach- Lakoff. 2000. *The Language War*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp. 322.

Professor Tolmach-Lakoff is well-known for linguistic research on the relations between language and gender. On the front and the back cover of this volume there is a quotation from Deborah Tannen's review of it saying that Tolmach-Lakoff is "a national treasure." On the back cover the excerpt continues as follows: "She is one of the most astute and knowledgeable linguists in the country (indeed in the world), and one of the few who turns her analytic eye to the role of language on popular and political culture. It was she who pioneered the field of gender and language. She is poised to be recognized among the general reading public as she has long been recognized in the field of linguistics."

The book is not written as "dry" academic research. The style is conversational, flowing, and humorous, and jokes are told, poems and popular songs are quoted, and the discussion "diverges often to explain various background issues. It is as though the author speaks directly to the reader.

Still, a professional reader can easily see how meticulously designed the book is, and the rich reference list and index reveal the author's scientific background. The topics that are discussed include basic principles in linguistics or related fields, such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, philosophy of language, generative-transformative grammar, pragmatics, semantics, gender studies, folklore, and mass communications. Each point is raised and discussed thoroughly and clearly, and each new term is explained by a "layman's paraphrase". The aim of the jokes is to illustrate and demonstrate certain points, which are the center of the discussion. The structure evolves from basic ideas to more complex issues--from the study of single, isolated words to the structure of narratives, of whole texts.

Tolmach-Lakoff says in the Introduction, sub-headed as “What I am doing here and how I am doing it,” that the really interesting questions from her point of view are for example the following:

Why do men and women who speak the same language regularly misunderstand each other?

Why do we later-twentieth-century sophisticates, after a century’s barrage of advertising, still find ourselves bedazzled by the language of persuasion, economic and political?

How do we use language to avoid responsibility for ourselves and allocate it to others?

How can lawyers on either side in a trial describe the same events in such different ways that jurors fail to agree on a verdict? Or reach a verdict that, to an outside observer, makes no sense at all?

How do the stories we tell and hear, privately and publicly, give us our understandings of ourselves and the society we inhabit? (p. 7).

As noted above, these seemingly simple questions actually deal with the intricacies of many present-day linguistic domains.

The book sets out to explain the problems involved in these questions in eight chapters. Chapter 1 is “Language: The power we love to hate” (pp. 17-40); Chapter 2 is “The Neutrality of the Status Quo” (pp. 42-85); Chapter 3 is called “Political correctness and hate speech: The word as sword” (pp. 86-117); chapter 4 is “Mad. Bad, had: The Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas Narrative(s) (p. 118-157); Chapter 5 is “Hillary Rodham Clinton: What the Sphinx thinks” (pp. 168-193); Chapter 6 is “Who framed “O.J.”?” (p. 194-226); Chapter 7 is “Ebonics – It’s chronic” (pp. 227-251); Finally, Chapter 8 is “The story of ugh” (p. 252-281). In the end we find a chapter of notes, explaining various concepts and points as well as referring to professional and journalistic literature (p. 283-302).

The titles are rather puzzling to attract the reader. In fact, each chapter takes up a different story that has been in the news for some time, and teaches a different linguistic lesson through it. The depth of discussion in each chapter is unexpected. Since we cannot detail here all the linguistic points that come under the author's scrutiny, let us deal here with only a few examples.

The starting point of Chapter 1 is the notion of a "story" – why do certain stories attract us, the audience, anywhere, whereas others are immediately discarded from our attention? The author mentions here such "juicy" and "scandalous" stories as the role of Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Bobbit contretemps, the OJ saga, sexual misconduct in the military, the death of Princess Diana and more. This "Socratic" question leads to the statement:

Culture, after all, is the construction of shared meaning. These cases are about nothing else than our definitions of ourselves and who can make them. Therein resides power, directly or not" (p. 19).

To match with this point of view, the sub-title of this chapter is "The power we love to hate," which links directly to the title of the book, "the language war." Other subsections in this chapter are "Language makes reality" (the magical and non-magical power of the word), "Apologies as language politics," and "The Un-Apology" (observing a rather new "fashion" in recent political discourse: a seeming apology which at the same time "saves face" for the apologizer), "The identity crisis" (first or third person reference to one's own actions and its useful role in the discourse). This leads us to the end of the chapter which states "Language is not "just words". It enables us to establish ourselves, as individuals, and as members of groups; it tells how we are connected to one another, who has power and who doesn't... Now more than ever language is construed as something worth fighting for, or at least over." (p. 41). This is one basic way to look at language and describe or define it, which many books on linguistics deal with.

Chapter 2, “The Neutrality of the Status Quo”, deals with “meaning and marking” – or “markedness.” Again: the discussion begins with simple beliefs that “some ideas, terms, concepts, story-lines and such are “normal” – natural, simple, expected. Others seem more complicated, less probable, even bizarre... We cherish intuitions about “plausibility” and base upon them conclusions about human behavior that inform fields from science to literature to law, often with serious consequences... But psychology is showing, more and more, that this is not typically the case. The first is a case of “dog bites man”, the second of “man bites dog”. We differentiate between them on the basis of our expectations, and these in turn are created both by our own individual prior experience, and by the cultural knowledge that we share as members of our society. (p. 43) Linguists, philosophers and cognitive psychologists explain these ideas by theories of “markedness and “frames” (p. 44).” This is the point the author dwells on in this chapter (and see the section “Frames as makers of meaning” which she demonstrates by Alice’s shock at the changes of frames she encounters ever so often). Several case studies about gender and race issues, developed late in the second half of the 20th century, make more recent examples of this philosophical as well as pragmatic topic.

Chapter 3 considers word meaning from other angles. The title of the chapter is “political correctness (a modern term) and hate speech – the word as sword ” and the first section deals with meaning complexity by analyzing the meaning of “ambition” as in Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” with its negative association, compared to modern American ambition, which is considered the “quintessence of American virtue” (p. 87). This discussion, then, is about the multiple meanings a word may have, in one period or during the history of a language. “Politically correct” (p.c.) then is another example of the semantic load certain terms may have under certain circumstances, in certain places or times. Somewhat later in the chapter the

discussion analyzes the development of “p.c.” expression in newspapers, starting in about 1990, picking up between 1991-1994 and appears to subside after that. This point implies the modification of meaning in time, a constant fact in any language lexicon. The issue of “hateful speech” and its right of expression in America is another point under consideration in this chapter, investigating the question how to legislate hate speech; is language a thought or an action? Thus again: word has power, it can control human individual life as well as the whole community. But it does not stop there,

Chapter 4 deals with the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill case. Its subheading is “Prolegmena to a circus,” “The climate of the hearings,” “Interpretation, meta-interpretation and narrative control”, “The hearing proper (but not especially),” “He said, she said, sez who?” “Interpretation of events; or different takes by different fakes,” “The media make their message,” “Sequelae, epiphenomena and meta(meta)- narratives: what it all meant.” The linguistic “cue words” in these titles imply that the chapter is about narratives, their structures and their meanings. This is a respectable linguistic topic of study. The structure of the discussion makes of it a new narrative (in the literary sense). See for example the end of the first subheading section: “So, as the Judiciary Committee assembled in the Senate Caucus Chamber and all of us gathered before our television sets, on October 11, a sequence of events had come together to produce a narrative into which the hearing and its outcome would be fitted” (p. 123). The events then unfold, accompanied by the linguistic interpretation of the discourse analysis kind, while additional communicational concepts are introduced and explained. For example, in the section “He said, she said, sez who” the illocutionary force of dialogue structures is analyzed in the use of tag questions and other question-and-answer techniques. In this context, the author says that “Like tags, these types [of assertions] signal the power of the speaker over the addressee: “I can compel

you to answer even without having to resort to the apparent weakness of asking a real question” (p. 136).

The chapter, which opened with a recapitulation of the movie “Thelma and Louise” ends with the conclusion that “[the Hill/Thomas case] opened up discourse options for women (and African Americans) continuing the process that began with the p.c. debate and leading to the further extensions that will be explored in the next chapters... Before Hill/Thomas, women played a negligible role at best in the making of public language at the highest levels... The most important aftermath of Hill/Thomas is that it gave women and others the interpretive power they had lacked and gave it to them publicly in front of everyone at the very highest level of public discourse” (p.157). Thus, gender studies are linked with linguistics, or vice versa.

The last chapter focuses on the Lewinsky/Clinton case. A large part of the discussion in this chapter is devoted to genre analysis of the media reports that accompanied the scandal and the proceedings at the Senate. Some of these reports compared the affair with various types of literature – modern or from the 19th or 18th centuries, or even prior to those periods. Accordingly, one of the subsections in the chapter is entitled “Genre bending,” discussing the various journalistic attempts. In this, language is the main variable (in the sub-section “Words, words, words”), for it “changes the music,” using an expression from another area. There was an “inner story” (Lewinsky/Clinton) and an envelope story (Clinton/Starr), and much effort of the media has gone to describe and analyze both stories. Much difficulty has been found in the definition of keywords like “impeachment”, “sex,” and “lies.” And here the discussion enters again the realm of semantics, in addition to the problematic use of terms in different discourse circumstances or different pragmatic (communicational) goals. Tolmach-Lakoff’s analysis does not use

“professional” terminology, though she brings home the desired meaning. Thus both discourse and its parts (words) are analyzed in this final chapter.

The end of the book (entitled “Endings”) is a little disappointing since it was written (and finished) before the end of the affair. The writer suggests two endings to it – a tragedy and a comedy. In fact, the comic ending is historically closer to the real end of the affair. So she writes “Or maybe it will turn out to have been a comedy... We learn to appreciate our different voices, we all work together to make a new common language and a new understanding. We all win the language war, but we may have to go through a bad patch or two before this cheerful conclusion” (p. 282). (It seems to me that we are still a long way from this happy ending.)

To sum up, anyone who reads this book will acquire a good idea about language, its structure and its use in modern communication. The examples, the “case-studies,” are about American society at the end of the 20th century. Those readers who, like me, are not American will also learn many new aspects of “local color,” in terms of style and expression, which are part and parcel of any conversational discourse, American or otherwise. Although the book is not written as academic research, it brings modern linguistics to a wide public, professional or otherwise. Due to its thorough linguistic basis, the book could make a very good university textbook for more specialized readers’ goals.

Judith Rosenhouse
Dept. of Humanities and Arts, Technion I.I.T., Haifa 32000 Israel