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PETER BURKE AND ROY PORTER, EDS. Languages and Jargons: Contributions to a Social History of Language. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995. vii + 216. £24.95(?) (hbk).

I'm on record as a firm supporter of Burke and Porter's "Social History of Language" project consisting of the initial volume of that title (1987), Language Self and Society (1994), and now the present volume. The idea of introducing historical detail and empirical rigour into the field of discourse pragmatics is both exiting and timely. However, of the three volumes, this most recent contribution is perhaps the most troubled. This may be for two reasons: (1) When the term "jargon" is used to collect not only the specialist languages of trades, sub-classes, criminals, ethnic minorities, the law, the church, the technical professions, and so on, but also lingua franca, slangs, lingos, pidgins and creoles — with all of these stacked against "the vernacular" — it pretty much ceases to describe anything in particular. There may then be no "proper" language for it to be the "other" of. (2) At any given historical period, a jargon will often mean a relatively new linguistic technology and, as with most new technologies, natural moral positionings can arise for or against the innovation. The problem for the analyst in this case is to treat the natural moral axis as part and parcel of the technology to be analysed rather than simply enjoining its pro- or anti- positions. To different degrees, these two problems (and a range of related ones) haunt the papers in the present volume.

Peter Burke's "Jargon of the Schools" deals with three periods: (1) the move from scholasticism to humanism in the late 15th century; (2) the 18th century distaste for elaborate philosophical forms; (3) more recent criticisms of philosophical obscurity. Burke has a tendency to find a continuity of complaints across these

periods when, in fact, there may also be important differences. That is, the first period involved a rejection of Aristotelian logic in favour of rhetoric as elegant language. The second, by contrast, rejected most forms of "elegant" language — whether literary or philosophical — in a new attempt to find a plain and universal scientific language for the description of nature. Again, by contrast, the third period was multifarious and ranged from ordinary-language philosophy's rejection of speculative philosophy as misleading to radical Marxist criticisms of the class-grounds of metaphysics ("ideology"). Burke's own account makes these differences between types of anti-"jargon" arguments obvious — so it's peculiar that he finds, above all else, a continuity, "a submerged tradition" (36).

In the next chapter, Roy Porter deals with (or, more accurately, in) the morality of medical jargon: its tendency to both obfuscate matters and to ensure surgical precision; to aggrandise the practitioner on the one hand and, on the other, to be a necessary shorthand internal to any complex discipline or profession. He traces a brief history of this double ethics. What I don't understand, though, is why Porter himself has to take up such an obvious moral position in the debate — he's clearly on the side of an ethics of simplicity which, he seems to think, is the royal road to accuracy (54). But, as his own history shows, the two may not always coincide: medicalese may be in opposition to either (or both) "good science" and/or "plain talk". This doesn't do much to aid the overall theme of the volume: that pro- and anti- jargon posturings have their own histories (continuous and discontinuous) and that a sound knowledge of those histories might temper excessive rushes to moralistic extremes — to what are effectively theologies of jargon. From Porter's essay, it appears as if the histories are largely continuous and as if most of the anti-jargon theologies are correct. But this is odd when such pedantic views, as Porter himself points out, have lead to embargoes on such terms as "appendicitis" (51)!

Lee Beier's chapter is an attempt at an empirical study of cant, the language of the underworld, in the 16th & 17th centuries. There are some dubious points of methodology here. Firstly there's a tendency to inference such that, for example, Beier can write "Since both Jackson [the suspect] and [Lord] Stafford had Gloucestershire addresses, the story [that Jackson was a servant] may have been true, but what was a transient suspected of theft doing in the household of a great lord? Is this possibly an early instance of cant cutting across social boundaries?" (71). What this fails to realise is not only that Gloucestershire covers a fairly large area (1,019 sq. miles) but also that it's perfectly reasonable to assume that an aristocrat's servant can fall into suspicious ways without his former master having shared his argot! Secondly, Beier works on the assumption that vocabulary collections by contemporary lexicographers are accurate reflections of actual rates of usage in the underworld. While he does adduce corroborating evidence from court records to show that some of the canting recorded by the lexicographers may have been used in the underworld, this is not evidence for an accurate correspondence between rates of usage and collection. Thirdly, we have still to write "may have been used" (above) because there's a shaky logic operating here too. For example, Beier makes much of the fact that an examining magistrate's record refers to a particular canter's terms as "her term[s]" or "their [canters'] terms" (73) and this, apart from sheer problems of credibility, appears not to acknowledge the complex work that pronouns can do. Fourthly, there is in the central argument of the chapter, a kind of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: that rates of lexical use somehow afford us an insight into the forms of consciousness of the users. This is an interesting conjecture but it has no arguments to support it.

John Geipel's contribution is a solid historical philology of Caló, the language of Spanish Gypsies which derives ultimately from Sanskrit, as Geipel shows very clearly. The old form of the language as such has, he tells us, now been all but assimilated into Castilian Spanish. In particular, it has lost the syntactic structures

of Common Romani, taking on Spanish syntax (as Anglo-Romani has taken on English). However, a fairly strong lexical component remains. So historically, Caló was once a fairly distinct language in its own right, related to the other languages of the Gypsy diaspora; became a Spanish dialect, whence it also had its own important return effect on Spanish slang forms; and is now what Geipel calls a "sub-code" or partial alternative vocabulary by which Spanish Gypsies can know each other as insiders (then switch back to Spanish as required). This is a wonderful and fascinating linguistic ethnography but, as Geipel himself wonders, is it a study of anything vaguely like a jargon? To call it such would seem both incorrect and condescending.

Wandering even further from the ostensible topic, Marie Mulvey Roberts' work is not an investigation of language forms at all. Rather it's a brief look at the ritual practices of freemasonry in the 18th century and, according to the author, by extension, today. The argument (so obvious that actual research does it an injustice) is that masonry is masculine, misogynist and excludes women. This is true, if tautological — and if the paper ignores the "jargon" of the masons then it has plenty of its own on offer in the form of pseudo-intellectual trendy feminese: "phallic symbols", "phallocentrism", "deconstruction" (used here, wrongly, to mean a shallow reduction by principled criticism), "homo-eroticism", "embodiment[s] of the Zeitgeist", "the demarcation of gender roles", and so on. These terms achieve nothing of any historical or linguistic substance, let alone the purpose of the book as stated on page 1. The language of masonry is mostly ignored (apart from the mention of a few secret phrases) and the historical differences are overridden by the assumption of a pan-historical masculinism as both the "mainstream" norm and the masonic "secret".

If jargon is, as it is for Burke, a deliberate form of obfuscation, an insider's code, an "-ese", then there is no sense in which what Timothy R. Burns documents can

be a jargon. What he's looking at is in fact the rudiments of a rhetoric and its figures — primarily metaphors and similes — as used by Chartist politicians between 1830 and 1880. Rather than being "insiders'" talk, this rhetoric was — while often flowery, sometimes overblown, and occasionally purple — extremely simple. Moreover, this "oppositional rhetoric remained within the grain of British politics, seeking to appropriate the metaphors and idioms of political engagement that ran through the language of public debate" (172). Hence, by contrast with anything like a jargon, an "oppositional" rhetoric could be (and was) formed through very traditional vernacular appeals to manhood, parenthood and family (capital as the wayward "child", labour as its true father who must now take control); proper Englishness (associations between capitalists and the invading Normans); ideas of natural progression and evolution; the similitude between the struggles of the political leaders and the noble toil of the classes they represented; and ideas of the cleansing of corruption and decadence, among others. This is very interesting because it shows that the connections between language and politics (particularly macro-politics) are not always clear cut: that the apparent opposition between "conservative" and "oppositional" can, itself, be a coin with a single value and that imaginary attachments to an "outside" or a radical "other" may miss some basic historical facts about being radical, not to mention an understanding of their own positions within "dominant" political rhetorics. By this stage, the collection gets much better — exactly as it wanders from its inexact topic.

By the final paper, Javed Majeed reaches some very important conclusions that should have been stated right from the start. He describes the near impossibility of locating anything that could even vaguely be called "jargon" in Urdu. And this at any of its stages of development: from its remarkable beginnings as a Northern Indian lingua franca of trade; via its difficult separation from Hindi; its emergence as a vernacular in its own right with both "high" and "low" forms and, as it were,

even "higher" borrowings from Persian vocabulary and syntax; its instigation as one of the administrative vernaculars of the East India Company from 1837 (replacing Persian itself); to today's situation where "a glance at present-day Urdu newspapers shows how the boundaries between Urdu and Persian and Arabic, as well as English, remain permeable" (199). Hence Majeed's polite correction: "it may be possible to speak of varying degrees of pretentiousness in styles of Urdu, but this is not the same thing as talking about jargon".

Majeed is no doubt correct: in any diglossic situation (and what situation is not diglossic?) there is no effectively settled vernacular from which a sense of jargon can be derived. Simply borrowing a particular syntax, vocabulary, register (or whatever) — and so, in a sense, borrowing what is already one's own — does not mean that we are face to face with a case of jargon. By extension, then, the term may have no precise or analytically useful referents. Majeed in particular, but also Geipel and Burns, have worked well with this almost impossible brief.

References

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