LINGUISTIC INNOVATION IN FEMINIST UTOPIAN FICTION

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1.

In this paper I shall be discussing some recent feminist utopian novels and some of the more interesting implications and questions we might draw from a close study of the linguistic innovations in them. Consistently, we find that defamiliarisation of the language of the idealised world is a recurrent characteristic. I shall begin by describing four of these texts to you, in general. I shall go on to map out the types of defamiliarisation they offer the reader, linking this with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which asserts, in its strongest form, a determining connection between a culture's language, its thought and its reality. The implications and questions I want to draw from these comparisons are two-fold. The first is socio-linguistic and concerns real life issues of whether linguistic change is a necessary part of conceptual change. I shall offer some observations about pressures for certain types of change made by various minority and oppressed groups in England and America. The second is literary-critical, in that it concerns the possibility that the language of all texts is best understood when viewed as markedly biased towards various sets of cultural presuppositions. The reader's difficulty, when she or he shares these presuppositions is that of seeing the language merely as an innocent mirror of an all too easily taken-for-granted reality. I shall suggest ways of beginning to deconstruct aspects of that so-called reality, concluding that, whilst there are inevitably features that will always remain opaque — to us, if not to future generations — (and for good epistemological reasons), there are nonetheless ways of making ourselves, and helping our students, see possibilities of alternative presentations of the worlds given to us in the language of literary texts. In doing so, I would argue, we learn more about both the text in question and our perceptions of everyday issues - both large and small.

2.1

Let me describe four texts to you.
Taken in chronological order, they are:
(1) Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915)
(2) Ursula le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974)
(3) Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976)
(4) Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* (1980)

I hope to give those of you who don't know them a sufficient understanding of these novels so that you can follow my argument, but will try my hardest not to spoil the pleasure I hope you will get when you come to read them — they are all splendidly gripping texts I can assure you.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is a rather remarkable writer — probably most well known for her non-literary work *Woman and Economics* (1898) and a horrifyingly manic fictionalisation of her own nervous breakdown *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892). She was a prolific writer of witty, inventive, short stories, in rather stolid prose, most of which she published in her magazine called *The Forerunner*, a periodical committed to the publication of material pertinent to the Women's Movement of the time (1909 - 1916). *Herland* is a plainly-written novel, which describes what happens when three educated and wealthy young men make an expedition into an isolated and hitherto unexplored country whose entire population is female, and has been so for two thousand years. We, like the young men, find this hard to believe, until it is revealed that all the men of this country were destroyed by war and natural disasters — at one fell swoop so to speak — and thanks to a contingent biological development, whereby women could give birth to girl children without intervention from potential fathers, the population has grown and developed very successfully in specifically feminine ways ever since. The novel is narrated by one of these young men, thankfully the most flexible and least arrogant of the three, and charts the events and discoveries they make after a gentle but determined "capture", during enforced, rigorous, but patient "education", and during tricky, tantalising but moving "love affairs"

and "marriages" with three of the woman. I have, willy-nilly moved into the inverted comma technique of the text itself, for it is in this way, more than any other, that it signals the differences between Ourland and Herland. As the book progresses, the mismatches between concepts of Ourland and concepts of in Herland mount up, since it becomes clear that the women are doing intense anthropological ethnography on their prisoner-guests. Words and concepts that are dwelt upon specifically include the following: woman; man; womanly; manly; gentleman; feminine; girls; boys; motherhood; motherliness; sisterhood; wife; marriage; home; family; love; romance; birth; virgin; industry, work; poverty; competition; patriotism; religion; God; immortality; salvation; damnation; laws of nature; possession and ownership; punishment; education; psychology. That check-list maps out the major areas where the Herland culture has difficulty in understanding our heroes and vice-versa, and, clearly the novel follows the usual Utopian pattern of stringent criticism of contemporary society, but, specifically here, it is a criticism of patriarchal attitudes. The following extract represents a mid-way summary, where the narrator, relying on later experience, tries to clarify several linguistic and cultural and conceptual issues at the same time:

> Two thousand years of one culture with no men. Back of that, only traditions of the harem. They had no exact analogue for our word "home", any more than they had for our Roman-based "family".
>
> They loved one another with a practically universal affection, rising to exquisite and unbroken friendships, and broadening to a devotion to their country and people for which our word "patriotism" is no definition at all.
>
> "Patriotism", red hot, is compatible with the existence of a neglect of national interests, a dishonesty, a cold indifference to the suffering of millions. "Patriotism" is largely pride, and very largely combativeness. "Patriotism" generally has a chip on its shoulder.
>
> This country had no other country to measure itself by — save the few poor savages far below, with whom they had no contact.
>
> They loved their country because it was their nursery, play-ground, and workshop — theirs and their children's. They were proud of it as a workshop, proud of their record of ever-increasing efficiency; they had made a pleasant garden of it, a very practical little heaven; but most of all they

> valued it — and here it is hard for us to understand them —
> as a cultural environment for their children.
>   That, of course, is the whole distinction — their children.
>   From those first breathlessly guarded, half adored race
> mothers, all up the ascending line, they had this dominant
> thought of building up a great race through the children.
>   All the surrendering devotion our women have put into
> their private families, these women put into their country
> and race. All the loyalty and service men expect of wives,
> they gave, not singly to men, but collectively to one another.
>   And the mother instinct, with us so painfully intense, so
> thwarted by conditions, so concentrated in personal devo-
> tion to a few, so bitterly hurt by death, disease, or barren-
> ness, and even by the mere growth of the children, leaving
> the mother alone in her empty nest — all this feeling with
> them flowed out in a strong, wide current, unbroken through
> the generations, deepening and widening through the years,
> including every child in all the land.

It is not insignificant, I think, that the author chooses to make such insistent use of the inverted commas — a technique that becomes more and more obtrusive as the book opens out. It is precisely the technique used by those philosophers of language who debate their varying theories or methodologies for discussing the relationships between language, truth, "truth", reality, and possible worlds (see, for example, Tarski 1943, Quine 1960, Putnam 1975, Davidson 1967, Davidson & Harman 1971).

In *this* text, it is a device to remind us continually that the reference for *any* word cannot be taken for granted once we enter the boundaries of the fictional world. Of this more later. It is a device which not only makes strange the words encapsulated within it, but, which, by its obtrusiveness, proves extremely irritating to the unsympathetic. Of this more later too.

2.2.

Ursula le Guin is probably best known "merely" as a writer of science fiction. Like several other writers in this category, however, she uses that medium to allow herself space and flexibility in the production of rather remarkable literary pieces. Unlike *Herland, The Dispossessed* is written in elegant, poetic style, and has many passages where

literariness has clearly been a central concern in the composition. It is also a rather gripping story, (far less didactic than *Herland*) whose central characters engage our sympathies, concern, anxieties and so on, in just the manner of the classic realist novel. Interestingly, though, many of the issues about language, thought and culture are very similar to those expressed in *Herland*. Here, a brilliant physicist called Shevek, whose history we are given in some detail, leaves the semi-idealised world of Annares on a mission to Urras, to learn, teach, discover, make links with that advanced, but as *we* discover, corrupt society, a society whose corruptions are reminiscent of our own, of course. Particular linguistic and conceptual mismatches between the two worlds are less easy to express as a checklist, however. This is probably a point in the book's favour − it is far less the simple comparison between this world and a possible idealised world. Specific *general* issues do recur however: swearing; forms of address and politeness phenomena; subject-object relationships; the means for expressing pronouns; honorifics; the means for indicating possession, ownership, sexuality, family relationships, work, play and so on. Some familiar words are brought into question as Shevek encounters them or their referents for the first time: splendour; gun; alienated labour; class; property; imprisonment; chivalry for example. Other words are used by the people of Annares and are, so to speak "slipped into" the novel, asking us to take them for granted. By the end of the novel, sympathetic readers find them an invaluable addition to their everyday vocabulary: egoising; profiteer; propertarian and propertarianism − all of which are blatant insults in the organic economy of Annares. My first example is taken from a nursery scene in Annares. The child, looking with delight at the sun has said "mine sun". The nurse corrects him with the culture's articulated concepts:

> "It is not yours", the one-eyed nurse said with the mildness of utter certainty. "Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it, you cannot use it".

Similarly, a child is gently criticised in the "speaking and listening group":

> "Speech is sharing — a co-operative art. You're not shar-
> ing, merely egoising".

Later, Shevek, discussing physics and knowledge in the corrupt
Urras, uses the strongest insult in his culture — the culture which
despises the cult of personal property:

> "But what's the good of this sort of understanding" Dear-
> ri said, "if it doesn's result in practical, technological ap-
> plications? Just word-jugging isn't it?"
>
> "You ask questions like a true profiteer", Shevek said,
> and not a soul knew that he had insulted Dearri with the
> most contemptuous word in his vocabulary; indeed Dearri
> nodded a bit, accepting the compliment with satisfaction.

The most crucial feature of Pravic as a language is precisely that
of it being an *artificially constructed* language. We gradually learn the
history of Annares, colonised in times well past by the anarchist-
idealist Odo, as a breakaway escape from the already despotic
authoritarianism of Urras. In building up her new society, she and her
immediate companions carefully articulated both social conventions
and linguistic possibilities of reference, tying the two together intri-
cately in their choice of lexis, syntax and metaphoric possibilities. Take
for example the fact that the language only has one word for both work
and play (expressed as work/play until it is commented on):

> The identity of the word "work" and "play" in Pravic had,
> of course, a strong ethical significance. Odo had seen the
> danger of a rigid moralism arising from the use of the word
> "work" in her analogic system... "the Saint is never busy",
> she had said, perhaps wistfully.

Similarly, consider both the expression of possession relationships
and subject, object, agent relationships in this extract:

> The singular forms of the possessive pronoun in Pravic
> were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little
> children might say "my mother", but very soon learned to
> say "the mother". Instead of "my hand hurts", it was "the
> hand hurts me", and so on. To say "this one is mine and
> that's yours" in Pravic are said, "I use this one and you use

that". Mitis' statement "You will be his man" had a strange sound to it. Shevek looked at her blankly.

2.3

Marge Piercy's novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* moves us even further away from sraightforward didactic explanations, and offers almost all its linguistic innovations as part of an experiential reading practice. Again we are given two worlds to compare, though for the first fifty pages we are located firmly and strictly in a very brutal and harsh picture of the bad side of New York State.

Connie Ramos, a thirty seven year old impoverished Mexican-American woman, with a tragic history of violence, ill-treatment from both individuals and the state, imprisonment (where help would have been more appropriate) and stunningly bad experiences in long-stay mental hospitals, is trying to protect her neice, Dolly, from the brutal attacks of her pimp-boyfriend, who does not believe the child she is carrying is his. In so doing, Connie, herself, has to resort to physical violence on the boyfriend — a brave but futile attempt which results in her enforced readmission to the mental hospital. Both the description of the world outside the hospital and the world inside it make painful reading. Marge Piercy makes no attempt whatsoever to soften or mediate the hard brutality of these scenes, and rather cleverly and economically demonstrates the paradoxical traps that Connie finds herself in. Having been classified once as violent and insane, all her subsequent actions and statements are suspect, and blatantly treated as such. One simple example will have to suffice. She has, in fact, been very badly beaten up by Geraldo, (Dolly's boyfriend). With broken teeth and ribs, she begs the social worker who comes to interview her in the hospital to get a medical doctor to examine her:

> "Please Miss Ferguson, have a doctor look at me. I hurt so much. Please, I beg you. Look at my mouth".

To this, Miss Ferguson coolly replies:

> "You   say it hurts you. Where do you believe you feel pain?"

Let me offer you, without prior description or comment, an extract
from the speech of Luciente — a mysterious visitor, who has appeared
to Connie a few times in the past, in inexplicable ways — suddenly
being in rooms without seeming to enter them, suddenly standing on
streets where she walks alone:

> Luciente beamed. "We must not chill each other. If
> you're patient in spite of my bumping along, we'll succeed in
> interseeing and comprehending each other. Alia — that's
> the student of blue whales — told me that after months with
> them, Alia can only inknow the grossest emotions or mes-
> sages. Those long epic operas that are their primary pastime
> are still garble to per. After a whole generation of com-
> municating with the Yif, we are merely transmitting digital
> code. We think of the Yif as superrational, a world of math-
> ematicians — and maybe that's how they vision us... Anyhow
> if you and I suck patience, can we fail to clear our contact...
> Connie chuckled... "You're crazy, you know that? If I'm
> not".

> "Crazy? No, actually I've never been able to. Jackrabbit
> went mad at thirteen and again at fifteen —"

> "Who's this Jackrabbit?"

> "I am sweet friends with Jackrabbit. Also Bee. Both are
> my mems too — in my family? If we work at this, I hope
> you'll meet them soon. Even though you laugh at this, I hope
> you'll meet them soon. My own work is velvet for me".

In this comfortable way, both Connie and the reader are initiated into
the way of talking and thinking that Luciente and what we could call
"per" people use. She is in fact female, though Connie initially per-
ceives her as masculine, uses the masculine pronoun to describe
him/her, which is nicely confusing for us. As it happens, the more we
learn about Luciente's homeland (a futuristic Utopia) the less such
distinctions matter — since both sexes can mother and nurture
children, and, as in *Herland*, this job, like all others (including onerous
duties) is a matter of voluntary choice. As the book develops, we have
our reading time divided between the horrors of the mental hospital,
and the delights of Luciente's Utopia. The point I want to stress here,
though, is that, unlike the other two texts, we are hardly ever "taught"

the language that Luciente and Luciente's friends use. It is very easy indeed to become an imitator (if not a native speaker) of per language. It is left to the pedantic linguist to chart out the interesting feaures of that language. That I shall proceed to do for you:

Vocabulary differences:

catcher (receiver of psychic messages); sender (sender of psychic messages); kenner (pesonal wrist-watch computer); person (a man/a woman, /he/she); rib (a joke); loon (a bird); mems (people in a "family" = a personal-political unit); kid binder (someone who looks after every-one's children); sweet friends (emotional lovers); pillow friends (physical lovers); hand friends (close emotional friends who are not lovers); naming (rite of passage, where an adolescent chooses per own name); end-of-mothering (same rite of passage, from the mothers' point of view); fooder (communal eating place); brooder (communal institution for artificial creation of foetuses, development of them, and birth).

to mother (to take responsibility for a baby, together with two other mothers — either male or female); to crit (ritualised act of constructive criticism); to vision (to imagine); to grasp (to understand); to be feathered (to be ready); to inknow (to know intuitively); to chill (to pour cold water); to body (to give substance to an idea); to bottom (to allow yourself to get extremely depressed not necessarily a bad thing); to guest (to welcome).

Structural differences:

a marked decrease in objects after transitive verbs

a marked decrease in articles and markers of possession

a marked decrease in the use of pronouns, often using proper names instead

substitution of 'person' for nominative third person pronoun (this also means 'a man' or 'a woman')

substitution of 'per' for accusative third person pronoun.

2.4

Doris Lessing's *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five* is clearly *of* this feminist Utopian tradition, and yet, linguistically, the most radical of them all, though it takes a moment's thought to see why, since as a text is seems to offer very little in the way of obtrusive linguistic innovation and challenge. Again, let me offer you an experience of reading/hearing a part of the text without prior judgement. The book opens this way:

> Rumours are the begetters of gossip. Even more are they the begetters of song. We, the Chroniclers and song-makers of our Zone, aver that before the partners in this exemplary marriage were awake to what the new directives meant for both of them, the songs were with us, and were being amplified and developed from one end of Zone Three to the other. And of course this was so in Zone Four.

> Great to Small
> High to Low
> Four into Three
> Cannot Go.

> This was a children's counting game. I was watching them at it from my windows the day after I heard the news. And one of them rushed up to me in the street with a "riddle" he had heard from his parents: If you mate a swan and a gander, who will ride?
> What was being said and sung in the camps and barracks of Zone Four we do not choose to record. It is not that we are mealy-mouthed. Rather that every chronicle has its appropriate tone.
> I am saying that each despised the other? No, we are not permitted actively to criticise the dispensations of the Providers, but let us say that we in Zone Three did not forget — as the doggerel chanted during those days insisted:

> Three comes before Four
> Our ways are peace and plenty.
> Their ways - war!

> It was days before anything happened.

Immediately we are thrust into a reading situation where, although we are well able to make sense of each individual word, phrase, sentence, paragraph at a simple level, we are unable to grasp the narrator's cosmology which would allow us to distinguish the taken-for-granted information from the surprising. This is a feeling which deepens and widens as the text continues:

> No one had expected the marriage. It had reached even popular speculation. Zones Three and Four were doing very well, with A1. Ith for us, Ben Ata for them. Or so we thought.
>
> Quite apart from the marriage, there were plenty of secondary questions. What could it mean that our A1. Ith was ordered to travel to the territory of Ben Ata, so that the wedding could be accomplished on his land? This was one of the things we asked ourselves.
>
> What, in this context, was a wedding?
>
> What, even, a marriage?
>
> When A1. Ith first heard of the Order, she believed it to be a joke. She and her sister laughed. All of Zone Three heard how they laughed. Then arrived a message that could only be regarded as a rebuke and people came together in conferences and councils all over the Zone. They sent for us — the Chroniclers and the poets and the song-makers and the Memories. For weeks nothing was talked of but weddings and marriages, and every old tale and ballad that could be dug up was examined for information.
>
> Messengers were even sent to Zone Five, where we believed weddings of a primitive kind did take place. But there was war all along their frontiers with Zone Four and it was not possible to get in.
>
> We wondered if this marriage was intended to follow ancient patterns, whether Zones Three and Four should join in a festival? But the Zones could not mingle, were inimical by nature. We were not even sure where the frontier was. Our side was not guarded. The inhabitants of Zone Three, straying near the frontier, or approaching it from curiosity as children or young people sometimes did, found themselves afflicted with repugnance, or at the least by an antipathy to foreign airs and atmospheres that showed itself in a cold lethargy, like boredom. It cannot be said that Zone Four had for us the secret attractions and fascinations of the forbidden: the most accurate thing I can say is that we forgot about it.
>
> Ought there perhaps to be two festivals, simultaneously, and each would celebrate that our two lands, so different,

> could nevertheless mirror something, at least in this way? But what would be the point of that? After all, festivals and celebrations were not exactly pleasures we had to do without.

and which never, in fact, is clearly resolved. Lessing's challenge to the language-reality debate, is to deny us precisely those hints, clues, examples that allow us to become native-thinkers of these lands. When all is said and done, we have spasmodic interpretations, available for further interpretation were the novel, say, twenty pages longer. Not even the most pedantic of linguists would attempt a dictionary for you, since, in order for a lexicon to make sense, compiler and user must either share what Sperber calls "encyclopaedic knowledge" (Sperber 1975) or have access to a set of maps and descriptive networks that will explain and locate the meaning systems of the lexicon of the new language.

2.5

Let me then draw together my observations about these four tremendously interesting texts. Each of them is what I would call "an interrogative text" (see Belsey 1980, Coward & Ellis 1977). As such, they forbid a passive reading, and demand, in their various ways, that the reader participate, think, work at her or his reading and understanding. In this way they follow very clearly in the Brechtian aesthetic. You will remember how much he despised the self-indulgent emotionalism and sentimentality of traditional German theatre where "the audience may leave their brains with their hats and coats in the cloakroom", (Brecht 1937). He discusses his concept of the alienation device or effect thus:

> If empathy makes something ordinary of a special event, alienation makes something special of an ordinary one. The most hackneyed, everyday incidents are stripped of their monotony when represented as quite special.

The term "defamiliarisation" that I have been using, or the term "making strange" which I could have used, as well as "alienation" all seem to me to be adequate descriptions of these texts. I hope to have

indicated though, that, much as I admire them all, and appreciate the value of their interrogative qualities, they do, in fact represent a line of sophistication in this respect. The chronological ordering also represents a progression in that sophistication, in the amount and *type* of interrogation those texts present to the reader. Charlotte Perkins Gilman offers us two worlds who have different — sharply different — evocational and associations for crucial lexical items in those worlds. These, she suggests, both mirror different social values, and help to create different perceptions of *possible* social values (two of the three men are relatively easily converted to the Herland way of life and thought). Ursula le Guin presents an altogether more complex (and problematic) comparison, where the language-reality debate is not only influenced by lexical issues, but by syntax and metaphor as well. She also does not suggest the optimistic hope of cross cultural linguistic flexibility — though, within a sympathetic culture, and between sympathetic persons, this is definitely offered as a fruitful possibility. Thus Shevek is able to explain his physicist's view of time and meaning to his non-specialist wife by altering his metaphors to suit hers (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980 for the linguist's nice view of this). Marge Piercy, on the whole, moves away from teaching us explicitly about the *language* of the alien culture. It is left to us, as a challenge, to get to grips with those parts of the text that seem "foreign". At first they seem difficult to grasp. Fasure at first we lack vocabulary and she runs hard over too much but we ken we must work to commune because have such different frames of redding, but a catcher, a receptive, can find the door to what person is meaning. Grasp. Everybody is feathered to learn. And Doris Lessing moves us one stage further, by simply dislocating us from guide books, phrase books, encyclopaedias, history books, story books to so on, we are left in a continually questioning frame of reading.

3

Now, where do we go from here? Let me briefly describe for those of you unfamiliar with them, the work and ideas known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. At its most crude, and in the original formulation, it is, to say the least, unsophisticated Benjamin Lee Whorf's work

(Whorf 1941a,b) on the difference he could perceive between American English, "Standard Average European" and Hopi Indian led him to assert that the *structure* of one's native language determines both ways of thinking and cultural patterns, thereby influencing one's social structure in both small details and in large issues. And by "determines" here, he means the full strength of that word. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in its strongest (and most interesting) form suggests that one is actually heavily constrained in conceptual *potential* by the lexico-grammatical structures of one's native language or languages. Linguists have not found it difficult to criticise Whorf's assertions, making the following points, reasonably enough.

Firstly, small children clearly think (in some way) about mothers, dolls, crawling, throwing rattles out of prams for a game, and so on, before they learn to speak, whilst adults work, recognise faces, respond to complex emotional situations without recourse to speech. Secondly, it's clear that many people can, even as adults, learn a second language, and master to a significant degree whatever new conceptual divisions of the world such learning requires. Thirdly, speakers of all language borrow lexical concepts from other languages, invent new ones of their own, and invent powerful metaphors specifically for expressing what was previously inexpressible. Fourthly, even Whorf seem to have been sufficiently free of the categorical hold of American English to understand and explain the conceptual structures of his Hopi informant.

Now, whilst at one level those are indeed reasonable criticisms, and, doubtless constitute a useful and constructive type of criticism from within the perspective of rigorous structural linguistics, when this is taken as the hermetic study of empirical phenomena, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis nonetheless remains an intriguing proposition. Recently linguists such as Bloom (1981), Bolinger (1980), Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who are attempting to re-open interesting issues in the language-thought-reality continuum have suggested ways in which we might usefully pursue the questions suggested by Whorf's work. They do not assert his conclusions, but transform his statements interrogatively, converting them into axioms for a new — refreshingly new — theoretical approach. So, heuristically at least, they assume there *is* a relationship between one's language and one's ways of thinking. The

questions they ask stem from this presupposition and we find them asking "in *what ways* are linguistic structures responsible for conceptual and cultural patterns?" A crucial difference for them, however, is the explicit belief (quietly held in one a case, a motivating force in the others) that we are in fact able to shift our frames of reference should we want to. That is, unlike Whorf, they hold that once we are able (in a sophisticated way) to analyse and articulate the ways in which our linguistic training and culturation *has* influenced our ways of thinking, we are able to maintain those frameworks we find enabling and to alter, adapt or transform those we find disenabling.1 In this bold, and I should perhaps add unpopular line of argument, they lend academic linguistics support to the creative polemic of writers such as Perkins Gilman, le Guin, Piercy and Lessing. My own preference, I must say, is all for the bold line of argument – particulary in this case, when it links neatly with humane philosophical and political issues so well. Coupled with this, however, I would also wish to add the caveat that all bold lines of argument must listen carefully to, indeed ask for, stringent criticism from the sceptics, and wherever necessary or appropriate, modify, restrict or even jetison appealing hypotheses.

4.1

And now for some sociolinguistic implications in all this. For brevity's sake, I shall focus directly on familiar issues central to racism and sexism, and will state my opinions as boldly and contentiously as possible. I shall, therefore, necessarily oversimplify a complex case.

I am particularly interested here in the relationship between people who see themselves as oppressed minority groups in various cultures, and what they decide to do about the language of the dominant culture. Recurrently they take issue in some way. One sweeping strategy is to opt out of that language, and speak an alternative language, dialect or argot.[2] Another strategy is to attempt radical re-definitions of items within the dominant discourse, whereby for example "black" is consciously upgraded to become not only a term with positive rather than negative associations, but also the preferred term (by black people) for the designation of their racial difference.[3] Similarly Women's Liberationists (with whom I am not in sympathy)

and Feminists (with whom I am) have attempted many linguistic chan-
ges, some of them seemingly quite trivial, much as if they were real-life
equivalents of the inhabitants of the fictitious worlds we've already
considered. It is precisely on the "seemingly trivial" that I want to
dwell. I am thinking here of issues like: the use of Ms rather than Miss
or Mrs as an honorific for all women; the use of "person" where
formerly — man (or maybe — woman) was suffixed, as in "Chairper-
son", "craftsperson" etc.; the use of she/he, him/her (or even her/him)
in places where the dominant discourse would use and expect the mas-
culine pronoun to stand for both genders. Now, I think there are many
complex issues to discuss here. I want, though, to bring out a line of ar-
gument that is not generally acknowledged outside feminist-linguistics
circles (or even, actually, within them, unless they are of a structural-
anthropological disposition). I want suggest that the remarkable thing
about such desires for change and the attempts to impose such chan-
ges is *the reactions of those opposed to such change*. The amount of
heat, anger, and trenchant conservatism that is provoked by such pres-
sures for change deny completely the most common of the opposition-
al outcries, which pours scorn and derision on the *triviality* of such lin-
guistic issues. Clearly the issues are not trivial at all if they generate
such a response. Similarly the seemingly coolly rational opposition
which says "we see your point, but it's so difficult to say — it makes
everything sound so clumsy" is clearly off the mark. I would maintain
that the clumsiness, the making strange, the defamiliarisation is
precisely the point of such pressures for linguistic shift at this stage in
the sexual political debate. Each clumsy phrase is a symbolic reminder
of a far more clumsy and ill-organised social structure. It seems that
the Feminist request for this small inconvenience in our everyday dis-
cursive practice is very little to ask when a substantial proportion of
the world's women are living in ways that are something considerably
more than inconvenient. Ultimately, of course, it is not linguistic
change that is required, but conceptual change and positive action. No
one is foolish enough to believe this will happen quickly, or without
difficulty for both sexes. I take it that the pressure for linguistic change
is for consciousness-raising in the first instance. Linguists and lay-
people who produce opposition ignoring this purpose are merely miss-

ing the point. As are Feminists and fellow-travellers who defend these changes without acknowledging this purpose, of course.

This is not to say, however, that linguistic change will *not* influence transformation in conceptual frameworks. There comes a time when these phrases stop sounding odd — though the implications of *that* would take several other papers to discuss.

4.2

I shall conclude with some implications for literary criticism, again, of necessity, stating these somewhat briefly.

It seems to be a valuable tendency in recent critical theory that it tells us we should emphasise the following: the act of reading as a process; the negotiation of meanings between text and reader; the need to articulate our reasons for priorising any one interpretation over another; the ultimate inadequacy of any one discussion or 'closure' of a text.

Modern critical theory aligns itself with what it calls "Post-Saussurean Linguistics" (a term that's trickier than it looks).Its most enabling and forceful insights cluster around the stress made on the *non-transparency* of language, where critics demonstrate over and over again, the complexity of the relationship between linguistic expressions and the "reality" or "realities" they are helping to depict. Critical theory asks us to move away from any simple notion of that relationship, to examine and deconstruct the *linguistic* constructs that fool us into thinking we have a non-problematic grasp on the social world. In particular they praise the interrogative text — the text that, of itself, forces us to notice this problematic. Also, though, they urge us to do our deconstructive work on precisely those texts that seem least interrogative; the classic realist novel; descriptive poetry and so on. It is with this in mind that I chose to compare the four novels above. As I hope to have shown, they are all, in their different ways open to interrogation and deconstruction. The Lessing text is the most challenging of all in that it verges on *being* the classic realist novel we all know and love — with one crucial difference. We have no easy access to background knowledge and assumptions of an *a priori* possible world *out of*

which Lessing's descriptions of narrative might appear to have been drawn. Instead we have only her words for it. The limits of the language of her book are the limits of her fictional world. As such it should remind us that this is the case with *any* linguistic construct we encounter, however much we might like to fool ourselves otherwise. Like Brecht she reminds us to pick up our brains from the cloakrooms where we have often been encouraged to leave them. In so doing she gives responsibility back to the reader.

NOTES

1I should perhaps clarify that I am not here referring to the massive (and theoretically unknowable) frameworks that constitute what Michel Foucault (1967, 1969), would call "the episteme". I would want to claim, with Bolinger and Bloom and Lakoff and Johnson that one may, whilst still speaking within "the same" and "the true", transform one's language, one's perceptions, one's contributions to the social world.

2See, for example, Michael Halliday's work on anti-languages (Halliday, 1978), or Inghehart and Woodward's work on language conflicts and the political community (1967), or various of the studies in Gumperz and Hymes (1972) and Bauman and Sherzer (1974).
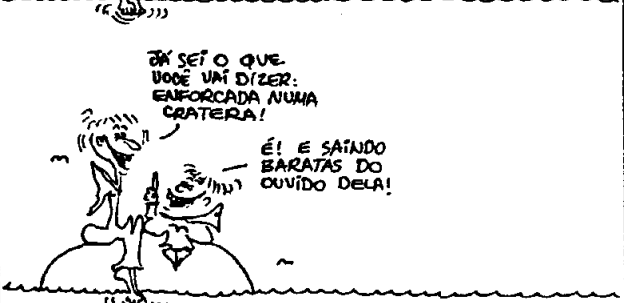
3See James Baldwin (1979).

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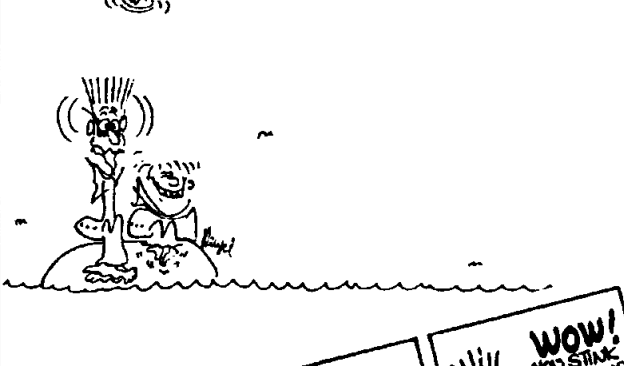WHORF, B.L. **Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of B.L. Whorf,** ed. J.B. Carroll. New York: Wiley, 1976.