

18.11.2015

## The Intimacy of Words - Pétur's defence.

Matthew Whelpton's paper 'Thumbing the Wind'<sup>1</sup> is a wise and generous criticism of some of the ideas I have been airing in recent articles. Wise, generous and mistaken. Matthew and I both believe that we have different views on certain fundamental principles in linguistics but we have never really been able to pin down these differences; whenever we talk we find we are in full agreement. This time Matthew has gone out on a limb and pretended find a bone of contention, but of course he's wrong, this is simply yet another point on which we are in full agreement.

Matthew gives a very clear and succinct description (24-25) of a phenomenon which I wrote about in my doctoral thesis<sup>2</sup> concerning the nature of the connections between Halldóra Björnsson's translation of *Beowulf*,<sup>3</sup> the original text, and a host of other texts. I shall not use Matthew's example here, but another slightly more complex one from my thesis which shows correspondences (which I refer to as *indices*) between line 163 of the original text of *Béowulf*, the same line of Halldóra Björnsson's translation, and lines from the Eddic poems *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Völundarkviða*. Here are the texts concerned:

hwyder helrúnan hwyrftum scrípað (*Beowulf* 163)  
"whither hell-councillors (monsters) snakingly crawl"  
hvarleiður helriði úr hvarfi skreið (Halldóra Björnsson's translation, 163)  
"everywhere-loathed hell-rider from his den crawled"  
[þú] hefr í hreysi hvarleiðr skriðit (*Helgakv.Hundingsbana I* v.36)  
"[you] have crawl'd everywhere-loathed into you den"  
austur skreið Egill at Ölrúnu (*Völundarkviða* v.4)  
"eastwards crawled (glided on skis) Egill to (find) Ölrún"

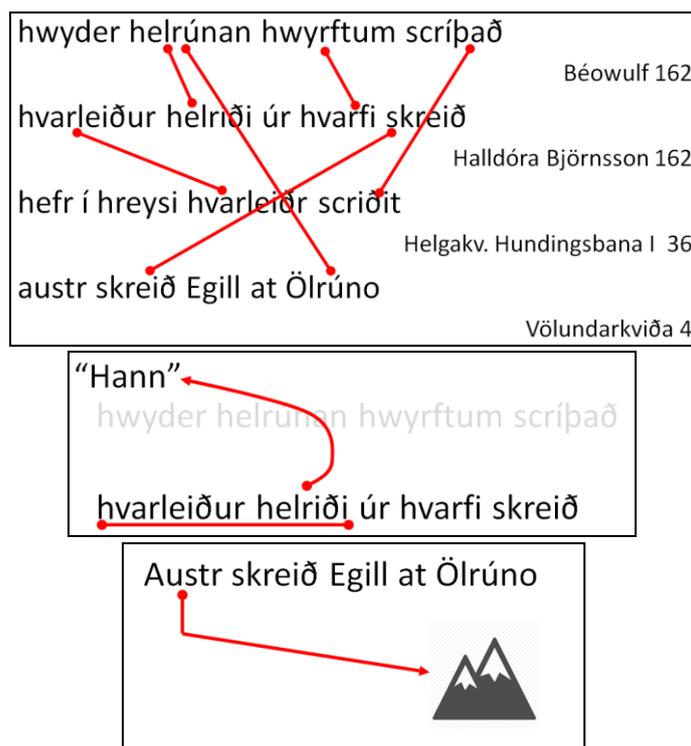
These lines are knitted together by a number of sound-shape correspondences, of which the most prominent are shown in the following slide:

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<sup>1</sup> 'Thumbing the Wind' in Matthew Whelpton *et.al.*, *The Intimacy of Words/Innileiki orðanna*, Essays in Honour of Pétur Knútsson, 2015 (22-42),

<sup>2</sup> Pétur Knútsson 2004

<sup>3</sup> Halldóra Björnsson 1983



There is no need for the purposes of this Defence to go into these correspondences closely; it is enough to note that they do not follow the regimen of syntax or etymology.<sup>4</sup> Their flavour is perhaps best captured by focusing on the two words *helrúnan* ‘councillors of hell, monsters’ in the top line and *Ölrúno* in the bottom line, dative of *Ölrún*, ‘Ale-rune’ the name of Egill’s lady friend. Were it not for the tight net of correspondences which enmeshes these sound-shapes the connection between *helrúnan* and *Ölrúno* would not be particularly electric. As it is, and given Halldóra’s further use of *Völundarkviða* in her translation,<sup>5</sup> the correspondence sparks loud and clear.

I have tried to discuss these effects in terms of a sort of Bahktinian dialogic, a multiple voicing in the text. A sort of — not quite the novelistic discourse which we know from Bahktin but something in fact remarkably similar. We are post-Derridean readers, readers of written texts which Derrida sees as being prior to speech,<sup>6</sup> and—crucially—we are *silent* readers, hearing the impossible intonation<sup>7</sup> of these indices, the co-existence of multiple textual structures running simultaneously, as it were in parallel interacting universes.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In articles I’ve written since I’ve referred to these lines of connection as *indices*, and pointed out that they can be *intratextual*, knitting together various parts of the same text, *intertextual*, reaching out to other texts and as it were exploding boundaries of the text and merging it with all the other texts it touches, a sort of universal text, and finally and perhaps most magically *extratextual*, the threads of connection between the text and some sort of a reality outside the text, which I symbolize here with a Misty Mountains. In another article have written about textual indices - which I called pollices - which pointed to places we can’t or don’t wish to look at, untexted reality, unthought, unconscious realities.

<sup>5</sup> qq

<sup>6</sup> prior to *parole*,

<sup>7</sup> Ch. Lock

<sup>8</sup> So a sentence is doing 2 or 3 things at once, and we hear them all going on at once.

Now Matthew is a highly unusual “generative” linguist insofar as he accepts with me the linguistic importance of these textual movements, and what is more he claims that they are open to analysis within the framework of linguistic theory,— as for instance Chomsky doesn’t, or doesn’t want to bother with, claiming that that’s .. something else, a place where he doesn’t really want to go. Ann Banfield set out to analyse novelistic discourse from within an early generative framework, but she is not looking precisely at these phenomena. Nor is Jackendoff; except that Matthew feels that a Jackendoffian linguistics *would* be able to deal with these effects.

But this is where Matthew and I seem to part company. In my article on Windy Words I said one or two things which didn’t really expect Matthew to take lying down. Very briefly, I explored the possibility that language has its own momentum, that there are things happening in language which we don’t have to explain in terms of activity controlled by the brain. If you like: language is a structure which works—to some extent—independently of human mental processes. As it is, linguists seem flatly to refuse in any way to look at language as they look, for instance, at mathematics: in mathematics there are structures which we feel exist independently of human cognition.

Now I think I realised at the time that my article was not a well-rounded argument,<sup>9</sup> and I’ve been recasting it since—and Matthew’s thoughtful comments have definitely helped me to see what was needed.

It’s clear to me that from either of our points of view, Matthew’s and mine, the other person appears to be dualistic. Let me explain. My favourite philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge insists that, when we make a valid distinction between opposites, for instance day and night, this does not mean that we can physically separate these opposites. Distinction is not the same as division. The distinction between day and night is of course a pragmatically important one; but we who are obstinate enough to live in Iceland know that you cannot physically divide day from night; the *dividing line* is uncertain, arbitrary, political, and periodically completely neutralized. Now I want to maintain, with Coleridge and a number of other thinkers,<sup>10</sup> that this same distinction obtains between what is in *here* and what is *out there*. Making that distinction is of course a pragmatic necessity for every individual human. It enables me for instance to walk out through the doorway instead of trying to walk through the wall. But making the distinction is not dualism. Dualism arises when we think that since we can make these distinctions we must be dealing with two separate pieces of reality: this is what I think Matthew is doing, and I quote Coleridge as

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<sup>9</sup> To be honest, I rushed to get it published before I retired, in order to receive research points—as an emeritus you are ex-merited, and have to live off your own merits.

<sup>10</sup> Goethe, Schelling, Rudolf Steiner, and particularly Barfield—to mention a few

saying ☞ “It is a dull and obtuse mind (Matthew!) that must divide in order to distinguish; but it is still worse, that distinguishes in order to divide.”<sup>11</sup>

Owen Barfield, *What Coleridge Thought*, 1972

It is a dull and obtuse mind, that must divide in order to distinguish; but it is still worse, that distinguishes in order to divide.

Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*; Barfield 1972:19

Mikael M. Karlsson, ‘Do we Think with our Brains?’ *Intellectica* 2010/1, 53/54, 67-94

Dualism is the assumption that because it make sense to talk of the world *in here* and the word *out there* then these two worlds must be in different places. That is the mistake that we all make, and Matthew is making it here.

In order to explain my point here I am going to start out with Mikael Karlsson’s contention ☞<sup>12</sup> that the compulsive habit we have of *locating* all such processes as thinking and presumably language in space is not a necessary or even a rational approach. He asks whether we think with the brain, and comes to the conclusion that we do not, any more than we eat with the brain; although it seems clear that the brain participates bravely in these processes. In the same way I find it meaningless to locate the workings of language solely or even primarily in extended matter such as the brain. Of course, the fact that something is going on at the same time in the brain is strongly indicated by modern science, but it does not follow that that is its only arena of action, and—crucially— it does not follow that strict *location* (in the brain or outside it) of its arena of action is a genuine explanatory desideratum. So goodbye Kant, at least as I understand him: but that is another story.

Note that I’m not talking about the undoubtedly also-valid conception of language as a cultural phenomenon occurring in a community of human minds. That understanding also posits a locatable arena, and I have the same quarrel with it.

And one more point before going on to explain where I’m going. There is another acute difficulty about locating language primarily in the brain—a problem which is endemic to modern science, and one which I know Matthew is fully aware of. It is this: modern neuroscience, which Mike beautifully and not at all disparagingly calls brainology, is concerned with remarkably vague ideas about the make-up and function of what we call neurons. We *know*, if we stop and think for a moment, that the neuron model of brain function is a creation of our times, as were the humours and vapours of the medieval body, or the engines and valves of the scientific revolution; the neuron model will inevitably go the way of earlier models as we move on to new conceptions and new

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Barfield WCT p. 19

<sup>12</sup> ‘Do we think with our brains?’

technologies.<sup>13</sup> Jackendoff is already dated when he calls the brain an organ of computation 📄,

#### Jackendoff

After all, the brain is the organ of computation, and the same computation can happen in different places as long as the pattern of information flow is the same. In your computer, a file or program may sit in different parts of memory or be fragmented across different sectors of the disk and work the same way in every case. It would not be surprising if the growing brain were at least that dynamic in allocating neural resources to computational demands.

Kindle, loc. something

and goes on to suggest on the model of computers' fragmenting data across different sectors of their hard disks, that the human brain is likely to be doing something similar. I mean that is so crass, such a jejune and ultimately misleading metaphor.

So perhaps I can explain my position by working backwards from Matthew's alarm and in fact abhorrence 📄

#### Matthew 'Thumbing the Wind'

In the context of Chomsky's characterisation of linguistic creativity and its use by free rational agents, the idea that individuals are simply sounding pieces for a finite textual repository of set expressions, channelled from outside themselves, is not only observationally untrue but politically abhorrent.

of my position. It immediately brought to mind George Steiner's 📄 remarks

#### George Steiner, *Language and Silence* 1985

The words themselves seem to have lost some of their precision and vitality. This, I know is a controversial notion ....Most linguists would regard implications of internal, independent vitality in language as suspect.

(44)

that the non-locatable approach is suspect for most linguists, and I have heard this response before from linguistics colleagues. I've never understood it fully, because I don't see that my position runs counter to the notion of individual

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<sup>13</sup> Medieval science is not bogus. The four humours were logical extrapolations from correctly perceived data; if we laugh at them now it is because we can't be bothered to follow the analytic logic involved. In the same way we can imagine scientists of the future laughing themselves silly over the algorithmical analyses of today.

creativity and free will. If Matthew reads my position as claiming that “individuals are simply sounding pieces for a finite textual repository ... channelled from outside”, then I didn’t at first understand why he called this dualism, since clearly it would mean that I didn’t accept the concept of mind at all. I would be a simple behaviourist like Skinner. Skinner is not a mind-matter dualist, because he believes that mind is simply matter interacting with matter. He is a matter monist. ■

But Matthew’s insistence on my dualism gave me the clue. *Matthew is reading my distinction as a division*. This is an expression of his dualism, his belief in a real division between the individual human mind and the rest of the universe, for which I can find only very meagre supporting evidence. For me, my mind is part of the cosmos, not adjunct to it; and it is not a domain of phenomena which can profitably be discussed as a closed system, in some way corralled out of the rest of reality. I’m not simply saying that the line of demarcation between my mind and the rest of the cosmos is difficult to draw, or variable; I’m saying that there *is no division*: the distinction is a useful abstraction which works well for mankind at its present stage of evolution, but is nevertheless still a creature of the analysis. Matthew’s dislike of the idea of language ‘working on’ man—a dislike which I would share—is born of the idea that free will and creativity are functions which exist only in the human mind, that there is a “vital spark” *in here* which doesn’t exist *out there*. I DO agree that this vital spark glows particularly brightly in the individual human consciousness, but this tells me something about the state of the cosmos rather than of man alone. Man *is* the cosmos being aware of itself. And this awareness is not solely *in here*; it is by definition, as awareness, a constituent principle of existence: not just some existence but existence in general.<sup>14</sup> Barfield calls this awareness ‘meaning’. “It is not simply that words have meaning. Things also mean.”<sup>15</sup>

This approach is commonplace in a number of disciplines from quantum mechanics to literary criticism through hermeneutics to psychology; it is also an essential feature of the fine arts 🎨. Here is Nína Tryggvadóttir’s *Untitled*, 1962, now being shown in Listasafn Íslands,

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<sup>14</sup> I am aware that I am going against the transcendental Kantian argument of the interrelation between self-consciousness and objective reality. “The consciousness of my existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me” (quoted by Strawson loc 270). This is Kant’s argument for a simple Cartesian duality; but he is nevertheless merely “distinguishing in order to divide.” Kant’s arguments for an objective, rule-bound reality outside of ourselves *is not falsified* by any denial of the possibility of division. It is simply a question of examining the ontology of this reality.

Kant was most probably on the right track when he saw the essential correlation between objective reality and self-consciousness, but what he doesn’t seem to have noticed is that this is also an argument which tends to dissolve the mind-matter duality: man is part of objective reality, man’s self-consciousness *is* objective reality’s self-consciousness: with man, the cosmos has become self-aware.

<sup>15</sup> Barfield quoting—whom? Prob in first essay in *Rediscovery*.



Nína Tryggvadóttir  
*Untitled, 1962*

where rectangles of colour identify themselves with varying intensity. But none of them can be plucked out of the work, none can suffer analysis as a single identity. This seems to be a mode of understanding which terrifies analytic linguists.

So I'm going to finish with multiple voicing, the co-existence and co-extension of different symbolic structures in the same space of silent reading. My grandson Sebastian Kristinsson brought up the idea in a conversation with me this summer that the silent multiple discourse of the dialogic is as if it were meaning in quantum superposition. This is a brilliant observation, and one which I wish I had thought of myself;<sup>16</sup> it is, as I said at the beginning, the metaphor of my paper. The space of silent reading is of course unstable: the door may open at any time and a face look in and asks what's for dinner. This multiple state of parallel linguistic structures can be likened to the domain of quantum multiplicity, because as soon as we submit it to observation it collapses; as soon as we clear our throats and speak the sentence aloud, the unspeakable intonation of silence collapses into a simple monologic, macrologic intonation, and the multiple worlds evaporate like an irrelevant statistic.

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<sup>16</sup> Proof of my brilliance. Brilliant thinkers always steal their best ideas from their students and grandchildren (Sebastían is both).

Every sentence is plurivocal,<sup>17</sup> running in parallel universes. Chomskyists like to refer to Move- $\alpha$ , one of the fundamental syntactic operations; so whenever Move- $\alpha$  is performed, the sentence splits into parallel sentences. A normal spoken sentence, uttered by a fast-speaking, Icelandic female right-wing politician, is performing Move- $\alpha$  at speeds which are fully commensurate with quantum superpositionary effects. This is an attested fact, not a supposition on my part (it is Roger Penrose's conception). But you don't need fast speeds. In what order did I tell you that that speaker was Icelandic, right-wing, female and fast-speaking? By the time my sentence finishes the sequence no longer matters. Alpha has never moved. It is no coincidence that the sign for the end of the sentence, the full-stop, is a single point. When the sentence is finished its quantum possibilities have collapsed into one historic monologic post-sequence. But every time we read it or hear it, the parallel universes start up again.

So if you really want to stave off my scepticism for a while yet, Matthew, the binary nodes in your linguistic trees must be drawn in quantum superposition; and I rather suspect that the same may be said of brainology.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> There is in fact—and this clashes with some of what I have said above—no such thing as monologic language.

<sup>18</sup> On extrapolation.

One of the characteristics of this extrapolation is jargon, which often proliferates in the course of free creative analysis since there is no underpinning reality. I quote from Matthew 2014, in an otherwise admirably focused article: “Satellite-framed languages map the spatial association function onto a particle”. In the first place the sentence can easily be translated into dejargonated English: “Languages of this type express the spatial relationship with a particle.” But the jargon hides a dangerous short-circuit in the reasoning: it is not the languages themselves which perform this mapping, but the linguist; the mapping is executed in the course of the analysis: it is a creature of the analysis. We may also note the interesting point that Matthew's sentence assigns direct agency to language itself, not to the speaker— and this is exactly the point I am trying to make in my essay on Windy Words, which Matthew feels so strongly clashes with the free autonomy of the individual human brain. The fact is that we habitually speak of language like this: French has only two genders, Icelandic favours parataxis. In fact we do not hesitate to attribute full agency to language: it is much more normal to say that a language such as Icelandic imposes certain constraints (or restraints?) on its speakers such as gender or case assignation than to claim that individual speakers of the language impose such constraints on their language. This is of course something that we do all the time in language, or that language is doing to us all the time when we speak, creating agency and patiency where they don't exist on the ground; but in this case it makes much less sense to assign all linguistic constraints or structural necessities to an already outmoded vision of hardwiring in individual brains than to assume they are properties of language itself, period. The subsequent physical location of language does not seem to me to be an essential or ontological point. It is at best falsifiable.