Language as a Series of Statements

The question as to what language is in its being is once more of the greatest urgency.

... the statement circulates, is used, disappears, allows or prevents the realization of a desire, serves or resists various interests, participates in challenge and struggle, and becomes the theme of appropriation or rivalry.

Foucault.

I

In recent years, a growing body of work has had the effect of disturbing the founding assumptions on which the linguistic study of language is based. From Jacques Derrida's radical critiques of Saussure and Michel Foucault's metadiscursive architectonics emerge certain Anglo-American appropriations such as Silverman and Torode's The Material Word and the work of Trevor Pateman. In a less radical way, Fowler, Kress, Hodge and Trew have married the concerns of leftist sociology, stylistics and linguistics to produce a politically-positioned "reading" of language now becoming well-known as "critical linguistics."2

Post-linguistics (if one may be permitted the term) joins with the concerns of poststructuralist approaches to language, literature and culture. Of necessity, it has taken root in the spaces between departments or disciplines, that is, in interdisciplinary schools in tertiary education.2 Far from constituting any sort of liberation from disciplinary procedures, interdisciplinary study, as it is deployed in a number of the new universities, polytechnics and colleges, involves procedures and strategies of teaching and research which are radically different from disciplinary procedures and strategies.

It involves complex modes of address which take it beyond an amalgam of individual disciplines; this would be multidisciplinarity, the poorer alternative, I think, to interdisciplinarity. To construct an interdisciplinary program it is not sufficient to take a historian, a sociologist, a linguist and a psychologist, ask them to inspect a particular object, and expect them to be able to come up with anything different from what their individual disciplines had to offer.

Interdisciplinarity, in the ongoing processes of its establishment and deployment, takes as its object several disciplinary procedures and interrogates their adequacy as ways of knowing. In this sense it is metadisciplinary and metatheoretical. So the first question the member of

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a teaching team asks himself or herself (and the students) is, "What are the
ways in which I got to know about 'language,' 'history,' 'society,' and so
on?" Or in other terms, "What are the rules for the construction of the
discourses through which disciplinary knowledge is made possible?"

This is just one of the strategies of interdisciplinary approaches. The
teaching-scene emerges as one which is not so much progressing smoothly
as more and more knowledge is accumulated and fed into the pedagogical
situation, but one which is characterised by conflicting accounts,
 incompatible paradigms and discontinuous discourses. These conflicts
sometimes produce new fields of inquiry where absences are discovered in
the concerns of a discipline (e.g. labour history, Aboriginal history in
Australia). At other times, areas of teaching can be divided in non-
productive ways. This would seem to be the case of (say) Communication
Studies in Australia, which could be characterised most aptly as a field of
contestation between an American paradigm of, broadly, behavioural
studies, and a British/European paradigm of, broadly, Sociology/Cultural
Studies.4 Where the former tends to seek explanation for the observed
phenomena of communication in the minds of individuals, the latter looks
to the material conditions of existence and the modes of distribution of
texts and to their rhetorical capabilities.

This is not to suggest that this particular conflict is part of
interdisciplinarity. Indeed, only the second paradigm will permit the
notion of conflict as a teaching strategy. What is suggested by this strategy
is that there is the possibility of conflict and cohesion in relation to specific
teaching problems. Without ever trying to construct any general theories,
interdisciplinarity will engage in teaching programs while openly
recognising the political nature of the negotiations which must be carried
out as an integral part of rational intellectual inquiry in settling on the
forms and contents of courses, and on what problems and areas are to be
addressed.

So, once the team has agreed on a set of headings under which they
can begin to teach, they ask themselves not so much what circulates as
knowledge (in a disciplinary sense) about these things, but how they come
to know these things. One of the features of interdisciplinary discourses is
thus their ability to calculate their own formation in an ongoing way; they
are metadiscursive, self-reflexive activities which are always subject to
review as to their effectivity.

This emphasis on processes of knowing (apparatuses which construct
knowledges) means that interdisciplinary study tends to locate its work in
historical fields of problems. That is to say, courses would be organised
around theoretical problems and texts would be recruited to these
problems. For example, if one were teaching a course around conceptions
of "Australian English," the category "Australian English" would be set up
as a problem to be investigated. The category would be investigated
historically in its emergence as a projection of national/political strategies,
its later appropriation by more scientific linguistics, and so on.
II

This shift of emphasis in teaching inevitably affects ways of perceiving “language” and of talking about texts as language in interdisciplinary areas such as Communication Studies. Teaching language in a disciplinary context involves the deployment of a number of linguistic assumptions which the work of Foucault, Hunter and others has made visible. These must first be characterised as a familiar background to the Foucauldian analysis which I propose here as an interdisciplinary apparatus for the examination of historical problems of the use of language. I shall be neither doing linguistics nor attacking that discipline. What I want to do in a very tentative way is propose a theoretical construction of the uses of speech and writing which might lead to a different series of results from that provided by some forms of current linguistics.

One familiar statement about language is that it is the mediator between the world of thought and the world of things. For instance, a very general account of Chomsky’s Rules and Representations claims that “This book is about mind and reality and the language that mediates between them.” With this kind of account — an endlessly repeated way of talking about language — it seems to be simply given that words “express” meanings, and that meanings are describable as the rules generated at the “point of contact between the laws of thought and the orders of things.” There is nothing in the nature of language itself (if this is in fact where one seeks justifications) to justify privileging this relationship between thought and the world, and taking them both as given, as separable components of a dualism. The use of words is not simply reducible to this meaning—relation. A way around this problem lies in the use of the term “discourse,” in its Foucauldian appearance. It can be used to build up a picture of language—use which addresses a quite different set of problems from those made available through the conception of language as a form of mediation.

If we decide not to privilege thought or individual consciousness (the individual human subject’s faculty of recognition), we might have to admit to a notion of language as not being generated by thought, but as circulating according to the rules of a discursive formation. Similarly, if we reject realism and adopt a notion of language as (re)presentation (i.e., as constitutive and productive) we might have to reject a notion of “the world out there” as something which exists before or apart from language which then comes along to “express” it, as if language were a process of the “placing outside” of ideas, as Derrida puts it.

The notion of discourse need not take into account either of these special positions (consciousness, the world) on which a general philosophy of language has centred its research since Port-Royal grammar, or even Locke’s Essay. Discourse is “an account of word use which is not reducible either to a subject’s conscious recognition or to the objects which these recognitions supposedly recognise.”

Discourses consist of specific techniques or enunciative operations which are not necessarily part of an infinite and harmonious larger unit.
Language as a Series of Statements

Discourses are not, therefore, "contained" "in" language as partial representations of a potential totality. It has been assumed that linguistics could circumscribe the universe of language. But, from the newer perspective, linguistics could be described as a discourse which performs operations on language according to disciplinary rules which are neither mental operations nor laws of nature. They are rules specific to, or epistemologically dominant within, the discipline of linguistics. For instance, if one performs a simple rewriting operation:

Joe caught the cat

\[ \Rightarrow \text{NP} + \text{VP} + \text{NP} \]

the rule for the use of one set of symbols in relation to another set of symbols has nothing to do with any mental act that may have occurred before the operation of the rule (apart from pedagogic trainings in such formal operations). Nor does the operation just performed relate back to some sort of reality. It is not the province of linguistic techniques to say if the sentence or, for that matter, the other string of symbols, is an adequate representation of "reality." Linguistics is simply a description of regular occurrences found in linguistic artifacts.

Nor is the rewriting operation a fragment of what a consciousness has recognised so far about language, so that it would be part of an infinitely expanding set which will eventually become adequate to the subject's virtual capacity for the understanding of phenomena. The operation is, in a sense, the understanding. Knowing how to do it derives not from a general faculty of understanding but from a training in the application of specific techniques. "Recognition" thus names a subject's practical mastery of a set of techniques.

If one looks at much of modern linguistics, and in particular linguistics deriving from the tradition of generative transformational grammar, one has to ask what kind of knowledge is being reproduced. Inevitably, explanations and motivations for knowledge reside in conceptions of what is innate in people's minds, and the social correlate of this is the category of the universal. A Foucauldian approach would have no quarrel with a linguistics which sought simply to describe the regularities of discourse (such as Bloomfield and Harris), but it would not be able to accept a linguistics which systematically attempted to relate the structure of thought with a logico-grammatical order. The Foucauldian perspective insists that there are no fundamental mental operations which can provide a basis for a logical analysis of language in the form of a propositional analysis.

Generative transformational grammar is a kind of linguistics in which a strong bond is established between the subject and grammar. It turns out to be not very useful in the analysis of language as communication. Training students to perform symbolic rewriting operations on sentences tends always to produce the same kinds of results across a number of languages or even discourses. The students are often interested in the
communicative effects of language as it is used in specific encounters in their daily lives. This means that methods of analysis which claim to reveal the innate or the universal point to what is shared and identical for all, and therefore of no communicative significance. The study of communication depends on the analysis of the differential distribution of information across spatial, temporal or social categories. Ultimately it depends on the development of an interest in the rules governing what is in fact said, i.e., the statement.

One solution would seem to be a shift to sociolinguistics, but this also has problems. Historically, linguistics colonised the adjacent field of sociology in order to make use of the concept of context in language studies (just as Chomskian linguistics had earlier, for different reasons, colonised the authoritative discourse of psychology and the "pure" discourse of symbolic logic). So emphasis shifted from a study of language which gave priority to the subject-grammar relation to one in which what is said was conceived of largely in terms of a subject situated in a certain context which explained what his or her words meant. Context (given as social, rather than, say, textual) was the point at which subjectivity was supposed to stop, and yet the category of the social was constantly created out of statements on intersubjectivity. For instance, Labov writes:

There is a growing realization that the basis of intersubjective knowledge in linguistics must be found in speech — language as it is used in everyday life by members of the social order, that vehicle of communication in which they argue with their wives, joke with their friends and deceive their enemies.

From this phenomenological base, the category of the "social" was constructed by using the discontinuities of sociological discourse — role, domain, sex, age, or social stratification. This kind of study was useful because it allowed for the multiplicity of the uses of language; both individuals and language ceased to be uniform in their effects. The technique became one of reading off from their speech the social characteristics that individuals were "offering." A problem which came up before recurs with sociolinguistic analysis because it is still not important what one might say. Utterances are strangely devoid of communicative effects; they function rather as a kind of social labelling of individuals and groups in terms of categories provided by (usually empiricist, behaviourist) sociology.

Sociolinguistics also discovers "language" in selective ways. What were previously constructed as monolithic national cultures are broken up into varieties of languages; and the ones chosen for study tend to be the marginal or dispossessed varieties: the languages of ethnic minorities, "lower" classes. Perhaps for tactical reasons it is easier to study these groups. American business people or academics might not have the time or inclination to become the objects of empirical research. The discourse of sociology has traditionally not seen these groups as being problematic.
Language as a Series of Statements

To sum up, sociolinguistics seeks its data generally within national cultures and in historically unspecified ways. Language is read in such a way that individuals are socially specified in a "given" society at a certain point in time. In Australia, the ideal object for sociolinguistic research would seem to be the varieties of Australian English. But "Australian English" cannot be taken for granted as a national phenomenon, since the exploration of its functioning at a micro-level leads back from each linguistic function to a broad social category (such as age or class) which is defined only by sociology and is therefore more relevant to a certain disciplinary knowledge than to the specific problem of language-use in Australia.

An alternative possibility is to start with specific and current problems engendered by "language," such as a sexist statement appearing in a newspaper article. At the level of a discourse of sexism, it is clear why neither linguistic nor sociolinguistic analyses are adequate for an understanding of the adjacent politics. Grammatical analysis can only rewrite such a statement as a string of symbols, and only an extremely meticulous semantics (one which could also account for metaphor) would be able to measure its features and match them against some pre-established non-sexist discourse.

Sociolinguistics would have the problem of not being able to recognize "sexist" as a social and political category, and might instead turn its attention, as Robin Lakoff did, to features of men's and women's speech, as if the fault somehow lay with language itself. The fact that sexism can take many linguistic forms (and even non-linguistic forms like the spatial organisation of buildings) points to its effectivity as a discourse. It would seem to be quite an important one today since it is constantly referred to as if it were some machine dispensing misery. What is interesting about sexist statements is that whenever they appear they are seen as being associated with an effect of power — a phallocratic order which must be eradicated. The appearance of a discourse of sexism is historically related to a transformation of this kind of power in Western societies. The concept of sexism not only appears in relation to a certain evolution in the distribution of women in the labour force, but is also the product of the operations of the discourses of feminism. Feminism (which is a kind of knowledge) "produces" the concept each time the conditions are met for the manifestation of a certain kind of power.

This kind of discourse analysis, then, is concerned with the appearance of certain kinds of talk in any language, not just a national language, or varieties within national languages. It relates the appearance of statements to the complex of historically evolving technical, institutional and political factors which work to produce them. Within the complexity of discursive formations the statement is not reducible to the speaking subject, nor to symbolic operations, nor to some originary social context in which it would seem to be made.
III

In 1957 two remarkable books were published: Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* and Roland Barthes's *Mythologies.* Both are treatises on language, but the limits they impose on the term "language" are so fundamentally different that the coincidence of their date of publication is all that the two books have in common; and their juxtaposition is simply a rhetorical device I am using here to generate the friction needed to warm up an argument.

Let me start by giving an example. Let me repeat what I have just said: "let me start by giving an example." This points to one of the major problems for metalinguistics: what is it in the structure of discourses on language that allows the writer to stop the mediated narrative of a paper and shift to a supposedly immediate (neutral, factual, given-in-advance, innocent) statement called "an example"? What permits the juxtaposition of example and non-example in the one discourse, and what communicative effects are thereby generated? What would happen if theorists of language stopped giving examples? In other words, what specific factors necessitate the maintenance of a distinction between examples (language as empirically given data which is spoken by "someone else") and language mediated by the speaking subject? This was Barthes' problem, not Chomsky's, so my third example will be from *Mythologies*:

It is now time to give one or two examples of mythical speech. I shall borrow the first from an observation by Vílery. I am a pupil in the second form in a French lyceé. I open my Latin grammar, and I read a sentence, borrowed from Aesop or Phaedrus: *qua ego nominor leo.* I stop and think. There is something ambiguous about this statement: on the one hand, the words in it do have a simple meaning: *because my name is lion.* And on the other hand, the sentence is evidently there in order to signify something else to me. Inasmuch as it is addressed to me, a pupil in the second form, it tells me clearly: I am a grammatical example meant to illustrate the rule about the agreement of the predicate. Here Barthes hit upon something of huge importance, and used his example to illustrate first- and second-order semiological systems. It can be used in another way: to point to a rule for the elaboration of rules in grammar books. It is a regular feature of this kind of discourse that it demands that some of its statements be read metalinguistically (as examples of grammar) while the statements which surround the example and open up a space for it to appear in the discourse are on no account to be read in this way. On the contrary, they must be read transparently as the carriers of propositions which participate in a particular variety of argument.

What, then, is the substance of language, its material force? Is it logical (and therefore composed of propositions)? It is linguistic (and
Language as a Series of Statements

therefore composed of sentences? Or can its substance be conceived of as propagated in another space, the space of statements and discourses?

Foucault, in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, announces that he will only be concerned with statements, and this will be precisely my concern in analysing linguistics as a kind of language coupled to a kind of social practice. Propositions, with their possibilities of truth and falsehood and of correct ordering to create arguments, are the product of philosophical readings of certain sorts of texts. Sentences, as is now well-established, are not “natural,” but are produced when people are taught to write language in certain ways. They are the product of the normative grammatical and orthographic practices of primary school teaching.

Statements constitute the surface inscription of language as it is materially produced: one statement cannot hide underneath another—they tend to exclude each other in their use. There is no “deep structure”; there are only statements which follow each other according to the rules for the construction of familiar discourses. To say that a sentence has a deep structure is to rewrite it according to a technique deployed in and validated by certain schools of linguistics. Statements appear, are proliferated, and become rare. Their conditions of existence lie in historically-specific institutional configurations. By themselves they are neither true nor false, neither correctly nor incorrectly formed, neither innocent nor guilty. Rather, these evaluations are attributed to them by the institutions with which they form discursive apparatuses. A statement is not the same from one century to another or from one institution to another. An obscene statement is not the same thing if it is produced first in a kindergarten and then in a pornographic magazine.

To reiterate, the present theoretical orientation is concerned with the analysis of discourses such as linguistics as elaborations of statements. These statements are not like the air we breathe, an infinite transparency; but things that are transmitted and preserved, that have value, and which one tries to appropriate; that are repeated, reproduced, and transformed; to which pre-established networks are adapted, and to which a status is given in the institution; things that are duplicated not only by copy or translation, but by exegeisis, commentary, and the internal proliferation of meaning.

(Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 120)

I am not concerned with the analysis of linguistics as a vertical hierarchy of propositions, since that is the province of particular disciplines in linguistics, such as those in which one practises the techniques of syntactic argumentation: a fusing of informal logic and syntactic analysis which sets up the criteria for the ordering of propositions and examples into “good” and “bad” arguments. Nor will it be concerned with an analysis of linguistics (or language) as a series of sentences which are ordered horizontally across conjunctions and disjunctions, and are ultimately constructed according to the normative training of producing “correct” English.
The present theory looks at language, and the specific discourses within it, as powerful techniques for assuring the reproduction of certain kinds of knowledge. We must be careful to specify what we mean by this word. "Knowledge" is not a general phenomenon open to explanation, but the product of a discontinuous series of operations performed by agents who are more or less familiar with the techniques associated with a discursive formation or an institutional discipline.

In other words, for a discipline such as linguistics, there isn't any general knowledge about language already in existence which can be accumulated. Rather, certain kinds of knowledge about "language" are brought about through the repetition of particular communicative operations performed along the gradients of power difference. These power differences would be evident in the classroom, the fieldwork situation, between men and women, on the shopfloor, and so on. The analysis, therefore, would look to the limited set of things that can be said within linguistic science, the set of statements which characterise this discourse and limit its operations and give it a specific kind of value in a general "economy" of discourses, as defined by Foucault:

The "economy" of discourses — their intrinsic technology, the necessities of their operation, the tactics they employ, the effects of power which underlie them and which they transmit — this, and not a system of representations, is what determines the essential features of what they have to say. Statements, therefore, are of the order neither of propositions nor of the sentence. They are not the categories of analysis of either logic or grammar. They constitute the material appearance and circulation of language in the social world, and are not infinitely proliferated because they are essentially rare. The appearance of a given statement at a certain time and in a certain place assures the exclusion of alternative statements which may have been possible. Nor does the same statement always induce the same effects at different historical periods. Deleuze gives the following example from The Archaeology of Knowledge:

The same sentence-slogan "To the prison with the mad!" could belong to discursive formations which are entirely distinct according to whether it is protesting, as in the 18th century, against confusing prisoners with mad people, or on the contrary, demanding, as in the 19th century, asylums which separate the mad from prisoners, or even today where it decries an evolution of the hospital milieu.

IV

With this in mind, let us consider another well-known example: "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." When it first appeared this statement functioned as an "example" illustrating semantic anomaly combined with syntactic regularity. It can be juxtaposed, by way of comparison, with another statement which was also given as an example.
Language as a Series of Statements

This one, produced by Wendy Bacon when she was a sociology student at Sydney University, was used as an example of gross obscenity. She appeared in the vestibule of the Central Court in Sydney on 17 August 1970, dressed in a representation of a nun's habit bearing the words, "I have been fucked by God's steel prick."

Also "well-formed" by syntactic criteria, this sentence could be read, like Chomsky's, as semantically anomalous. But it was not inscribed or circulated as that kind of statement. It was intended as a protest against the censoring of a student newspaper, and formed part of a deliberate "porn-politics." Judge Levine's prosecution of Bacon for exhibiting an obscene publication rested in part on his construction of the context in which the statement appeared. He said: "She was putting herself on as a member of a religious order — the same words on the back of a postage stamp may not be obscene." Thus the law, as arbiter of social order, automatically arbitrates on discursive order by saying which statements can appear in which contexts. Obscene statements, it would seem, cannot be recognised as such in the order of the individual (the atomistic, the private and the invisible) but only in the broad public domain. For this, and other charges, Bacon was confined for a week in prison. The statement she made was out of place, and therefore judged guilty. Her words were tried and found to be offensive to "the average man."

A precedent exists in the trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover. In that case of legislation on language, what was brought into focus was another configuration of statements. These concerned the role of the writer as author in society. Literature in this case became a privileged discourse, and the imagined response of "the average man" lapsed, its place being taken by well-known literary experts testifying about the intentions of the ("great") author.

In comparing Wendy Bacon's sentence with Chomsky's (and using both as examples having particular communicative effects), we see that it is not the syntactic or semantic form of the sentences which is important, but the contingent narrative which must be evoked to "explain" each statement, particularly Bacon's. Chomsky's would appear to need little explanation. It gives the impression of being innocent or neutral. Indeed, in conjunction with its partner, it almost constitutes an explanation in itself:

1. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
2. Furiously sleep ideas green colorless.

Because speakers of English have been trained to accept, in most instances, that (1) is grammatical while (2) is not, the example stands as a justification for separating criteria of meaning from syntactic analysis. This was an extreme moment in the history of the study of language; semantics and pragmatics were later to flood back to provide criteria for syntactic analysis. But the example itself is curious. The rhetorical effect is an appeal to the commonality of language-experience among speakers of English. If none of us doubts the "truth" of the distinction between grammatical and
non-grammatical, where, then, is the problem? It becomes a problem only if one accepts one’s engagement in a training program in disciplinary linguistics. Furthermore, this acceptance may indeed follow on from an uncritical acceptance of prior normative (primary school, etc.) trainings in recognition of “good” and “bad” sentences. But it is nevertheless possible for speakers to conceive of “problems” in language as being located more in sociopolitical areas (problems arising from sexist statements, racist statements, and so on). This approach can equally lead to a metadiscursive re-examination of linguistics itself, where its “problem” might lie in the fact that it somehow imagines that language carries with it (always?) a set of problems waiting to be solved by increasingly adequate theories. But this is not the case. Linguistic theories set up their problems in the way Chomsky’s example does. Grammar constructs its object. A case in point would be ergativity. “Ergative” languages were not always so called. Australian Aboriginal languages did not “become” ergative until 1969 with the publication of a paper by Bob Dixon. Ergativity wasn’t hiding out in them waiting to be discovered by procedures just as likely to turn up any other structure. Ergativity came to be “discovered” via a particular systematic evolution of the techniques of linguistic analysis. Work on ergativity became very popular, but this particular gold mine might be said to have petered out when an influential American linguist, Ken Hale, announced at the 1981 meeting of the Linguistics Society of Australia that ergativity can be found in just about any language.

Specific linguistic techniques — such as the procedures for recognising and analysing patterns of ergativity — are produced within specific power/knowledge conjunctures (Dixonomism in the Australian case). This is how Foucault has spoken about so-called “new discoveries”:

the important thing here is not that such changes can be rapid and extensive, or rather it is that this extent and rapidity are only the sign of something else: a modification in the rules of formation of statements which are accepted as scientifically true. Thus it is not a change of content (refutation of old errors, recovery of old truths), nor is it a change of theoretical form (renewal of a paradigm, modification of systematic ensembles). It is a question of what governs statements, and the way in which they govern each other so as to constitute a set of propositions which are scientifically acceptable, and hence capable of being verified or falsified by scientific procedures. In short, there is a problem of the regime, the politics of the scientific statement.

This type of specific “governing rule” operates in relation to the Chomsky example, which says that this kind of sentence — having its origins nowhere else but in Chomsky’s mind, and constituting a humanist appeal to universal intuitions about language — can be part of the setting up of a scientific hypothesis without having any propositional content in itself. Because it is an example, its meaning is reduced to a kind of neutrality. Its innocence and self-evidence form the counterpart to the theory developed in the text around it. The rule for the elaboration of this kind of scientific
discourse is one which depends on a constant discursive alternation between the natural, formal data-base of the *exempla* and the propositional content of the *explanans*. But can it not be said that the "data" sentences are already part of the argument, that their exemplary quality is only a partial one? An obvious difference, at the discursive level, between example and non-example is that the speaking subject (the linguist) is only present in the latter. So just as Chomsky's sentence (1) "means" nothing, and is thereby innocent, it is also innocent of an author.

The opposite occurs with the Wendy Bacon statement. Everything she did or said was attributed to her as a subject. She cannot detach herself from any of her utterances by saying, "Perhaps that example was inappropriate, I'll try another." Her person risked punishment as a result of what she "expressed"; and nothing she said could be separated from her deviant subjectivity as an individual already fixed by the gaze of the law. There is thus a "regime" governing her statements which is different from the one governing scientific statements. She is inserted into a discourse of order as the element of disorder, so that if she had rearranged her words, in a way similar to Chomsky, to read: "Prick God's have by been steel fucked I," then this disorder would have had to be read by the court in the only non-judicial way that it can grasp disorder: she would have been interviewed by a psychiatrist to see if she could be classified as mentally deranged. So, in the context in which she was operating, Bacon's example was read as symptomatic of a subject in disorder in relation to the law. Chomsky's example, on the contrary, was read as an example of language disordered by a knowing subject who is absent but is already participating in an ordered scientific discourse. After 1957 Chomsky's statement circulated widely and appeared on blackboards all over the world as an explanatory device. Could this enormous proliferation of an idea be innocent? Could the establishment of an exciting new linguistic paradigm over the decade to follow be considered entirely independently of the factors (institutional, political, economic) which made it possible? The proliferation of that one sort of discourse on language had the hegemonic effect of blocking the progress of other discourses on language. Chomsky's statement is no more innocent than Bacon's. Like Bacon's, the words seem to instate a particular ideology: the subject of the sentence is ideas; we are at the level of the human mind, a universal mind in which contradictory (green and colourless) ideas are given life. Read in this way, the sentence is guilty of the Chomskian approach: universalism, mentalism and the reification of linguistic structures in the mind. Chomsky is still with this paradigm in *Rules and Representations*, and in spite of his other political writings has not been able to find any political effectivity in his linguistics.

V

Roy Harris, in *The Language-Makers*, links the establishment of European modern languages with a linguistics based on concepts of language associated with national boundaries, or nationalism. In relation
to the rise of the dictionary, he says:

The new orthology thus became an integral part of an equation between linguistic unity and socio-political unity which had not obtained generally in Europe since the barbarian invasions. It also influenced the development of the Western concept of a language in ways its counterpart of antiquity could never have done. 29

The point to make in conclusion is that the concerns of linguistics, as a discipline, shift in accordance with broader socio-political concerns about language itself. "Language" as a conceptual problem makes quite distinct appearances over time according to how its study is aligned with other discourses (one discourse which I haven't mentioned is the moral one which is used in conjunction with grammar to produce a prescriptive account of language, so that the way one uses language is in some way connected with one's moral adequacy).

If this is the case, then Chomskian linguistics can be seen to be specifically related, in complex ways, to a certain period of American politics. Roy Harris sees in Chomsky a return to the "orthodox dogma of Renaissance nationalism" because Chomsky had "endorsed the Saussurean postulation of a single supra-individual system uniting the collectivity of language-users." 30 If, as Harris says, "patriotic aspiration was eventually given the solemn blessing of modern science," then Chomskian linguistics remains strongly tied to a conception of language which can too easily be confused with language as a national phenomenon. Also, in a way reminiscent of the Port-Royal school, it relates General Grammar to particular grammars in a way which seems to promote universality as a key category. Grammar is conceived of as a universal system which is also infinitely productive of its own raw material: sentences. This sort of statement about language belongs to a broader episteme which includes theories undermining American cold-war politics of the fifties and sixties. This correlation could be argued against by insisting on the disjunction between power and knowledge, an argument which can be sustained only if knowledge makes claims for universality, a claim which I have been trying to discredit throughout this paper.

From the point of view set up here, the notion of language as a national phenomenon would seem to be unproductive in the sense that it cannot tell us about discourse as specific uses of language which articulate it with institutional configurations and induce the effects of power. Discourses traverse national boundaries and are more closely tied to multinational spaces in which knowledges are disseminated: the economically developed West, Communist bloc countries, and so on. Discourses circulate within these economies and create problems for their users which are only on the point of being articulated. These are problems which have received some attention: liberalism (Rowse), populism (Lacoule), sexism (the journal m/f), totalitarianism (Faye), official discourse (Burton and Carlen), the discourses of the social sciences (Foucault and Derrida), and so on. 31 These are the concerns which stretch a conception of language beyond the boundaries of nations. Thus it is no
Language as a Series of Statements

longer important whether one speaks Greek or English or how these two languages might be "related" genetically or structurally. The important thing is the kind of problems, whether they be of power or of knowledge, that one sets up by taking a position within a given discourse in Greek or English.

How can one proceed with the practical analysis of these discourses as appearances of language? I will try to give one example which concerns a feminist response to a sexist statement. A hoarding advertisement for a Fiat car produced in England in the late seventies had the following message: "If it were a lady it would get its bottom pinched." Later someone scrawled another message in paint: "If this lady was a car she'd run you over."

Certain linguistic techniques can be used in the analysis of this exchange, keeping in mind the historical specificity of the event (such an exchange might no longer occur in precisely the same way). The first statement is composed of two sentences: a relational with the copule, and a passive transitive with agent deletion. This dual structure is repeated in the response, but with important modifications. The distance between the first statement and the response can best be understood as a reversal of the first position, and as a contestation of its political implications.

The first statement is sexist because it presents a familiar conservative reclassification of a car as a woman, a metaphorical shift which exploits male sexual desire in the market place. The person doing the buying, and the pinching, is an absent man, the absence deriving in the second part of the sentence through agent deletion. Passive sentences of this type have authoritative communicative effects, and are typical of formal written English. This formality is also signalled in the use of the "correct" conditional form of the verb "to be": "were."

The colloquial "was" of the response inscribes an opposition to the formality of the first sentence, as does the rewriting of the second part as an active sentence. The classification (car becomes woman) is also reversed, and this is now an unusual meaning shift for then-current discourses. The speaking subject also makes a direct appearance (this lady, she'd) which has the immediacy effect of spoken language via the deictic this and the contracted she'd. The subject is now in an active-actor position doing something directly to her addressee (you).

The response embodies reversal or opposition by first reversing the semantic classification and then reversing the syntax in the two major parts of the statements. Absent actors become present, and the immediacy of spoken colloquial responses is opposed to the staid authoritative prose of the first statement in a way which seems to repeat, as the level of language, what is the political struggle of feminism at another level: an opposition, a reversal. Such feminist responses to sexist statements have had an effect. It is not likely that such "blatantly" sexist statements would now be used in advertising.
Although this analysis may have used linguistic techniques in ways the earlier part of the paper might have suggested were fraught with difficulty, they can still be seen as usable in a local and strategic way, such that "grammar" is subsumed under a more general "political/ transformational" principle: reversal. It may therefore be possible to salvage linguistics and use it in ways that are suggested by current problems for language users (where those users are not always the "others"). Furthermore, problems for "language" need not necessarily be problems inscribed within a nationalist conception of language. They may be in some sense "multinational" and located at the level of discourse.

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3 The following account of interdisciplinarity derives from a talk given by Peter Williams in the English Department, University of Adelaide, 1981.
7 Hunter, "Michel Foucault," n.p.
17 Barthes, Mythologies, pp. 115-16.
Language as a Series of Statements


22 Chomsky, Syntactic Structures, p. 15.


27 "Dixonism" refers to a school of linguistics at the Australian National University headed by R.M.W. Dixon.


30 Ibid., p. 167.


32 This has something in common with M.A.K. Halliday's concept of "anti-language" in Language as Social Semiotic (London: Edward Arnold, 1978).