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Ideological Orthodoxy and the Ideation of Oligosynthesis

“Now the [tone four low:] MARXISTS would of course claim that [ditto:] SOME interpretations of reality may in fact turn out to be more [tone one wide:] SUCCESSFUL than others.” That this clause complex is, and is indeed intended to be, encountered out of context seems to be an essential part of its meaning. The author of the present paper first encountered it – shockingly, and indeed deliberately, out of context – over a quarter of a century ago, towards the end of a lecture by M. A. K. Halliday on the significance of Benjamin Lee Whorf’s contribution to the cultural relativism debate. Whorf was, of course, very far from being a Marxist; in fact, he seems to have been somewhat of a theosophist, and it is to this particular leaning of his that we owe not only his first contact with linguistics but also one of the main concerns of his early work in that field: the notion of oligosynthesis, which he adopted in large part – in spirit if not in name – from the work of the early 19th century (pre-) linguist Fabre d’Olivet. (The latter has been described as a “mystic” and “amateur linguist” – but then what are the Flemish and non-Flemish linguists of the late 22nd century likely to call the Systemic Functional [tone one wide:] RESEARCH Community!?)

Just what transpired in the Hartford, Connecticut library where Whorf first encountered the English translation of Fabre d’Olivet is something we may never know; we can, however, critically re-read for ourselves the text that so influenced not only Whorf but also, through him, a significant strand of twentieth century (non-pre-) linguistics. Just what effect this re-reading will have on our own linguistic thinking will depend on the strength of our commitment to the linguistic orthodoxies of our time. One thing, however, is certain: we will need to re-examine our understanding of the interaction between two theoretical notions that are of central importance for the ideational metafunction: that of inherent cislexicogrammatical constituency/dependency and that of arbitrary translexicogrammatical phonemic/graphemic realization. The (non-non-pre-) linguistic thinking of Fabre d’Olivet was, to put it bluntly, constrained neither by the principle of “double articulation” (Martinet) nor by the principle of “l’arbitraire du signe” (Saussure); for Fabre d’Olivet, the morpheme was essentially the phoneme/grapheme, and vice versa.

Whether Halliday’s ideological misappropriation of Whorf has a greater higher-stratal significance and/or a greater lower-stratal extent than Whorf’s oligosynthetic misappropriation of Fabre d’Olivet is intended to constitute one of the topics informing the post-presentation discussion; in order to both underpin and stimulate that discussion, we shall first of all attempt to map the extent of Fabre d’Olivet’s theosophical misappropriation of the lexis and grammar of an Ancient Hebrew text traditionally attributed to Moses. The nature of the interaction between the “macro” and the “meta” along the temporal axis of semogenesis is intended as a further strand in, if not of, the discussion.

Reference:

The Hebraic Tongue
Restored

And the True Meaning of the Hebrew
Words Re-established and
Proved by their Radical
Analysis.

By
Fabre d’Olivet.

Done into English by
Nayan Louise Redfield.

Samuel Weiser, Inc., New York, 1921.