

NEW WORDS
FOR AN OLD LANGUAGE

I

In his *World Culture and the Black Experience* Professor Ali Mazrui states that “by being left behind scientifically African languages gradually became incapable either of coping with or stimulating new areas of reflection and analysis”. He agrees with Professor Mohammed Hyder of Nairobi that “if a serious attempt were made to develop a ‘technical limb’ to Swahili, this would indeed be possible” by the simple device of writing *redioaktivu* for *radioactive* and *thairodi* for *thyroid* and so forth. He thinks, however, that “the majority of African languages have too few speakers to warrant a serious undertaking to convert them into scientific and technological languages.” In any case such an at-

This essay was given as a lecture at the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, in Boston in December 1984. Professor Peter Caws gave it its title. I am also grateful for comments, suggestions, and further assistance to W.V.O. Quine, Mikael Marlies Karlsson, and Thorsteinn Hilmarsson.

tempt “would be an extreme form of cultural autarchy”.¹

This is suggestive of two distinct theses, it seems: one theoretical and the other practical. The theoretical thesis is that a language such as Swahili may be *incapable* of serving the needs of its speakers. It is not merely that such a language happens never to have been applied to contract bridge, the making of automobile engines or harpsichords, elementary logic, the anatomy of the cod’s head, and so on. Rather it cannot in principle be so applied. This theoretical thesis is, as far as I can see, interestingly related to various relativistic ideas of contemporary philosophy and anthropology. But let me leave that for discussion later on, and first take a look at the practical thesis.

To start with, it is admitted that the alleged incapacity of Swahili—and thus, presumably, of a great number of other languages—is a historical condition, and consequently, it would seem, a remediable one. There are two suggestions about the remedy. One is that it would require centuries, or perhaps millennia, of historical development, witness the evolution of European science and philosophy. The other is that the remedy is at hand, and only involves transliterating the standard European vocabulary—or for Swahili perhaps the Arabic one—of the arts and sciences. Professor Mazrui appears to believe that the latter sort of linguistic innovation or adaptation is quite impracticable. But he does not tell us why. The bare reference to “too few speakers” is hardly a sufficient ground for this belief, and to call such innovation “an extreme form of cultural autarchy” seems to be abuse rather than argument. Perhaps he does not see the need of a special argument here because he thinks the theoretical thesis, as I have called it, provides us with all the reason we need. And perhaps he thinks of that as self-evident.

I now propose to argue that Professor Mazrui’s practical thesis is mere prejudice. Linguistic innovation of the sort he has in mind is quite practicable: it can be made because it has been made. And this takes us to Iceland, in particular to neology or linguistic purism in Iceland.

¹ Ali A. Mazrui, *World Culture and the Black Experience*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1974, pp. 87-89.

II

Allow me first, before I turn to neology, to touch briefly on two central facts about the Icelandic language. In the first place it is by far the oldest of the Germanic—and indeed of the European—languages now spoken, having been preserved for more than a millennium by a tiny nation of farmers and fishermen, living for most of that time in a stagnant society and in utter poverty near the end of the world. Numbers may be of interest here, if only because of Professor Mazrui's mention of them. For most of their history the Icelanders have numbered less than 100,000. In 1703, when the first census was taken, they turned out to be 50,358. After this, in times of plagues or volcanic eruptions, their number went as low as 34,000. By 1925, the Icelandic population had risen above 100,000, and above 200,000 in 1967. Now there are about 230,000 of us.²

In the second place the Icelanders, from the 10th century onwards, created a vernacular literature in verse and prose, or in some cases preserved Norse literature antedating the settlement of Iceland in the late 9th century. They began to commit these creations to writing in the 12th century at the latest. This literary tradition—mythology, history, poetry, fiction, scholarship—is by far the greatest monument of the early history of the Germanic peoples. And this tradition, I might add, is still a living force in Icelandic culture, at the very least to the same extent as Elizabethan culture is alive through Shakespeare in the English speaking world. I mention these facts of history because they will tempt many people to reject my juxtaposition of Icelandic and African languages. This would be a mistake. There is no virtue in being old for languages or literatures any more than there is for people. We should keep in mind that the whole of culture is created anew by each generation. There is no culture beyond that of a single generation.

Beyond these purely historical facts there is a third central fact about our language, and to me at least by far the most important and interesting of the three. The simplest description of this phen-

² For this and further information see *Iceland 874-1974*. Handbook published by the Central Bank of Iceland on the Occasion of the Eleventh Centenary of the Settlement of Iceland, Reykjavik 1975.

omenon is that we Icelanders do not in general admit foreign words to our language, but prefer to coin our own vocabulary from Icelandic roots and stems. In particular we do not admit such derivatives of Greek and Latin as dominate the various European vocabularies of the arts and sciences. There are exceptions to this, of course, for example *kirkja*, *biskup* and *prestur* for church, bishop, priest. But neology is the rule. Thus philosophy is *heimspeki* (world wisdom) and not *filósófia*; logic is *rökfraedi* (study of reasons) and not *lógik*; and so on. This was a common practice in Iceland already in mediaeval times. An anonymous thirteenth century author writes of the *ástarspekt* (wisdom from love) of Hippocrates meaning (philosophy). A contemporary of his, Bishop Brandur Jónsson, describes the shabbiness of Aristotle after sleepless nights of work on his *thraetubók* (book of disputes), adding that this is Icelandic for what in Latin is called *dialectica*. It is worthy of note that of the four last-mentioned words only one—*ástarspekt*—is what in German is called *Lehnübersetzung*, that is loan-translation, perhaps better called part-translation as it consists in translating words part by etymological part. It is noteworthy too that the word *ástarspekt* seems to have never entered common usage; philosophy has been *heimspeki* at least since the 15th century. *Thraetubók* has survived the 19th century introduction and acceptance of *rökfraedi* for logic, and is now primarily used as a derogatory term, in particular of Marxist dialectics. But I have also used it in the mediaeval sense as a title of a little textbook of elementary logic, written in collaboration with Professor Peter Geach. I should add that *heimspeki* may, like *ástarspekt*, be a loan-translation, but from the German *Weltweisheit*. I say “may” because dictionaries give earlier occurrences of the Icelandic word than of the German one.

This brings German neology to mind. I shall only list a few differences between the two purisms. In the first place, Icelandic purism is, as I said, originally a mediaeval phenomenon. German purism, by contrast, dates back to the 17th century. Moreover, the agents of German purism were societies, the so-called *Sprachgesellschaften*, formed to combat what they saw as impurities that were already established in the German language. There has never been a comparable movement in the whole history of the Icelandic language. Secondly, Icelandic neology has been, and is, much more

extensive than German neology is, for after all the German vocabulary of the arts and sciences is mainly the common European one. Thirdly, German purism relies more often than its Icelandic counterpart on descriptive compounds, or on part-translations. Take the telephone which becomes by loan-translation *Fernsprecher* in German; in Icelandic it is *sími*, this being an obsolete poetic word for thread, for instance the thread of fate or love. In the fourth and last place, German purists have generally been frowned upon as cranks; there are respectable dictionaries defining *Purismus* as *excessive* concern with Germanization, and thus treating it as a derogatory term. (It may be of interest to some that purism was condemned by Adolf Hitler in an edict of 19 November 1940.³) By contrast Icelandic purism has been a resounding success. Today there are many industrious Word Committees at work in academic fields and in many other areas. The coinage of terms for technological novelties is a national sport one vehicle of which is a daily radio programme. Thus the transistor has become *smári* (clover); this was because the earliest transistors could be seen as being a bit like the plant, with three wires replacing the leaves, but also because *smári* is suggestive of the non-cognate *smár* (small). Or take the computer. In Icelandic it is *tölva*: the root being *tala* (number), co. German *Zahl*. But the brilliance of *tölva* is that it rhymes with, and so is suggestive of, only one older noun which is *völva* (Sybil). I happened to have been present when *tölva* occurred to its creator, Professor Sigurdur Nordal.⁴ Within a week it replaced *rafmaonsheili* (electric brain), and has since been on everyone's lips, three years old and up.

III

Allow me now to give some examples from my own work. The first three come from logic. In the standard logic texts of the 1940's and 1950's, written by Professor Símon Jóh. Agústsson, the term

³ Peter von Polenz, "Sprachpurismus und Nationalsozialismus" in Walther Killy *et al.*: *Germanistik - eine deutsche Wissenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1967, pp. 137-138.

⁴ Sigurdur Nordal (1886-1974), Professor of Icelandic Literature in the University of Iceland, was a profoundly influential scholar, critic, poet and playwright.

for *syllogism* was *afályktun*, somehow an exceptionally clumsy loan-translation.⁵ We have now replaced this with *rökhenda*, from *rök* meaning (reasons) as in *rökfraedi* (logic), and *henda* meaning (stanza): a syllogism is a stanza of reasoning. The second example is *grip* for *schema*, the same word as the English *grip*. One reason for picking this word was that in addition to its being a perfectly ordinary word meaning (grasp) or (grip), it is also used of the fingerings of a guitar player, and of these as symbolized in song-books and popular sheet music, whether with letters and numbers, somewhat reminiscent of the Polish notation, or with diagrams and dots reminiscent of logical diagrams.

In teaching elementary logic, I discovered that the traditional word for predicate—*umsögn*, a loan-translation of the Latin *predicatum*—creates some difficulties for the students. Icelandic students get a fairly intensive training in Icelandic and general grammar, unparalleled in Anglo-American schools since the demise of Latin as a school subject, and their knowledge of grammar, including familiarity with the syntactical sense of *umsögn*, is what makes difficulties for the logical use of the same term. I have not yet made up my mind about this. One possibility is to take up the word *kaera* (accusation) for the logical notion of predicate. The idea comes from Aristotle, of course, whose term *kategoria* has the ordinary sense of (accusation). But this suggestion seems, at the outset, quite wild to an Icelandic ear. As would, I imagine, the introduction of *accusation* as a synonym for *predicate* in English, and this despite the fact that no one objects to the use of the word *accusative* in English grammar.

Next two traditional mathematical examples. One is *fleda* for *asymptote*: its ordinary sense is (flatterer), with the connotations of (lickspittle) or (bootlicker). Another is *fall* for *function*. This is the same word as *fall* in English and *Fall* in German: it is also, in imitation of the Greek *ptósis* and the Latin *casus*, our term for case in grammar. One reason for our having adopted it is that it begins with an *f*, like *function*. Another is the connotation of *falling under*; at least as good a reason as that given for case in grammar having come to be called *ptósis* and *casus*. The story is that a

⁵ Símon Jóh. Agústsson, *Rökfraedi*, Reykjavík, Hladbúd, 1948; translation of Konrad Marc-Wogau, *Rökfraedi*, Reykjavík, Hladbúd, 1962.

teacher made a style stand in his wax tablet to illustrate the nominative—*casus rectus*—and then pushed it and made it fall in different directions for the oblique cases.

One more. A mathematical friend of mine needed a word for the topological notion of dual spaces, and gave me a brief talk on this topic. From this I gathered that he needed first and foremost an adjective, like *dual*, and a cognate verb, like *dualise*. A feature of dual spaces is that they are in various respects “the wrong way round”. Now, one of the many supernatural creatures of Icelandic folklore is a grey horse that lives in lakes. It is called *nykur*, and its sole physical peculiarity compared with ordinary horses is that its hoofs turn back to front. This gave us *nykurrúm*, or using the cognate adjective *nykrud rúm*, and the verb *nykra*.

There is another feature of this proposal that commended it to our mathematician. This is that the adjective *nykradur* is not a new word. It occurs in the prose *Edda* of Snorri Sturlason, a textbook of poetics written in the early thirteenth century. Snorri uses the word in the sense of (broken) in the context *broken metaphor*. An 18th century grammarian later turned out to have used the same adjective for disagreement in number in cases like *the police think they have caught the criminal* and in analogous cases of gender. It is not known if the two words, noun and adjective, are cognate or not.

The mention of Snorri Sturlason brings to mind what will be my last example. Snorri’s word for metaphor is *kenning*; this term has been adopted in English poetics as a technical term for the ornate metaphors of the mediaeval Nordic scalds or court poets. The word is formed from the verb *kenna* meaning (characterise, recognise) and also (teach). Already in Snorri’s time the word was used for (doctrine) or (dogma). In our time, in addition, it has become our main word for (theory). This word, by the way, has no tolerable cognate adjective. So we distinguish between theoretical and practical syllogisms as *bóklegar* meaning (bookly)?! and *verklegar* meaning (workly)?! *rökhendur* (stanzas of reasoning). And so forth, using if necessary differing contrasting terms for different cases.

IV

In 1927 a young Icelandic farmer, Jón Sigurdsson of Yztafell, entered into a brilliant debate in which he made serious criticisms of Professor Gudmundur Finnbogason, a distinguished philosopher and probably the most prolific of all Icelandic neologists. Jón's first essay was called "Books and the People", and one of its targets was the needless creation of neologisms. Translations from foreign languages, Jón insisted, should not be word for word, but sentence for sentence or paragraph by paragraph. There was no hope of exact correspondence between the vocabularies of different languages. A free translation was often, even as a rule, the best translation.⁶

The hyper-neologising that Jón attacked has been too common in Icelandic neologistics to this day. This is partly because the various Word Committees have thought it more pressing, or at any rate less time consuming, to prepare lists of words with proposed Icelandic equivalents rather than translations *in context*, and thus of whole books and papers. But there are also three connected prejudices at work here. One of these is the *literalism* that prefers loan-translations like *umsögn* for *predicatum*, and disapproves of tropes, sometimes as being unscientific and therefore out of place, at least in logic. Another is the *parallelism* that seeks Icelandic words with senses parallel to those of given foreign words. A third is the *fear of ambiguity*. I have found it useful to have a name for those governed by these prejudices. I call them *milksnatchers* after one more creature of Icelandic folklore: the milksnatchers—*tilberar*—are made of sheep's ribs and some wool, they dash about sucking ewes and return to the owner to vomit the milk into his or her churn. The followers of Jón of Yztafell I call *moonshiners*, since they prefer home-brew to imports.

The prejudices of the milksnatchers are exceedingly powerful. I work under the constant pressure of them myself. This should not be surprising to contemporary philosophers: we all feel the power of Frege's prejudice that the ambiguities of natural language

⁶ Jón Sigurdsson, "Althýdan og baekurnar", *Idunn* IX. Reykjavík 1927, pp. 62-77 and 143-152. See also *Timinn*, Reykjavík 12 January 1929. See further Baldur Jónsson, *Mályrkja Gudmundar Finnbogasonar*, Reykjavík, Menningarsjóður, 1976.

are severe imperfections. But these are prejudices. As Geach observes in *Reason and Argument*: “What is required for the successful application of logic is not that we should adopt some linguistic conventions making ambiguity impossible, but simply that ambiguity is in fact excluded in the piece of argumentation we are presently conducting.”⁷ As for parallelisms, there is of course not the slightest hope for them. But neither is there any need for them. I have mentioned the Icelandic word *rök* (reason). Actually its use differs considerably from the use of the English word *reason* that Anglo-American philosophers have been attempting to describe for some decades. In English a motive, for example, is one kind of reason for which a man may act; it is not one kind of *rök* in Icelandic. English speakers may seek consolation in the fact that they cannot resist mentioning that the word *rök* may mean (fate) in Icelandic. Hence the word *ragnarök*, meaning (the fate of the gods). Some ignorant German Professor of the last century mistook the word *rök* in this context for the non-cognate *rökkur* (twilight). Hence *Götterdämmerung* or (Twilight of the Gods) made popular by Wagner.

And so forth: the various similarities and dissimilarities are a subject for innumerable seminars. One possibility is that a technical term—a neologism introduced for some particular expert purpose—enters the common language and there begins to lead a life of its own. I mentioned the example of *thraetubók* (book of disputes). Another mediaeval example is *skepna*, a noun from the verb *skapa* (create), originally coined as a term for Aristotelian substance, along with the word *höfudskepna* (headcreature)!? for Aristotelian element. *Skepna* now means (animal) or (beast), partly perhaps under the influence of the Latin *creatura*, but also perhaps for analogous reasons to those Aristotle saw for restricting his *ousia* to living creatures. A striking modern example is the adjective *huglaegur* (subjective) and its complement *hlutlaegur* (objective), both introduced in a 19th century textbook of logic. The former of these has been used by Icelandic writers in this century with such senses as (sincere) and (interesting), both of which, I presume, would strike an English speaker as impossible senses for the English

⁷ Peter T. Geach *Reason and Argument*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1976, p. 75.

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subjective. Yet these Icelandic uses of the coined equivalent are perfectly natural, and indeed quite accurate, as may perhaps be seen from the literal idea (resting in the mind). These examples further show that literalism is just as hopeless as parallelism, as I shall argue in some detail later on.

In neologistics, at least that of the moonshiners, there are no rules. At best there are a few strategies to be recommended. The first might be: always begin by asking if we really need a new word; make new coinage your very last resort. Second, look for existing and if possible familiar words and find out what may be done with them; try to be as unobtrusive as possible. Third, never fear ambiguity. Fourth, study the four pictures at the end of Sigfús Blöndal's *Icelandic Dictionary*, the Icelandic equivalent of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, but with Danish translations. The pictures show a boat, a spinning wheel, two kinds of looms, and a cod's head. Unsurprisingly there are dozens of words for the different parts and functions of the artefacts. A bit more surprisingly there are about 150 words for the different bones and muscles of the cod's head. This is not due to a passion for anatomy on the part of the Icelanders, but to the fact that a dried cod's head is a traditional delicacy.⁸ Fifth, read a lot of poetry.

V

Now let us turn to Ali Mazrui's theoretical thesis—that of incapacities of languages—or rather to the related thesis, as I claimed it was, of linguistic relativism. Such dissimilarities as I have just described have been attributed by Professor Thomas S. Kuhn to incommensurability between two languages; this he glosses as mutual untranslatability.⁹ Translatability is the possibility of rendering a text in one language into a different language phrase by phrase, though not necessarily with one-to-one correspondences between the words of the two languages. In addition to this, Kuhn wants to

⁸ Cfr. Alan Davidson *North-Atlantic Seafood*, London, Macmillan, 1979, pp. 395-396.

⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn "Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability", unpublished but cited by permission.

distinguish *translation* sharply from what he calls *interpretation*. Interpretation, it turns out, is among other things what Quine's radical translator is doing with *gavagai*.¹⁰ It is also what Kuhn himself does with *phlogiston* when explicating an 18th century work of chemistry. This is not translating, but rather interpreting and acquiring a new language. Kuhn also suggests that what he calls interpretations—with connotations of hermeneutics—is what children engage in when learning their mother tongue. A hermeneutic philosopher replaces Chomsky's theoretical linguist inside us.

Let us now disagree with Professor Kuhn. I would then begin by saying that the incommensurability concerned is one of *vocabularies* and not of *languages*. Speaking of incommensurable languages here suggests that whole areas of thought and action are as a matter of principle inaccessible to us, after the age of five or so, just as—and in the same way as—a text in Bantu or Eskimo is incomprehensible to me for the time being. It also suggests that an Icelandic sentence with the word *rök* in it cannot be a perfectly good translation of an English sentence containing the word “reason”. And this seems simply false.

Further, I might want to say that there is no straightforward distinction to be drawn between translation and interpretation. For one thing, what interpreters do is translating, and translators interpret everything they translate. For another, we generally acquire a foreign language through translating it into our own. I learnt English by translating Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* into Icelandic. Incidentally, an important part of that book presents an interesting problem for an Icelandic translator, as should be the case with many other languages as well for analogous reasons. In Icelandic we have three verbs of knowing—*vita*, *thekkja* and *kunna*, comparable to German *wissen*, *kennen*, *können* but not identical in use with them—while English has only one, “know”. (However, there used to be two English verbs—*wit* and *ken*—cognate with two of the Icelandic and German verbs, with senses parallel to those of the French verbs *savoir* and *connaître*). This means that there are two ways of rendering Russell's epistemology, with its fundamental distinction between “knowledge by acquaintance”

¹⁰ W.V., Quine, *Word and Object*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1960, pp. 29ff.

and “knowledge by description”, into Icelandic. One is to coin Icelandic neologisms for Russell’s two terms. These would no doubt look and sound quaint to an Icelander (or at least to one with fair linguistic taste, and it seems a pity to turn an elegant writer such as Russell into one perpetrating academic jargon). The other alternative is to rewrite the chapters concerned in terms of the three Icelandic verbs of knowing. I expect “adaptation” is the right word for this second alternative. But whether adaptation is really translation or interpretation seems a matter of no importance. In this case there is further entertaining complication. There are errors in Russell’s epistemology, and Peter Geach has suggested to me that they arise precisely because Russell did not have the verbs *wit* and *ken* at his disposal. What can and should a translator do about this?

Back to Kuhn. It seems easy to defend Kuhn against such criticisms. He himself may claim to be using the terms “translation” and “interpretation” in his own perfectly defensible way, having derived one from Quine and Davidson and the other from Heidegger and Gadamer. And he may claim that my distinction between language and vocabulary is just as artificial as I claimed his distinction between translation and interpretation is. After all we do speak of “the language of physics” as well as of “the vocabulary of physics”. We sometimes refer to academic or bureaucratic jargon as languages, and speak of translating them into plain English or Icelandic. Or let us say the objector points out that Kuhn defines translation as an interlingual activity, and then speaks of translating phlogistic texts, plainly written in English, into the language in which his books and papers are written. The reply will be that for the present purposes Kuhn is dividing up English into several, or even innumerable, languages. Or let us object to his inferring from the incommensurability of languages or vocabularies that different languages “structure the world” in different ways, on the ground that there do not seem to be any limits in principle to our understanding each other perfectly though we come from opposite ends of the world. The answer will be that Kuhn does not mean to say that at all. In which case our objection to his different “structurings” of the world becomes at best stylistic. Icelandic has ten different words for the tails of different animals, and each of these has various transferred uses

both concrete and abstract, but there is no general word for (tail). It is a bit comical to say that we Icelanders structure the rear-ends of animals differently from the rest of the world. Or should we infer from this that there may be an anal stage of *Weltanschauungen*?

We could press these objections to Kuhn, and something might come out of them. Let us not. Rather, let us notice what is going on in such an argument as this between disagreeing philosophers. The disagreement seems mainly to be a disagreement *in* the uses of words, as distinct from a disagreement *about* the uses of words. When does trying to understand something consist in translating rather than adapting, or in puzzling things out rather than interpreting them? And so on, till the Day of Judgement.

Why do we differ in this way? The best answer seems to me to be a very simple one. It is because we keep, each and every one of us, using words in new ways all the time. In other words: we are all neologists.

VI

This was a bit quick. Let us backtrack, and begin by reminding ourselves of the five principles of moonshining. One idea runs through them all: don't coin words if you can possibly avoid it. Perhaps my title ought to have referred to old words rather than new ones, even to old words for new languages, the new languages being the resources that make us capable of constructing and construing an indefinite number of sentences in which we use our old neologisms. It is usually assumed, in philology as well as philosophy, that neologisms are exceptional, that they are "deviant speech behaviour" as linguists like to say. Those who say this are, no doubt, thinking of the coinage of technical terms, such as my making up the words *neologistics* and *milksnatcher* for the purposes of the present paper, as opposed to cases like my use of *moonshiner* and *moonshining*. Perhaps they are also forgetting that although our old words are old *in the language*, they are frequently new to an individual speaker, listener or reader, at least in the sense in which they are being used on a particular occasion. Consider my play in this paragraph with the words *new* and *old*

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as applied to words and languages. It is certainly new to me, and I should be surprised indeed if it were not new to others as well.

So neology need not involve new words, which means at any rate that it may be much more widespread than seems ordinarily to be believed. This is what I was after when I said, hyperbolically, that we are engaged in neology all the time. I was, if you like, suggesting that we make what obviously goes on in Icelandic an experimental model of our mastery of language in general, or at least more generally than usual. It is a philosophical platitude, at least since Wittgenstein, that “language is a rule-governed activity”.¹¹ My suggestion is that, as I said of moonshining, there are no rules. Which is, interestingly, what Professor Donald Davidson has to say of another linguistic phenomenon, apparently related to neology: metaphor.¹² Even more interestingly, from our present point of view, Davidson makes it a central point of his discussion of metaphor—the conclusion of which is that words used in metaphor have exactly the same meaning as they have in literal usage—that metaphors and neologisms are essentially different phenomena. He has two ways of showing this. One is claiming that metaphors depend essentially, as neologisms do not, on the original or literal meaning of the words used. The other is saying that in the case of a neologism “our attention is directed to language”, while with metaphor we are directed to what language is about. This is, perhaps, not very helpful; but for further clarification Davidson invokes the distinction between living metaphors and dead ones: for Davidson a neologism is dead even if it was originally alive as a metaphor.

Now this second distinction, between the living and the dead, seems weak. My response to it might be simply to assert that a good neologism is a one word poem. But we may leave poetry, life and death alone, for in the end the second distinction seems to be founded on the first one—that between *literal* and *metaphorical*—for Davidson says that the death of a living metaphor consists in its becoming literal, as the mouths of bottles have come to be, and

¹¹ See for example G.P. Baker & P.M.S. Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984, p. 56.

¹² Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984, pp. 245-264.

the mouths of a wounded body have not. So the issue becomes whether we can maintain a reasonably clear distinction between the literal and the metaphorical.

As far as I can see we cannot. Take two of my Icelandic examples. Is it metaphor when I call a syllogism a stanza and its schema a grip? Am I perhaps guilty of a broken metaphor when I do both? Or is this literal? What if I write a poem of which the stanzas are syllogisms? There does not seem to be any reasonable answer to such questions. I read in a recent issue of the *New Yorker* that a song is a marriage of text and tune, and of the cultural skyline of Frankfurt in the *International Herald Tribune* the other day. Let us say this is metaphor. But what about a bond, or a compromise, of text and tune? What of the cultural outline, or limits of Frankfurt? For further instruction let us consider examples from another theorist of the literal and the metaphorical, Professor John R. Searle.¹³

Searle insists that *cut* has the same literal meaning in *Bill cut the grass*, *Sally cut the cake*, and *John cut my hair*. Now I report that Icelandic requires a different verb for each of the equivalent sentences to these: *slá*, *skera*, *klippa*, and no one would call them synonyms, even in part. So why should we regard the English uses of “cut” synonymous? Why not say that *cut* has different senses corresponding to the different tools used for cutting: lawn-mower, knife, scissors, and so on? *Punching paper* seems to have different senses according to whether it is done with a punch or the fist.

Or take the word *open*. According to Searle sentences about opening doors, eyes, walls, books, and wounds are all to be understood as referring to literal openings (this turn of phrase reminds us that *literal* comes close to *real* and is just as problematic). In contrast to these literal uses of *open* the sentence *Bill opened the mountain* is non-literal and unintelligible. But the sentence *the ogress opened the mountain* seems fully intelligible, and if a child, or a sensible adult, were to ask how she opened it, the answer might be that she had a key made of dogshit, again a perfectly

¹³ John R. Searle, “The Background of Meaning” in J.R. Searle et al. (eds.) *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics*, Amsterdam, Reidel, 1980, pp. 221-232. See also J.R. Searle, *Intentionality*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 141-159.

sensible idea. One of Searle's examples here brings out a different issue: the opening of doors. Do we literally open *doors*, rather than *doorways* or *rooms*? After all, we open our mouths, not our lips, even if we do open our eyes and neither the sockets nor the eyelids. A further feature of this example is the following. In the case of *open the door* we have choice of two pairs of dictionary glosses. We may either take *door* to mean (doorway) and *open* to mean what it means in *open the wound*, or we may take *door* to mean (door) and *open* to mean (unclose, unfasten) as my dictionary has it. Finally note how poorly the notion of metaphor serves us in these examples of intuitively literal and non-literal usage. Departures from the literal, if there were such, would only occasionally be metaphorical.

So the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical seems a hopeless one as a theoretical instrument. And with it, as far as I can see, goes the notion of *rules of meaning*. For the notion of literal meaning is absolutely essential to any theory of semantic rules. The use of any word may be extended in a variety of ways—even if others do not agree with me that we are actually doing precisely this a great deal of the time. The constant creation of Icelandic neologisms is only a dramatization of what ought to be a commonplace. But commonplace or not, this feature of language has a plain, even if possibly startling consequence. It means that counterexamples to any semantic rules proposed may be produced more or less at will. And now the only way in which a rule theorist, a believer in semantic rules, could dismiss such counterexamples to his rules (assuming it to be a realistic possibility that a rule theorist will some day produce a semantic rule) is to insist that in the counterexample the word in question is being used in a different or extended sense from that of his rule. And if this answer is not to be blatantly circular (compare Freud's claim that the opponents of psychoanalysis required analysis and not argument¹⁴), our theorist's retort must be that words have literal meanings that may be systematically distinguished from transferred or metaphori-

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Über Psychoanalyse* in S. Freud, *Gesammelte Werke VIII: Werke aus den Jahren 1909-1913*, London, Imago Publishing Co., 1943, pp. 39-40.

cal meanings throughout our vocabulary. And this, I have argued, cannot be done.

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