LETTERS TO *LANGUAGE*

Language accepts letters from readers that briefly and succinctly respond to or comment upon either material published previously in the journal or issues deemed of importance to the field. The editor reserves the right to edit letters as needed. Brief replies from relevant parties are included as warranted.

Credit where credit is due
February 24, 2004
To the Editor:

I particularly enjoyed reading your Editor's Department in the December issue of *Language* (79.679–81 (2003)), where you mentioned the Moscow Linguistic Olympics organized under the auspices of the Department of Structural and Computational Linguistics within the Philological Faculty of the Moscow State University since 1965. These Olympics (called, in fact, 'Olympics in Linguistics and Mathematics') were a very effective means of getting high school students acquainted with linguistic problems (some of them I used myself when teaching linguistics in Brazil and in Australia). And this was a way of luring people into linguistics.

For example, this is how I came into linguistics. In the last year of high school, I was not sure what to do. I was desperate to study classical languages at the Moscow State University, but was told that with my (Jewish) surname they would never take me. So a friend (who had just graduated from the Department of Structural and Computational Linguistics, where they did take people with 'funny' surnames) suggested that I should have a go at solving linguistic problems, in the Olympics. So I went there, and got a Second Prize. This consisted of a smart-looking certificate and a pile of books (all in Russian, of course), including a Bengali-Russian dictionary, a Russian-Malayalam Dictionary, a teach-yourself Sinhala book, and a grammar of Hausa. This prize decided the matter for me, as after that I applied to the Department of Structural and Computational Linguistics, passed the entrance exams, and was accepted. From the very first day, I knew straight away that I'd done the right thing.

The most important person and the most brilliant lecturer in the department was Professor Andrej Anatoljevich Zaliznjak, whom you so kindly mentioned on p. 680. He inspired us to carry on doing linguistics despite the dark preperestroika era when we could not refer to the literature we wanted to refer to. He taught us Sanskrit, Akkadian, Old Russian, Arabic, and Introduction to Indo-European. He inspired me to work intensively on important linguistic topics: first, Hittite and other Anatolian languages (for my M.A.), then Berber languages (for my Ph.D.), followed by Modern Hebrew, Biblical Hebrew, languages from the Arawak family of South America, and now languages from the Ndu family of New Guinea. When I last saw him in Moscow (in May 2002), he appreciated not only my linguistic achievements, but also the vivacious smile of Yuamali (Jacqueline), my Papuan consultant.

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In defense of Fónagy
March 15, 2003
To the Editor:

In a book notice (*Language* 79.3.652) on Ivan Fónagy's *Languages within language: An evolutive approach* (John Benjamins, 2001), Alan Kaye writes that the author 'erroneously maintains that onomatopoetic words are arbitrary'. This shows a misreading of the text. Fónagy writes exactly the opposite, first indicating that Saussure argued that even onomatopoetic words are arbitrary because they vary crosslinguistically. Fónagy does this to show that 'the alleged arbitrariness of onomatopoeic words consists of the language-dependent selection between a number of motivated (iconic) expressions' (pp. 2–3). Thus, he emphasizes that such words are iconically motivated but that a language's conventional phonemic and morphological structure may alter and conventionalize the sound-shape of the form being mimicked. The reviewer's misinterpretation is all the stranger because the book in question is one long search for the MOTIVATED (or iconic) element in language.

Kaye notes that the 'book has been years in the making . . . and [that] even a cursory glance at the enormous bibliography . . . is proof enough that much effort has been exerted gathering information in semiotics, linguistics, psychology', etc. True enough, but it seems that the reviewer's cursory glance may have extended to the whole book. Nothing in the review elucidates the book's general theme; indeed, it concerns brief, often rather nitpicking remarks, such as objecting to the author's use of 'evolutive' in the title, rather than 'evolutionary'. Both terms in fact are possible, but 'evolutive' pertains more clearly to the GENERAL ways language(s) can develop and has

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no Darwinian connotation, making it a more appropriate term for a book that looks at both diachronic change and synchronic processing. Admittedly, the book does not make for easy reading, the style is awkward at times, and the 'documentation' is indeed considerable. But it is not 'superfluous', as Kaye maintains; rather, the book's strength and significance lie in the broad spectrum of its documentation and ingenious experiments.

In this light, I find the reviewer's restricting his 'remarks to a few details apt to concern general linguists' unfortunate, as if this book of over 800 pages has only a few unconnected details to offer. The details given are tiny snippets, and seem wholly unimportant outside their context. For instance, concerning Ch. 13, the reviewer writes, 'one conclusion is that dates may govern a possessive in English', while in fact this chapter is meant to illustrate that the highly diverse meanings covered by genitive constructions—possession, causality, partitive use, etc.—which are unrelated at the level of rational conscious analysis may be linked at the level of unconscious archaic thinking. Similarly, as to Ch. 17, the reviewer notes that it 'postulates that "metaphor is at the centre of linguistic change and evolution"', which, he adds, remains to be proven. He doesn't seem to have noticed that this chapter in fact recapitulates the preceding sixteen, which illustrate that metaphor (transfer) underlies verbal dynamics and linguistic change at all linguistic levels. No attempt has been made to give details in connection with the book's overall theme, which concerns both the evolution of language from more motivated into more conventionalized signs and the way in which even conventional signs may be remotivated in live speech as a result of what Fónagy calls the 'dual encoding procedure'. As John Haiman puts it in his review of the book in *Studies in Language* (28.246–52 (2004)), the chapters 'exhibit an unforced natural coherence' even though 'they are [not] assembled in [any] particular order'. The *Language* reviewer misses this natural coherence.

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Author's reply: Re my alleged misreading, the quoted line is contradicted by the immediately preceding on which I relied: 'These examples [*cock-a-doodle-doo*] clearly show the 'arbitrariness' of onomatopoetic words and exclamations' (p. 2). Re my remark on *evolutive*, it is not listed in some dictionaries (e.g. *The American heritage English dictionary*, 4th edn., 2000), though it is listed in others. However, I see little or no difference between it and the far more common *evolutionary*. (How many linguists today would like to be called 'linguisticians' or philologists 'philologians'?) Re my opinion on metaphor and linguistic change, I stand by my published statement.

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An influential paper

March 28, 2004
To the Editor:

In the September 2003 issue of *Language* (79.3.461–63), you asked readers to send you their comments about 'influential papers and their impact' from the archives of the journal. I would like to mention Paul Hopper and Sandra Thompson's 1980 article, 'Transitivity in grammar and discourse' (56.2.251–99). It is one that was interesting and useful to me when it came out, when I was a field linguist working in Indonesia, and it continues to be so more than twenty years later. Recently I pulled the article out again when I was working on an analysis of some so-called 'transitive' suffixes in Rotuman.

In analyzing languages it is always helpful to see things not as categorically this or that, but as falling somewhere along a continuum of possibilities. The phenomenon of transitivity became one of those continua with the publication of Hopper and Thompson's article.

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Editor's reply: Reactions to my columns are always welcome; I look forward to hearing from other readers with thoughts on influential papers in *Language*.

An important date

April 13, 2004
To the Editor:

Steven Dworkin's excellent obituary of Yakov Malkiel (*Language* 80.1.153–62 (2004)) contains one item that needs correction. On p. 154 Dworkin writes, 'In 1966 [Malkiel] left the Spanish department and became a professor in the newly-created department of linguistics'. In fact the Berkeley linguistics department was created in 1953, due especially to the efforts of Mary Haas, Murray Emeneau, and Douglas Chretien. During the 1950s and 1960s the department was responsible for, among other things, the documentation of numerous California and other Native American languages. Indeed, one of the editors of this journal, William Bright, was awarded the Ph.D. by that department in 1955.

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