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Editorial: Language Matters

When David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* was first published in 1987 it was reviewed by Walter Nash in the *London Review of Books*, where he wrote that it is "...a celebration of language in all its oddity, beauty, fun, astonishing complexity and limitless variety."[1] Consulting the book for the purpose of writing this editorial for an issue of *Junctures* devoted to "language", it still provides an entry point for a focus on the various registers in which contributions to the issue engage with language matters. Crystal suggests that language provides a fascinating object of study as it expresses a multiplicity of world views and ways of life. "We look back at the thoughts of our predecessors, and find we can see only as far as language lets us see. We look forward in time and find we can plan only through language."[2] Crystal continues by saying that the importance we attach to language is due to the fact that it is a means of understanding ourselves and our society; and of resolving some of the problems and tensions that arise from human interaction.[3]

One could add here that language does not only speak of tensions arising from human interaction, but is itself the locus of such tension and this is clear – for example – when we consider contrasting approaches to language within the intellectual systems of the last century. Comparative philology looked for the *similarities* between languages; formalist linguistics focused on a microanalysis of the *elements* of a text; structuralism embraced the concept of *difference* and made it the key to unlocking the *functions* of elements within a language construct, while positioning language as the very *matrix* of all systems (including the unconscious[4]). Generative linguistics concentrated on the *process* through which language is created within a structural system. Poststructuralism argued for *context* and historical *locatedness*: "...language is seen not as a static structure, existing regardless of social, historical, or personal considerations, but as a system whose values shift in response to these factors, and whose meaning is too complex to be demonstrable by structuralist techniques."[5]

Crystal requires his readers to consider not only the approaches to language within such intellectual systems, but also to think about registers of engagement with language across such systems. If and how language can construct identity or subjectivity is a question with

radically different answers within each of the systems mentioned above. The relative positions of speaking, listening, writing and reading language are differently configured within such systems; as is the acquisition of language; the relationships between spoken and written language and other "languages of communication"; as well as the political barriers or opportunities posed by language.

In this issue of *Junctures*, contributors engage with systems and registers of language in a variety of ways which agree with or question one another. The reader is invited to read across the contributions in order to find both the points of connection and of contention. Without necessarily overtly aligning themselves with particular intellectual systems, the contributions signal different allegiances and a multiplicity of engagements and positions concerning language as an embodiment or a locus of tension. This editorial provides a small map of trajectories – with reference to Crystal's larger map – with which readers could negotiate the terrain covered in the journal.

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Norman Denzin contributes a co-performance text, a play which enacts a critical cultural politics concerning Native American women and their presence in popular journals and a novel seminal to a Montana myth of origin. In his prologue Denzin points out how the persona of Sacagawea has been embedded in popular culture as a pan-American legend. He writes: "I understand that the presence of the Native American woman in the collective white imagination is almost entirely a matter of racist myth and Euro-American patriarchal stereotype..." The play then sets out to unravel this stereotype and to render it open to questioning. But, he arrives at a two-fold problem: "[Sacagawea] can only be recognized from within the white male mythology and its signifying apparatuses [by which she is named and stripped of her subjectvity and sadly] there are few, if any Native American signifiers which would allow her to be recognized differently." Denzin's play critiques the structuralist move towards homogenisation through constructing an origin and an essence (often denying the outsider position and the particularity of "exotic" cultures in relation to dominant signifying apparatuses).

Sacagawea's first problem has a counterpart in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the figure of Hinemoa, a Māori maiden, as constructed by artists such as Nicholas Chevalier in the nineteenth century.[6] Her second problem is being addressed through revisionist research from within Māori scholarship. An example is Arapera Royal Tangaere's 2001 keynote address in which she firmly places the figure of Hinemoa as a particular tupuna (a Māori ancestor): "I listened to stories told [by my grandparents] about our land, our waters, and our tupuna such as Hinemoa..."[7] Alongside this statement, she insists that: "Māori research is based on a Māori knowledge base, values and concepts. It employs Māori styles of methodology with the Māori language being the key to this knowledge [and] research on Māori has the responsibility to redress the images and the ideology it has perpetrated."[8] It is such a redressing of the complicity of language in the construction of images and ideology in which Denzin participates with his play, albeit in another – particular – contact zone shared by Western culture and Indigeneity.

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The relationship between language and the world is also central to the alternatives posed by Jaakko Hintikka as analysed by Johannes Heidema and Willem Labuschagne. The two authors work together in exploring with Hintikka the field of formal logic and philosophy and, more specifically, the alternatives he contrasted as "lingua universalis" versus "calculus ratiocinator." With Ludwig Wittgenstein, some philosophers agree that "language [is] a universal medium…a prison from which no escape is possible, because language and thought coincide." With Charles Sanders Peirce, some philosophers agree – in contrast – that "language is about stuff outside language, stuff in the world…language is a tool, to be used for codifying information about the world." The authors explore the implications of these two alternatives, while resolutely dismissing a Derridean alternative as an exaggerated variant of Wittgenstein's position.

Connections between language and the world often entail the research of the human brain as an intermediary locus of language. Crystal states in his encyclopedia that the mapping of brain activity relevant to language production forms a major part of current neurolinguistic research and related fields.[9] With a background in mathematics and physics and from a computer science perspective, Hayden Walles looks at the sensorimotor system of the brain that controls perception and action at a concrete level and brings this into the study of language. To do so, he refers to cross-linguistic studies and argues that "language can be influenced by our physiology." More specifically, Walles is "looking for a causal link between an aspect of sensorimotor processing and a corresponding aspect of the structure of language." More specifically, he discusses "a psychological model of the way that groups of objects are classified in the visual system" while exploring the syntax of noun phrases relating to number in language. Thus Walles' model investigates the psychology of visual attention and classification as related to linguistic structure.

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From her perspective as an art historian, Estelle Alma Maré explores the question of whether we can "read" a work of visual art "like language texts, composed of an underlying linguistic structure." She explores ways in which images were used for visual communication with the illiterate in medieval times; and the role of supplementary material, context and codification. Moving to the contemporary era, the author finds a designation of works of visual art as "texts" highly problematic. Her problem with this designation revolves partly around the power invested in the art historian and critic as decoder of the message encoded by the artist. "Since the 'mutuality between pictures and language' is at present so deeply entrenched, it raises many questions" and after listing some of these, the author agrees with visual culture theorist and historian Barbara Stafford that "'we need to disestablish the view of cognition as dominantly and aggressively linguistic. It is a narcissistic tribal compulsion to overemphasize the agency of logos and annihilate rival imaginaries'." Maré concludes her contribution by reminding us of the ambiguity of using the term "reading" in relation to visual works of art where she quotes Wittgenstein: "'everything is what it is and not another thing'" *and* Aristotle's definition of metaphor as consisting of "'giving the thing a name that belongs to something else'."

Artist's pages by Clive Humphreys involve visual motifs clearly recognisable as sourced from the language of Disneyland. The writing alongside the images also includes words belonging to discussions on language: grammar, vocabulary, read. But, the writing clearly does not explain the images as utterances adhering to a linguistic system. The writing rather offers a contextual field of ideas or clues by means of which the reader may or may not approach the project. On looking at the images *and* on reading the writing, we learn that the integrity of space has been contradicted; but only on reading the writing do we learn that the artist likens this manoeuvre to the conflict between form and content in political systems, as discussed by John Ralston Saul. Because the artist-author refrains from an over-determination of signification, the reader is left to her own devices of interpretation within the field suggested by the pages.

Michele Beevors has also sourced motifs from the language of Disneyland for her large sculptures to be found in real space. It could be argued that their scale, materiality and physicality in that space in conjunction with a viewer's body create an open space for interpretation. Within Beevors' artist's pages included in this issue of *Juncture*s, they are, however, positioned on the same pages or "surfaces" as a response to Jean Baudrillard's explanation of our relationship with different types of commodified objects in an era of late capitalism. Again, the writing does not explain the images, but rather creates a field of signification *with* them.

It is important to note here that the format of "artists' pages" allows for the performance of meaning between images or between image and writing, rather than for the simple explication of the "meaning" of visual images. Various approaches to this format have been and will in future be included in *Juncture*s. No doubt, the extraordinarily persistent argument as to whether the visual arts function within the parameters of language (read: cultural systems or codes) or whether they can aspire to an origin and essence outside of language will continue to impact on this format. As Hal Foster wrote in 1985 with respect to expressionism: "[its] contradictions…are those of a language that would be immediate, a cultural form that would be natural. Perhaps in the end, the denial of its historical and rhetorical nature is simply the repressed recognition of how thoroughly language invades the natural, mediates the real, decenters the self." [10]

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Crystal discusses the porous boundaries between "literary and non-literary" uses of language and refers to Czechoslovakian and Russian Formalism. In 1933, Roman Jakobson delivered a lecture called "What is Poetry" (in its English translation) in which he said that: "Poeticity is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and a value of their own…"[11] The two poems included in this issue both – in different ways – work with the feel and weight of words to suggest rather than name. The refusal to name and thus the acceptance of a certain "unknowability" seems to indicate the main thrust of Judith Barrington's poem called "In Praise of Not Knowing the Names of Birds"; while Patricia Brody's "We Were Dead" uses words such as "tree", and "dotter" in ways which poignantly struggle in vain to recoup them from conversations unrepeatable in the face of death.

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The weight of words where they *do* name, and represent through this naming in a gendered register, can be felt in Suzanne Ferriss' and Mallory Young's article entitled "Chicks, Girls and Choice: Redefining Feminism." Discussing different waves of feminism, the authors point out, for example, how, in the 1970s, "the word *chick* was considered an insult, a demeaning diminutive, casting independent young women as delicate, fluffy creatures…[and how a] generation later…*chick* has been revived, wielded knowingly by women themselves to convey solidarity and [to] signal empowerment." The article traces the trajectories of related words – girl to grrl, bitch, biddy – through a focus on particular popular novels and films, and the reader is made aware of the historical contingency of language.

The liberating and enabling function of language as narrative is discussed by Jim Denison and John Winslade in "Understanding Problematic Sporting Stories: Narrative Therapy and Applied Sport Psychology." The authors write that "narrative therapists attend very closely to the way people speak about themselves and thus produce themselves…the way we speak about ourselves constitutes a constructed identity…this is not to say that the material world does not exist…[but that] new ways of speaking have the power to create new lives." Denison and Winslade write about the contrast between a medicalised approach to sporting behaviours and a more personal narrative alternative in which the sportsperson is empowered rather than objectified through an extraneous language of control.

John C Moorfield writes from the position of a Pakeha (i.e., a New Zealander of European descent) on teaching and learning an indigenous language. He focuses on the *Te Whanake* collection as a resource for teaching Māori as a second language to adults and particularly on "the narratives by well-known repositories of Māori knowledge across Aotearoa/New Zealand who saw the importance of the written word as a tool to aid in the survival of the Māori language, history and culture." Moorfield is careful to acknowledge his own position as a Pakeha and to explain that his access to indigenous language and knowledge had been gained through the proper processes and protocols, thereby suggesting an understanding of Sacagawea's first problem: representation of the world through language wielded by an agent acting as mediator, although, in this instance, there does now – some two decades after the compilation of *Te Whanake* – exist indigenous mechanisms through which narratives can be told in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

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Two book reviews conclude this issue. Craig McNab reviews *The Photobook: A History volume 1* (by Martin Parr and Garry Badger). This review discusses, amongst other matters, the semiotics of the photograph and the issues relevant to this field of research as addressed in the book under review. McNab writes: "… the artists involved in the construction of [the] photobooks are typically looking to create a new discursive language to explicate the slippage within the medium of photography and the real."

Bridie Lonie reviews *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux Etats-Unis* (by François Cusset) which discusses the response in the English-speaking world to French theory largely ignored in its own country. In this process Cusset

contrasts two philosophical (and, of course, socio-political) positions: a "reagonothatcherite" individualist as against a "foucauldeleuzian" collective, and negotiates the linguistic structures through which these alternative positions construct and communicate themselves.

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David Crystal quotes Paul van Buren where he writes about "walking language's borders, or being at the very edge of language"; while Bertoldt Brecht has warned us to be aware of the myth of the "transparency of language" as its very structure holds meanings often disguised by the words uttered.[12] The contributions to this issue tells of many matters related to "language." The careful reader will no doubt also find meanings working at the edge of language that are no less present than the overt arguments presented between the pages of this issue of *Junctures.*

Leoni Schmidt
(Editor)

1 See the *London Review of Books*, 7 January 1988, pp. 22-23.
2 David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1987 and republished in 1997), 1.
3 Ibid.
4 See Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, eds, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press), 273 & 287.
5 See Crystal, p. 79.
6 See Leonard Bell, *Colonial Constructs: European Images of Maori 1840-1914* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1992), illustration 86 on p. 141.
7 Arapera Royal Tangaere, "Kaupapa Māori Research: What is an Early Childhood Perspective?", Keynote Address at the International Research Conference on Early Childhood Education, July 2001 in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, published at www.kohanga.ac.nz/docs as last visited on 15 April 2006, p. 18.
8 Ibid., pp. 12 and 25.
9 See Crystal, pp. 258-263.
10 Hal Foster, "The Expressive Fallacy", in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Washington: Bay Press, 1985), 64.
11 See Jakobson quoted in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 35.
12 See Crystal, p. 72.