# Metalanguage in social life

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## 1.  Introduction

There are, broadly, two approaches to the idea of metalanguage. The first is oriented towards representation. Here, metalanguage is a specialised scientific register, which, because of its unique object, transcends all other scientific registers: it does not represent the world directly, it represents representations of the world, and so, in a sense, places itself above other representations and becomes the ultimate arbiter of their signification. In Carnap's philosophical theory of language "the language which is the object of study is the object language" and "the language we use in speaking about that object language is called metalanguage". The metalanguage then serves to formulate the *theory* of the object language (Carnap 1958: 78–79). In Hjelmslev's "glossematics", the signs of denotative semiotics form the content of metalanguages. A new expression form is then superimposed on that content to create the metalanguage. Hjelmslev stresses the scientific nature of metalanguage, calling it "a metasemiotic with a nonscientific semiotic as an object semiotic" (1961: 120). In practice, metalanguage has often been form-oriented. Moving from "object language" to "metalanguage", or, in Hjelmslev's terms, from "denotative semiotic" to "metasemiotic", has also been moving from an emphasis on the signified to an emphasis on the signifier, from thinking of language as meaning, or as communication, to thinking of language as form. This move was not restricted to the field of language. It was a major mode of twentieth century thought. In other areas of theory (e.g. philosophy and mathematics) devising formal terminologies and formulating formal rules was also regarded as the highest form of theorising. In the domain of the arts, emphasis on form was, and often still is, a mark of cultural distinction (cf., e.g. Adorno 1976; Bourdieu 1986). And in society's major institutions, devising and perfecting content-free procedures became the highest form of social organisation (and today especially of management).

In the other approach, metalanguage is oriented towards communication and seen as part and parcel of everyday communication, hence also as part and parcel of the so-called "object languages". Here the emphasis is on function rather than form, and the "metalinguistic function" is seen as one of several si-

multaneous functions of linguistic communication (Jakobson 1960). As a result, metalanguage is here not a scientific register. No special training is needed to communicate about communication, nor does it afford any special distinction. Every time we say "What do you mean?" we use language in its metalinguistic function. The ability to communicate metalinguistically is one of the key characteristics of all human language, setting it apart from animal communication (cf. Hockett 1977, who calls it "reflexivity"). Its origins may even be situated before human language, in play, with its possibilities of "framing" actions in different ways (Bateson 1973).

Today the idea of metalanguage acquires new relevance in relation to databases, a field in which there is an urgent need for a theory and practice of the "meta-data" which will help us organise the mass of information in databases, and allow us to find more easily what we are looking for. Again this requires superimposing a layer of information on top of already formulated information – "information about information" – and again it could be argued that meta-data are already part and parcel of the way we organise, store and retrieve information.

I want to say something about metalanguage in this chapter, but not by further developing the contrast between these two approaches, however much it is, unavoidably, the backdrop of anything we can say about metalanguage. Instead, I want to take a fresh look at how contemporary linguists actually write about language – to then eventually return to the question of the possible special status of metalanguage and to the tension between the formal and the functional which metalanguage (and, indeed, linguistics as a whole) inevitably entails.

I will compare aspects of the way three linguistic texts describe and interpret the language of political interviews. The first is pp. 78–92 of Sandra Harris' paper "Evasive action: How politicians respond to questions in political interviews" (1991). The paper can be situated more or less in the tradition of pragmatics. It is based on a corpus of political interviews, and essentially seeks to investigate what causes politicians to come across as "evasive" in interviews, hence also what constitutes "proper" (non-evasive) answers to specific kinds of question. The second is pp. 178– 192 from a foundational text in critical discourse analysis, Norman Fairclough's *Language and Power* (1989). The extract analyses an interview with Margaret Thatcher, aiming to reconstruct how she represents (and at the same time enacts) the relationship between the Government and the people. The discourse reconstructed in this way is not necessarily specific to the genre of political interviews, as a range of intertextual references suggests. Fairclough's emphasis is on using methods of critical discourse analysis to analyse the political content of the interview, rather than the interview as such, but he also shows that these two aspects cannot, in the end, really

be separated. The third is pp. 136–157 of *The Media Interview – Confession, Contest, Conversation*, by Philip Bell and myself (1994), a section in which we describe the genre of the adversarial political interview. Though containing a fair amount of linguistic analysis, the book was primarily aimed at a media studies readership and my co-author is a media sociologist. We used Hallidayan systemic-functional linguistics and "Sydney School" genre analysis and hence concentrated very much on the flow of the political interview, and on constructing a rationale for the way its characteristic mode of questioning develops. The inclusion of this extract will add an element of self-reflexivity and hopefully make clear that it is not my intention to criticise any of these authors "from the outside". I am not on the outside in this matter. These are the writings of my colleagues, of people involved in the same endeavour, writing about language and the media, analysing texts, trying to gain from language description some purchase on important social issues and events. How do we write our "language about language"? How do we negotiate the tension between form and function it inevitably involves? Those are the questions I seek to explore.

## 2.     Metalanguage as the recontextualisation of linguistic practice

Elsewhere (1993a, 1993b, 1999) I have argued the social semiotic point of view that all representation ultimately recontextualises social practices, that all our knowledge of "what is" ultimately derives from and is grounded in "what we do". Indeed, I see changing "what we do" into "what is", and so legitimating social practices and creating stability for social life (or delegitimating and destabilising social practices when they do not or no longer serve people's interests) as one of the key functions of all human communication, whether linguistically or otherwise. This may at first seem an extreme point of view. Do *all* representations represent social practices? What about representing natural processes? Yet think for instance of the weather. The weather itself is not a social practice. But when reference is made to it in texts, it will usually be through social practices or elements thereof, either because we have incorporated the natural processes into our social practices, or because we use social practices to understand natural processes. Weather reports, for instance, objectivate the social practices of meteorologists – practices of observation, of recording, and of performing mathematical and linguistic operations on these recordings. They seem like natural events only because they exclude both the observers and their practices of observation from the recontextualisation (cf. Van Leeuwen 1995):

> Even in the most abstract and theoretical aspects of human thought and verbal usage, the real understanding of words ultimately derived from active experience of those aspects of reality to which the words belong. The chemist or physicist understands the meaning of his most abstract concepts ultimately on the basis of his acquaintance with the chemical and physical processes in the laboratory. Even the pure mathematician, dealing with that most useless and arrogant branch of his learning, the theory of numbers, has probably had some experience of counting his pennies and shillings or his boots and buns. In short, there is no science whose conceptual, hence verbal, outfit is not ultimately derived from the practical handling of matter.
>
> (Malinowski 1935: 58)

Outside of science, reference to the weather will relate to social practices also. In literary stories, for instance, the weather may exteriorise participants' reactions to activities or other aspects of social practices, as in this example from a Simenon detective novel where 'the rain' substitutes for the hero whose enquiry is not progressing well:

(1)    It was still raining the following day. The rain was soft, cheerless and hopeless…

The other case, using social practices to understand natural processes, is well illustrated by this quote from Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* (1979: 64):

> Cancer cells do not simply multiply, they are 'invasive'. … They 'colonise' from the original tumour to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts ("metastates") …

Accordingly, when exploring how linguists recontextualise language, I will explore how they move from "what we do" (in this case, "what interviewers do with language") to "what is" (in this case, "what 'interview language' *is* like") – but at the same time also try to understand how and why this transformation from "what we do" to "what is" was achieved.

To start with the former, finding the way back to "what we do" involves taking at least the following aspects of concrete social practices into account (for a fuller discussion, see Van Leeuwen 1993a, 1993b):

– *Participants*

Who are involved, in which roles?

– *Activities*

What do they do, and how do they react to what is going on?

– *Time*

When do they do it (and for how long, and how often)?

–  *Place*

In what (kind of) place(s) do the activities take place?

–  *Resources*

What tools and materials do the activities require?

In any given representation several of these may be left out. It is perfectly possible to talk about interviewers without referring to their interviewing activities, or to talk about interviewing without ever mentioning interviewers and interviewees. Again, the activities of the social practices may be represented extensively, or only referred to by a handful of very general nominalisations or process nouns ("the interview", "questions"). And apart from representing the participants, activities, times, places, resources and so on, representations will also *add* elements: evaluations, purposes, legitimations (cf. Van Leeuwen 1993a, 1993b, 1999). Rather than discussing all these elements and their possible discursive realisations at length, I would like to give an example, a single sentence from Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1974 [1916]: 11):

(2)    The brain transmits an impulse corresponding to the image to the organs used in producing sounds

This sentence contains four activities:

transmit an impulse
(make) correspond to an image
use organs
produce sound

Two of these, "use organs" and "produce sound" recontextualise the act of speaking, but without including the speaker (a few sentences earlier Saussure has introduced "two people, A and B", so the speaker is not so much totally excluded as "backgrounded", cf. Van Leeuwen 1996). How do "use organs" and "produce sound" represent speaking? They represent it, not as a semiotic and social activity, but as a material activity. The crucial aspect of the semiotic activity, that it has content, that it is *about* something, or, in Halliday's terms, that it "projects" something, is absent. Elsewhere I have called this transformation "instrumentalisation" (Van Leeuwen 1995). Taken together, the two activity representations in fact represent speaking in economic terms, as the *use* of resources for the *production* of goods and services. However much we are used to this mode of representation, however much it has become the unthinking coinage of everyday communication, it still recontextualises a natural and

universal human faculty in terms of a historically and culturally specific social practice. It is still a metaphor "we live by" (Lakoff and Johnson 1981).

Then there is the main clause, representing the cause and origin of speech production: "the brain transmits an impulse". Here the speaker ("person A") is included, but he/she is represented as a body part rather than a whole person, a transformation which I have called somatisation (Van Leeuwen 1996), and which often has the effect of demeaning or de-humanising the participants who are referred to in this way (e.g. women, the physically handicapped, medical patients). Here it represents the origin of the production process as not the speaker deciding to say something (a *mental* process), but the brain transmitting an impulse, a material process. This way of representing mental processes relates to issues of social control. What goes on in the mind is normally not part of the social practice, simply because it cannot be seen and hence it cannot be subjected to social control either. But if we can deal with it in the way we deal with physical processes, if we can record it and measure it in some form (recordings and measurements which will then require interpretation through some expert discourse) it becomes accessible and controllable. Secondly, the process is, again, interpreted through a social practice, this time a technical practice, the practice of telecommunication ("transmit an impulse to").

Thirdly, there is the "impulse corresponding to the image" (by "image" Saussure means the "sound image", the mental representation of the sound). Again the social practice on which this draws is telecommunication, the encoding of one signifier into another signifier (e.g. "morse code") able to be transmitted by technical means. But it is objectivated (Van Leeuwen 1996). All agency has been deleted from the act of encoding. It therefore remains, in the end, a mystery how the sound image is transformed into an impulse.

Finally, the social practice is thoroughly de-contextualised. There is no setting, no time and place, no context in terms of any kind of broader activity sequence of which the speaking forms part. For Saussure, this is, of course, because what he is describing here is the "individual" and "physical" side of language (but then, "langue", the social side, the "system", is also decontextualised in Saussure).

The three texts I will analyse below of course represent more than one social practice. All three represent (a) their own practice, the practice of analysing texts, (b) the practice of the political interview, and (c) the practices which the interviews are about, the practices that constitute political life. The following sentence from Fairclough (1989:188) is an example:

(3)   In the text we are looking at there are no overt references at all to opponents

The sentence represents (a) the process of analysing an interview ("we are looking at a text"), (b) the activities of the interviewee ("there are no overt references to opponents") and (c) at least a participant from political life ("opponents"). The structure of the clause then creates the relation between these three practices. The interview ("the text") forms the main clause, and political life is its content. But the critical discourse analyst and his readers (the "we" is inclusive here) and the process of analysis ("looking at") are embedded in the nominal group of which "text" is the head, so that text and "reading" are grammatically welded into a single unit. The act of reading literally and figuratively post-modifies the text.

## 3.  Recontextualising linguistic agents

If linguistics recontextualises social practices of "languaging", it is perhaps fair to say that more effort has gone into devising metalanguage about linguistic *activities* than about their agents and patients. Goffman's theory of "footing" (1981) remains an exception here. For the most part speakers and hearers have been generalised and idealised. Chapter 1.1 of Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) contains 13 references to speakers and/or hearers, and one to the "speech community", but the vocabulary is limited:

> speaker
> hearer
> speaker/hearer
> idealised speaker-hearer
> idealised speaker-listener
> the child learning the language
> homogeneous speech community

Chapters 1.2 and 1.3 contain no references to speakers and/or hearers at all (I stopped counting after page 18) and none of the terms listed above are included in the otherwise quite extensive index. Almost forty years later linguistics has changed. It has become more text-oriented, and more interdisciplinary. As a consequence, the texts I am looking at here contain more, and more varied references to the participants involved in the "languaging". The tables below list the terms they use for "interviewer", "interviewee", and "audience". I include instances in which participants are replaced by their utterances, as in this example from Bell and Van Leeuwen:

(4)  Entrapment questions seek to drive the interviewee into a corner.

This could also have been "The interviewer seeks to drive the interviewee into a corner".

A number of points emerge.

First, all three writers "functionalise" participants, that is, they refer to participants in terms of their function or role in a specific institution, (cf. Van Leeuwen 1996). The relevant institutions here are (a) the media (e.g. "host", "interviewee", "audience"), (b) political life (e.g. "politician", "opponent", "voters", "the people"), and (c) linguistics/semiotics (e.g. "speaker", "addressee", "typified ideal hearer", etc.). All three texts refer to the participants in terms of both the media and political life, with some of the terms indicating that the political interview belongs to both these institutions ("political interviewer", "interviewed politician"). But the texts vary in the

*Table 1.* "Interviewee" vocabulary in three texts about the language of the political interview (*includes quotes)

|     | Harris | Fairclough | Bell/Van Leeuwen |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (1) | interviewee | interviewee | interviewee<br>interviewed politicians<br>experienced interviewees<br>guests |
| (2) | James Callaghan<br>Peter Biffin<br>Bernie Grant<br>Margaret Thatcher<br>Neil Kinnock | Margaret Thatcher | Andrew Peacock<br>Paul Keating<br>Bob Hawke<br>John Hewson |
| (3) | politician | political leader | politician<br>interviewed politicians<br>politics<br>leader of the opposition<br>federal treasurer<br>prime minister |
| (4) | participant | speaker<br>addressee<br>producer | |

*Table 1.* (continued)

| | Harris | Fairclough | Bell/Van Leeuwen |
|---|---|---|---|
| (5) | | | contestants<br>'bastards'<br>batsman |
| (6) | agenda-shifting<br>        manoeuvre<br>responses<br>answer<br>elaboration<br>en explicit "yes" | *utterance**<br>    (e.g. 'lines 7-12)<br>textual features<br>"we'"<br>the pronoun "you"<br>answer<br>selection of vocabulary<br>wording<br>assertions<br>modalities<br>turntaking<br>claim<br>co-ordinate structures<br>strategic purpose | statements<br>position<br>facts |

amount of emphasis they place on politics and the media. Fairclough clearly has a more varied vocabulary in the political field (and a greater interest in the audience), while Bell and Van Leeuwen have a few more media oriented terms, and less of an interest in the audience. By comparison, Harris remains a little more traditionally "linguistic" in this regard. All three authors must also negotiate between looking at language in the context of specific social practices and looking at language in general: they also use the kind of terms we can immediately place as part of the fields of linguistics and semiotics. Thus the language of these contemporary linguists has become more hybrid, more interdisciplinary, on the one hand retaining its connection with the generalising and de-contextualising vocabulary of the linguistic tradition, on the other hand introducing contextually specific (and "non-linguistic") elements. The question is, are these more traditional ways of representing language "metalinguistic", or are they merely more generalised, in the same way other scientific registers (e.g. psychology and biology) might also refer to participants in highly generalised ways?

*Table 2.* "Interviewer" vocabulary in three texts about the language of the political interview

|     | Harris | Fairclough | Bell/Van Leeuwen |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| (1) | interviewee | interviewer<br>journalist | interviewer<br>political interviewers<br>media host<br>host |
| (2) | Brian Walden<br>Fred Emery<br>Peter Jay<br>John Tusa<br>Jimmy Young | Michael Charlton | Paul Lyneham<br>Jana Wendt<br>Mike Gibson<br>Richard Carleton |
| (3) | participant | speaker<br>addressee<br>participant | |
| (4) | | "courtesans"<br>home team<br>bowler | |
| (5) | question<br>reformulation<br>turn<br>illocutionary force<br>utterances | | question<br>the first question<br>the final question<br>a series of Socratic checks<br>relatively open question<br>statements<br>challenges<br>cooperative solicitations<br>accusation<br>entrapment<br>entrapment question<br>checking<br>conjunctions<br>the WH-word<br>adverbs<br>the references<br>elements<br>the facts<br>a berating tone<br>the way he asks the question<br>irony<br>manner of delivery |

*Table 2.* (continued)

| Harris | Fairclough | Bell/Van Leeuwen |
|--------|-----------|------------------|
| | | the exchange |
| | | the interview format |
| | | the interview |
| | | the adversarial interview |
| | | the interviewer's moves |
| | | the game |
| | | |
| | | the media |

*Table 3.* "Audience" vocabulary in three texts about the language of the political interview

| | Harris | Fairclough | Bell/Van Leeuwen |
|---|--------|-----------|------------------|
| (1) | the audience | the audience | the audience |
| | the public | the public | the public |
| | the listening public | members of the audience | |
| | | members of the public | |
| | | a mixed audience | |
| | | a diverse audience | |
| | | the radio audience | |
| | | mass audiences | |
| (2) | we | the people | the people |
| | | the British people | the voters |
| | | the ordinary person | "us" |
| | | the working class | |
| | | the affluent "ordinary person" | |
| | | the people in general | |
| | | a collective | |
| | | we | |
| (3) | the hearer | the hearer | |
| | the overhearing audience | a typified "ideal hearer" | |
| | | on-lookers | |
| | | addressees | |

All three authors refer to interviewers and interviewees by name, which is some-
what of a departure from the generalised and decontextualised way in which lin-
guists have usually eliminated the social specifics of "speakers" and "hearers".
Whether or not they explicitly aim at providing social and political comment (as
in the case of critical discourse analysis), the writers all comment on specific
events of political significance and all evaluate the conduct of the media as well
as of the Prime Ministers and Opposition Leaders they mention by name.

Bell and Van Leeuwen invoke still further social practices. They quote a writer
who calls the political journalists in Canberra "courtesans" who, rather than chal-
lenging the politicians on behalf of the audience, rely on them for handouts of
news and in turn provide them with the electronic platform they need. Bell and
Van Leeuwen also invoke the kind of sports and combat metaphors which the
media themselves often apply to politics and politicians ("batsman", "bowler",
"contestant"). Such comparisons almost always involve legitimation or delegiti-
mation. Comparing politics to sport and combat reinforces a cynical interpreta-
tion of politics as being about personal ambition, winning office, votes, influence,
etc., rather than about, for instance, "serving" the public. Bell and Van Leeuwen
use these comparisons as part of their argument that the very way in which politi-
cal interviews are conducted reinforces and enacts such a cynical interpretation
of politics. But at the same time it makes their own language more like that of the
media they criticise than the language of the other two authors.

Finally, all three texts contain many instances of "impersonalisation". For
the most part these are instances of what I have called "utterance autonomisa-
tion" (1996), cases where the writer or speaker is replaced by his or her utterance,
something which is often done to lend a kind of impersonal authority to the utter-
ance (as in "The Bible says"). Formal and functional terms are not always easily
separated in linguistics, but the tables show that functional terms (e.g. speech
act terms such as "entrapment", "challenge", "accusation") and formal terms
(e.g. "the pronoun 'you'", "co-ordinate structures", "adverbs") exist side by side,
with Harris oriented somewhat more than the others towards functional, and Fair-
clough somewhat more towards formal terms. However, when formal terms are
used as utterance autonomisations, the effect is to functionalise them, to represent
them as agentive, capable of having an effect independent of who utters them:

(5)    Negative assertions evoke and reject corresponding positive assertions in
       the intertextual context.

                                                                    (Fairclough)

(6)    ... responses which maintain cohesion, topic coherence, presuppositional
       framework and illocutionary cohesion.

                                                                       (Harris)

(7)  The relatively open question which begins the interview establishes the cooperation necessary.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

This is not the case when the same terms are used in more descriptive ways – something which is relatively rare in these texts, but does occur, mostly in Harris and Bell and Van Leeuwen:

(8)  Responses may vary from a few words to a lengthy series of utterances.

(Harris)

(9)  [The relatively open question…] is a WH-question, using the WH-word "what"; it has second person address ("you") coupled with a cognitive mental process verb ("think") …

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

In one sense, such use of formal terms and such emphasis on how linguistic communication has its effect, is clearly metalinguistic, language about language, but on the other hand, how different is this kind of abstraction from abstracting other aspects from activities, e.g. from abstracting their mode of purposefulness, instead of their form, through the use of terms like "strategy", "manoeuvre", etc. Such terms, too, do not specify content, do not tell us, either in general or in specific terms what the activity actually is. Again, formalism is not restricted to linguistics.

A further aspect of the representation of participants is of interest, the question of whether the participants are represented in active or passive roles. The table below shows that Fairclough gives the interviewee a much more active role than Bell and Van Leeuwen, while Bell and Van Leeuwen give the interviewer a much more active role.

*Table 4.* Active and passive roles of interviewers, interviewees and audience in three texts about political interviews

|  | Harris n=306 | Fairclough n=376 | Bell/Van Leeuwen n=435 |
|---|---|---|---|
| interviewer active | 81 % | 82 % | 98 % |
| interviewer passive | 19 % | 18 % | 2 % |
| interviewee active | 84 % | 95 % | 71 % |
| interviewee passive | 16 % | 5 % | 29 % |
| audience active | 85 % | 92 % | 29 % |
| audience passive | 15 % | 8 % | 71 % |

Also of interest are expressions in which agency lies with some unnamed exterior force, as in the following two examples, where we do not learn who or what does the "pre-allocating" and who or what defines the "role of questioner":

(10)  Turns are largely pre-allocated

(Harris)

(11)  Control over the management and organisation of topics is afforded to the interviewer by virtue of the role as questioner

(Greatbatch, cited in Harris)

Such expressions may be fairly common in traditional linguistic discourse, but there are only a few instances in the three texts analysed here.

## 4.   Recontextualising linguistic activities

The amount of different terms for the activities of the participants is so large that it is impractical to list them in the kind of tables I used in the previous section. Harris' paper has 36 different expressions for what interviewers do and 47 different expressions for what interviewees do. Fairclough has 14 expressions for the activities of the interviewers and 105 for those of the interviewee (Mrs. Thatcher). Bell and Van Leeuwen have 143 different expressions for the interviewer's activities and 83 for those of the interviewee. Instead of listing them all, I will attempt to describe some of the key characteristics of these vocabularies.

Interviews are a particular kind of social practice, a *semiotic* practice, that is, a social practice which recontextualises one or more other social practices and makes meaning both through the way it presents itself and through the way it represents other practices. The question is, to which degree is this practice actually represented as semiotic? After all, it is possible to represent semiotic activities with (12) or without (13 and 14) inclusion of what they represent:

(12)  The question lists desirable qualities for a people.

(Fairclough)

(13)  The question requires the interviewee to be on the defensive.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

(14)  The trap doesn't quite close.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

In the first example the interviewer's activity, questioning, is represented as a semiotic act: we learn what the question is about ("desirable qualities for a

people"). In the other two examples, this is not the case. The activities are "materialised" (cf. Van Leeuwen 1995), represented as quasi-physical behaviour, or even as an event rather than an action ("the trap doesn't quite close" instead of "he doesn't quite close the trap"). The content "projected" by the activity, to use Halliday's terms, is not included. The semiotic act is represented as behaviour ("drive into a corner", "attack", "defend oneself") or as an instrumental act in which the semiotic dimension is objectivated and represented as a kind of tool or commodity ("use questions", "provide information", "employ various syntactic and semantic types").

Bell and Van Leeuwen represent the activities of interviewer and interviewee overwhelmingly in such "materialised" terms. 84% of interviewer activities and 89% of interviewee activities are materialised. While they use a wide range of terms for types of speech acts and types of questions, they have very few terms for specifying aspects of the content, and those they do use tend to be highly general ("issues", "topics", "view", "position"). Such more specific description of the content as does occur is bracketed or added as an apposition, rather than projected by the activities, as with "home buyers" in the following example:

(15) When Lyneham introduces a new element, "home buyers", this element, too, is picked up by Peacock in his answer.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

In Harris, too, the vast majority of activities is materialised (88% of interviewee and 97% of interviewer activities). But by using verbs like "use" and "employ", she instrumentalises terms which in themselves are semiotic and by themselves *could* project. "Questioning", for instance, *could* project ("questioning whether..."). "Employing questions" no longer can – "employing questions whether..." is not likely to occur. In Harris such instrumentalisations still use terms which are recognisably semiotic (e.g. "question"). In Bell and Van Leeuwen, on the other hand, the processes themselves often have a more material flavour – they are verbs which could either take a material or a semiotic object.

(16) Interviewers employ polar questions when they are attempting to force a politician to commit him/herself on a particular issue.

(Harris)

(17) Checking commits interviewees to positions from which they cannot easily retreat.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

All this contrasts strongly with Fairclough's text, in which only 54% of interviewer and 38% of interviewee activities are materialised. Fairclough, in this extract,

makes relatively little use of functional, "speech act" type terms. For him, words and grammatical structures first of all *represent* relationships and identities (the relationship between Mrs. Thatcher and her audience, Mrs. Thatcher's identity as Prime Minister and woman) and only secondarily also enact, or "construct" these relationships and identities. Thus Fairclough represents the activities of the interviewer and interviewee as what they are, semiotic, rather than as actions which might as well not represent anything since all their meaning comes from what they do to the addressee (as in example 20) rather than from what they represent:

(18)  This inclusive use [of "we"...] represents MT, her audience, and everyone else as in the same boat.

(Fairclough)

(19)  Some of the coordinate structures in the text explicitly attribute properties to "the British people"...

(Fairclough)

(20)  Frequent use of vocatives may enhance the confronting nature of the challenge.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

As a result of his emphasis on the semiotic dimension, Fairclough has a much wider range of terms for the act of representation: "represent", "reflect", "construct", "articulate", "refer to", "project", "list", "attribute to", "tell", "express", "make assertions about", "put across", and more. Harris has only three terms of this kind ("constructs", "projects", "gets across"). On the other hand, she uses a wide range of terms for the strategic aspects of the interviewer's and interviewee's activities: "apply strategies", "evade", "give indirect answers", "agenda shift", "refuse to answer", "avoid supplying the requested agreement-disagreement", "avoid giving a direct answer", "fail to answer", "challenge the illocutionary force of the question", "challenge the presuppositions of the question", "disagree with the interviewer's proposition", and more. Fairclough has only six expressions of this kind: "control interview", "be non-compliant", "reject interviewer control", "put interviewer in his place", "correct interviewer" and "steer away from question".

All three writers mostly use linguistic and pragmatic terms to represent the activities of interviewers and interviewees. But in Fairclough and Bell and Van Leeuwen there are also terms that are reminiscent of other fields. In Fairclough these come predominantly from the domain of politics, e.g.:

represent the people
express values of solidarity

> convey nationalistic sentimentality
> assimilate the leader to the people

In Bell and Van Leeuwen they come predominantly from the domain of the media, e.g.:

> expose evidence of duplicity
> use populist-consumerist approaches
> canvass soft, human interest issues
> investigate

In Harris, finally, quite a few of the activities are represented as mental activities, e.g. "inferring", "presupposing", "expecting", "rate responses", "judge supportiveness", etc. This is because she uses a pragmatic approach in which such cognitive terms play an important role, whereas Fairclough and Bell and Van Leeuwen use a more lexicogrammatical approach.

All three writers use both formal and functional linguistic and pragmatic terms. Bell and Van Leeuwen, for instance, use speech act terms like "contradict", "accuse", "challenge", "solicit opinion", "seek information", "comment", and so on, but also describe the activities of the interviewer and the interviewee in formal terms: "use honorific", "use vocatives frequently", "use adversative conjunction", "involve a 'but'", "use 'Yiddish rise-fall intonation'", "intensify adversatives with adverbs", and so on. What is of interest is how such formal and functional terms are brought together. Two methods are most common, in all three writers, and no doubt elsewhere too. Both could be said to express, by means of specific grammatical constructions, a view of the semiotic process. The first includes the human agent, the sign producer who *uses* the formal elements of language, the linguistic signifiers, as a resource for 'doing something with words', where 'doing' includes, of course, representation. This is the social semiotic theory elaborated, for instance, in Kress (1993) and also in this paper. But it is not only a theory, it is also routinely expressed in the grammar of clauses in texts which recontextualise semiotic practices, and not only in texts written by linguists. This grammar works as follows. The functional element is the main process of the clause, and the formal element a circumstance of means, as in 21, or the formal element, in nominalised form, is the object of verbs like "use" and "employ", with the functional element realised as a circumstance or purpose, as in 22, or, sometimes, a circumstance of time, as in 23 (where the meaning expressed, "incredulity", is "descriptivised").

(21) Both politicians attempt to agenda shift by means of elaboration.

(Harris)

(22) "*You*" is used to register solidarity and commonality of experience in workingclass speech.

(Fairclough)

(23) Jana Wendt uses it [the "Yiddish rise-fall intonation"] when incredulously repeating a phrase from an answer Peacock has just given.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

It is of course also possible to have form without function, as in 24, or function without form, as in 25 (in interpreting such cases we ought to follow one of the ground rules of critical discourse analysis: when something is deleted from a representation, look for the way in which this deletion serves the interests of the person and/or institution producing and distributing the representation – but this I will not pursue further here).

(24) ...the various syntactic and semantic types of utterances which are employed by interviewers...

(Harris)

(25) Interviewers seek to pin down interviewees on specifics.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

In the second method human agency is deleted, and the formal element, the linguistic resource, becomes itself agentive. The functional element is then represented as the process, as what the formal element *does*, whether this is an act of "expressing" or "representing" or some other kind of speech act.

(26) Both types of modality place MT in an authoritative position.

(Fairclough)

(27) 'We' refers to a collective like the British people.

(Fairclough)

While in theoretical discourses this view is often opposed to the previous one (debates on whether meanings are "in texts" or "in people"), in the practice of writing, the two views can live side by side. Take one of the sentences I have just written (and which I will now not change): "The first [method] includes a human agent". By putting it this way I have in fact made my "human agent" into a patient, and assigned agency to "the first method". My grammar contradicts my meaning. But maybe there is no contradiction. Maybe the two views express different aspects of or viewpoints on a complex truth, certainly in a culture where writing and other linguistic technologies *do* allow texts to become detached from their producers – and interviews combine the two aspects – they

are both interactive events and, once recorded or broadcast, "texts" that can be transported into many contexts other than the interview itself.

It also possible to use functional elements as agents. In that case, however, the formal aspect need not be represented, and the process, "what the speech acts do", will be a more broadly formulated social aim or meaning, dynamically linking (meta)language and social life.

(28) The politicians are interrogated (…) in order to expose evidence of duplicity and to make public hidden schemes and self-serving motives.

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

(29) How a politician manages his/her responses to "yes/no" questions may conceivably play a part in constructing a political style, and in projecting the public perception of that politician…

(Harris)

Other expressions lack the functional element altogether and transform linguistic activities into static descriptions of structures. This does not occur in the Fairclough extract I have analysed, because Fairclough explains the formal characteristics of textual features in an earlier, methodological chapter (e.g. 4.19)

(30) An *event* involves just one participant, which may be animate (*many peasants* in the SV examples above) or inanimate (*a black township*)

(Fairclough)

Combining such descriptions of formal elements and their functions or uses, then, tends to happen at the textual level, rather than through the structure of clauses and clause complexes. In Fairclough it happens, first of all, through the structure of the book as a whole, but in his analyses, too, he moves from form classes ("the pronoun '*you*'") or speech act types ("negative assertions") to what these form classes or speech act types *do* (e.g. "evoke and reject corresponding positive assertions"), and from there to what human agents do with that (e.g. "reformulate") – and the latter is represented as not totally predictable by the former, as "rather more complicated" than a decontextualised statement of linguistic function suggests. In other words, there is the system, and the semiotic potential of the textual features, and there are the things people do with that potential, the way they put it to work.

*(31)* *Negative assertions.* Negative assertions evoke and reject corresponding positive assertions in the intertextual context. But the picture is rather more complicated than this suggests in the case of the negative assertions of lines (29) – (30), because it is hardly credible to attribute the positive

assertions *they do have to be told* and *they do like to be (are willing to be) pushed around* to MT's political opponents. The point is that in alluding to opposition texts in the intertextual context, producers standardly refor- mulate them, substituting for the wording of their opponents an ideologi- cally contrastive wording of their own. In this case, for instance, MT is alluding to and arguing against positive assertions which are more likely to be worded as something like *people need guidance* or *people are quite willing to accept guidance (from welfare agencies)*.

(Fairclough)

Bell and Van Leeuwen, in their chapter on political interviews, first describe the interview in functional terms, and then start again, first recapitulating the func- tional analysis ("the interviewer offers information that could … weaken the interviewee's position") and then describing the formal structures that realise the functions ("these statements incorporate adversative conjunctions…" etc.):

(32)  Although we tend to call all the interviewer's contributions "questions", most challenges are not in fact questions. Rather they are statements in which the interviewer offers information that could, if not adequately countered by the interviewee, weaken the interviewer's position. Usu- ally these statements incorporate adversative conjunctions such as "but", "(al)though", "on the other hand" (a variant is: "Let me put this to you…") to indicate their nature as objections to the interviewee's position. The adversative aspect may be intensified by adverbs such as "surely" ("but surely…") and frequent use of vocatives ("Mr Peacock…") and a berating tone ("you should be streets ahead, surely…" may enhance the confront- ing nature of the challenge

(Bell and Van Leeuwen)

Harris, finally, alternates between linguistic description and discussion and "case studies" or examples. This example shows the transition between the two, and the shift in voice it entails:

(33)  It is probably simplest to define questions pragmatically as requests to provide information rather than syntactically as interrogatives, though most interviewer turns in my data (77%) do involve some form of inter- rogative. But, as Jucker suggests, it is useful to regard the various syntac- tic and semantic types of utterances which are employed by interviewers as pragmatic acts directed at eliciting information and, as such, the major- ity can be identified as 'questions' for all practical purposes. This is not to suggest that the question/answer framework in political interviews is never problematic or that breaches do not occur, as the following example

illustrates [*example omitted*] although Brian Walden's first two utterances are interrogative in form, their primary illocutionary force is not to elicit information but to act as an accusation that James Callaghan is refusing to provide an answer.

<div align="right">(Harris)</div>

This passage first chooses a functional definition of the question over a formal one ("It is probably easiest to define questions pragmatically") while yet taking care to retain the link with the formal dimension which is the hallmark of linguistic discourse ("though most interviewer turns in my data do involve some form of interrogative"). In doing so it recontextualises in the first place the activities of linguistic analysts ("define", "identify", "suggest") and only secondarily those of interviewers and interviewees. But then the focus changes, and the data begin to speak for themselves, shifting between "function"-oriented formulations, in which the language does the work ("…two utterances … act as an accusation") and "use"-oriented formulations in which human agents do the work, as in 34.

(34)  The interviewer elects to utilise highly restrictive forms of "yes/no" questions so that the failure of the politician to produce an explicit "yes" or "no" … will create a "noticeable absence"

<div align="right">(Harris)</div>

## 5.  Conclusion

How does all this relate to metalanguage? Four points emerge:

– Meta-communication is part and parcel of everyday communication and not restricted to the discourses of linguists and semioticians. Metalanguage, the resource needed for meta-communication, therefore permeates the language as a whole and should not be conceived of as a specialised register used only by linguists.

If metalanguage is still a viable concept, then no longer in terms of formalism, no longer as a decontextualised and purely formal "mathematics of language". It has to be in terms of the second of the two approaches I started out with, a linguistic function intermingling with other linguistic functions, something we do with language – and therefore something for which language also furnishes the metalinguistic tools, such as we have been describing them in this paper.

– Formal terms are an important part (but not the whole) of metalanguage, provided they are linked with functional, content-oriented, and context-oriented terms. The way in which they are linked up defines metalanguage and the necessity to link up with context-oriented terms guarantees the transdisciplinarity of metalanguage, its ability to permeate the language as a whole.

Centering on linguistic form is not, as I have perhaps suggested earlier, a hangover from earlier forms of linguistics, but instead an indispensable tool for using language in its metalinguistic function. The ubiquity of metalinguistic communication suggests that we cannot get by without being able to ask, from time to time "what exactly is it we are doing when we use this or that speech act?" or "what exactly do we mean when we use this or that word or expression?" To do that, we need to represent those terms and expressions *as* terms and expressions, and that means: metalanguage. One of the useful things linguists can do is to provide tools that can actually be useful for the very practical things metalinguistic communication has to achieve. But metalanguage is not, and should not remain restricted to formal description. The metalinguistic function cannot be fulfilled by representing the form of language alone. Function and meaning must also be represented, and the language about language must be closely tied up, often by grammatical means, with language about the social practices in which that language is embedded and of which it forms part.

– Meta-communication is not restricted to language, but can be realised in other semiotic modes also.

In this paper I have concentrated on meta-language. But I was tempted to use the word "meta-semiotic" throughout. It is not the case that only language can speak of itself – think of the way contemporary computer icons can label classes of visual signifiers such as fonts, colours, grids, etc. But a fuller discussion of this will have to wait for another occasion.

– In everyday communication meta-communication accompanies communication. It is called upon in cases of special communicative needs or problems. Linguists, similarly, should be situated in the middle of social life, to be called upon, as creative consultants and constructive critics, when communicative needs and problems arise.

Just as the metalinguistic function cannot be separated from the rest of language, so the work of metalinguistic specialists cannot be separated from the rest of social life. Linguistics of the kind I have discussed here, does that. It aims, not

just to write about language in social life, but to write as part of language in social life, to play a role in it. The more this is geared towards real communicative needs and problems of social life, the more the kind of metalanguage we have seen in action here can become "metalanguage in social life".

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