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Language, Metalanguage, Linguistics, and Love



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ABSTRACT

This special issue of *Language Sciences* has been put together for two main reasons. The first of these is our collective desire—shared by the contributors, the journal's editor-in-chief and board, and myself—to honor Nigel Love on his retirement from 17 years as editor of this journal and 34 years as a member of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Cape Town. The second reason is to reflect upon one of several influential topics with which our honoree has seeded the discourses of language theory, the cognitive sciences, and linguistics: the distinction between what he has called “first-order language” and “second-order language”.

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As this journal's editor, Nigel Love made an important and distinctive contribution to theory and research in the language sciences. A distinctive—and admirable—characteristic of his editorship was his resistance to theoretical dogmatism, regardless of its source. He accepted without prejudice submissions framed within any of the countless theoretical approaches to language. However, he insisted meticulously on the place of all such expressions of linguistic research—from tightly-focused empirical reports to the exposition of grand philosophical schemes—within what the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars famously termed ‘the space of reasons’: that is, within the normative discourse “of justifying and being able to justify what one says” (Sellars, 1956).

In his editorial practice, the enactment of this rationalist ideal took the form of active opposition to assertions and arguments which were not adequately explained, which did not openly acknowledge their premises or sufficiently examine their implications, or whose conceptualization or logical sequencing appeared over-hasty, vague, or without explicit justification. By means of that opposition, his editorial goal could be discerned as one of ensuring that any article finally accepted for publication in the journal, after one or more rounds of editorial review and revision, would approach the realization of that rationalist ideal. Naturally, this editorial approach was of benefit to the journal's readers, to the international standing of the journal, and, no less importantly, to all those individual scholars who (whether successfully or unsuccessfully) submitted the discursive expression of their language research to the journal and, in so doing, entered his meticulously maintained space of editorial reason.

Not surprisingly, this focus on discursive reasoning has also been a defining characteristic of Nigel Love's own writing, as can be seen in each of the articles, chapter, books, and reviews in the list of his publications given below. It has also been a much-valued feature of his written and spoken conversation with colleagues, co-authors, and correspondents. His prose style has a distinctively even-tempered, patient, and judicious character, which reflects his admiration for the writing and conceptual analysis of the 20th-century philosophers and humanities scholars whose texts loomed large in his intellectual and literary training: superb prose stylists such as J. L. Austin, Peter Strawson, H. L. A. Hart, and Gilbert Ryle. As such, his prose embodies a powerful rhetorical approach that makes the reader feel that what is being written about cannot be separated

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from how the writer is writing about it – content from form. Of equal influence on Nigel's writing, as on his theoretical perspective, was the justly praised, lucid, and rational prose of his Oxford supervisor and mentor, Roy Harris; but it is the student's prose which added to these qualities the appealing character of tolerance and humility.

The originating statement of the topical theme for this festschrift—the distinction between first-order and second-order language—appears in Love's 1990 critique of the role played in linguistic inquiry by the concept of 'a language':

A language is a second-order construct arising from an idea about first-order utterances: namely, that they are repeatable. Such a construct may be institutionalized and treated as *the* language of a community. But it remains a construct based on an idea: at no point does it become a first-order reality for individuals (Love, 1990, p. 101)

In the opening paragraphs to his contribution to this special issue, Chris Hutton provides a more detailed formulation of the distinction:

On the first-order level, there are non-recurrent, non-discrete events which can be located spatio-temporally... [O]n the second, there are units or entities that are identifiable by virtue of their repetition or iteration, that is in terms of some kind of abstraction.... Events may be similar to one another but never identical, except in respect of their postulated relation to an underlying abstract system. (...) Abstractions are often understood as templates which underlie or generate behaviour and which exist in each individual by virtue of social convention or as a consequence of systemic forces acting at the level of the individual. (Hutton, this issue)

In the years following his 1990 paper, Love and many others have made use of this distinction in picking out additional examples of second-order linguistic constructs which, along with that of 'languages', together constitute the traditional *explananda* of linguistic inquiry: 'word', 'sentence', 'word-meaning', 'sentence-meaning', 'phoneme', 'dialect', 'name', 'promise', 'request', etc. Love has argued that such second-order constructs all have their source in "the cultural fiction that lies at the heart of synchronic descriptive linguistics, namely that [first-order] utterances instantiate enduring [second-order] linguistic abstractions" (Love, 2009, p. 34).

From its first appearance in the 1990 paper the distinction has taken on a life of its own in theoretical discourse about language. As such, it has pointed in two directions, whose relationship has not always been clear and could be interpreted as in opposition to each other. On the one hand the distinction has frequently been used to criticize the foundational assumptions of the mainstream language sciences. Second-order notions such as 'the English language' and 'the word *pattern*' are typically treated by language scientists as enduring abstractions which are concretely instantiated in the time- and context-bound activities of first-order languaging and, as such, are mistakenly conceived as constituting the proper subjects of linguistic research. Several of the contributors to this issue review and expand this critical application of the distinction. Paul Thibault provides a concise summary of this approach in the following:

First-order languaging is an experiential flow that is enacted, maintained, and changed by the real-time activity of participants. To construe this flow as sequences of abstract forms is a radical misconstrual of what people are doing in their languaging. (Thibault, this issue)

On the other hand, second-order constructs have also been explained as abstractions that are in some way necessary to the processes of first-order languaging. They are not only, or not all, fallacious theoretical entities which should be eliminated from the *explananda* of the language sciences. On the contrary, such abstractions—or at least some of them—are said to "inform language use" and to be part of the ordinary language-user's "metalinguistic awareness" (Love, 1990 p. 100).

The possible conflict between these two uses of the distinction between first-order and second-order language has been the source of some confusion, as expressed in the question Chris Hutton raises: "Is it an ontological or analytical distinction?" (Hutton, this issue). Accordingly, one of the goals of this special issue is to shed light on the possible sources of that confusion and to reflect upon the possibility of establishing a meta-theoretical order to the concept of orders of language.

The papers which follow address a variety of different yet overlapping issues which the distinction raises for the theory of language and for the analytical methodologies of the language sciences. Several of the papers explore the claim that second-order metalinguistic notions inform or shape aspects of first-order language activity. As Rowan Mackay puts it in her paper, 'pure' first-order language, free of second-order constructs, does not exist (Mackay, this issue). For instance, Stephen Cowley and Paul Thibault situate the connection between the two orders as inhering in the way communicators integrate their behavior within the multi-scalar dynamics of communicative interactivity. Thus, Thibault characterizes the second-order in terms of "virtual and non-local forms" which "shape how we experience and anticipate the flow of utterance activity" (Thibault, this issue), while Cowley speaks of the child's acquisition of a "language stance", which "shapes perceiving and ways of acting" and "is intrinsic to languaging" (Cowley, this issue).

Other contributors also follow Love's lead in taking second-order notions to be a component of the individual's experience of languaging. For instance, Michael Toolan explores the challenge to research in stylistics which is posed by the relationship between second-order concepts, as deployed in literary explanation, and the reader's "first-order experiencing" of literary texts. In his contribution, Peter Jones offers a proposal modelled on Andy Clark's concept of 'transparent technology' (Clark, 2011). Linguistic agents thus "see through" second-order metalinguistic notions in their purposive engagement in first-order language activities. In her explanation of the experiential role of the second-order, Bettina Perregaard's paper draws on Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the functioning of one's own body in its immediate environment (body schema) and ideas about one's body (body image). Second-order metalinguistic constructs thus may be conceived as forming the

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