



Review article

Goodish: Integrating integrationism

Signs, Meaning and Experience: Integrational Approaches to Linguistics and Semiotics, Adrian Pablé, Christopher Hutton. De Gruyter, Boston, Berlin (2015).

Anecdotes are one of the preferred methods of enquiry of the integrationist, and it therefore seems apposite to start with one of my own: this Remembrance Sunday, I brought my twelve-year-old daughter through to listen to the radio broadcast on the BBC, and to observe the two-minute silence held to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. My daughter could not see the point of the whole thing – the war was so far in the past now that rather than attempting to remember, she thought we ought to try to forget, or more precisely, we ought to feel morally obliged to ‘move on’. The generations who fought, or lost loved ones, are distant to me too, but not quite distant enough to neutralise the dictum, ‘Lest we forget’. In ‘Redefining Linguistics’ (1990), Roy Harris (1931–2015), the founder of integrationism, offers ‘some documentation of the fact’ (p. 27) that what he has identified as the problem with ‘orthodox linguistics’, is still, in fact, the case. The most recent example he gives is from 1976. Forty years is a long time, and the backdrop to integrational linguistics has altered. Following the recent passing of Harris, Adrian Pablé and Christopher Hutton have written a book that is intended to present integrationism to future generations, not as an historical pursuit, but as a going concern, ‘to serve as an academic introduction to integrationism and integrational linguistics and to the wider domain of semiotic inquiry into which it falls’ (xiii).

The book is divided very clearly into two parts: the first forty-five pages lay out the ‘Theoretical Foundations’ of integrationism, and the second part (p. 47–160) comprises a section on ‘Topics and Issues’ and a short final section of ‘Discussion Materials’. We are told in the Preface that ‘the structure and organisation of the book has been the subject of extended discussion between the authors and between the authors and the series editors’ (xiv), with some encouraging the first part to be stand-alone, and others finding the second part with its case studies ‘more illuminating’. The two parts read as if they belong in two different books, and although odd, this has the benefit of allowing them to be judged somewhat independently. In the Preface, we are also given a signal that the authors are not simply rehashing the ‘sustained critique of mainstream or “orthodox” linguistics’ as offered by Harris, but that with this book, they will ‘bring into view a range of questions and research topics without necessarily contrasting an integrational view with one from linguistics’ (xv). Integrationism is, it appears, to form an axis of alliance with semiotics – at least for this book, which is, after all, part of De Gruyter’s ‘Semiotics, Communication and Cognition’ series. The extent to which this is successful will, as the authors are aware, be important for the continuation and development of integrationism.

The first part of the book provides a summary of the main tenets underlying integrationism, its unique features, and the way it proceeds. On the positive side, the clarity with which each sub-section is presented reflects the book’s origin in a course for undergraduates, who are also the principal audience for whom the book is intended. On the less positive side, it remains unclear what integrationism actually is, what it was for Harris, and what the authors hope it will become. In the useful Preface, we read that ‘integrational theory developed as a direct response to modern linguistics’ (xv), yet the authors ‘need to insist on this point: integrationism is not a method’ and ‘does not offer the reader an introduction to a particular mode of analysis’ (xvii). It is important to note however that it *does* instruct the reader in the acceptability or otherwise of various research methods, thereby providing a rather strict framework within which integrationist study can be undertaken. So we have a *theory*. But we also have a ‘relatively recent phenomenon’ (xiv) which, as an *ism*, ‘now needs to address the limits (or lack thereof) of its relevance to wider intellectual debates’ (xv).

A theory does not address its own limits: for that, a proponent must act. So, we have an academic grouping, keen to introduce the theory to others beyond the linguistics community – ‘there are indications that integrationism is expanding its range of intellectual interests’ (xv). The aim of the book, however, is not simply to introduce a theory and argue for its contemporary relevance in the field of semiotics, but to ‘enable the reader to “think like an integrationist”’ (xvii). On first reading, this seems like an oddly phrased academic enthusiasm. On subsequent readings, it is more problematic, symptomatic of the lack of flexibility which integrationism has inherited from its founder, and also of how the integrationist community continues to rely on his words.

Integrationists argue that, contrary to the belief held in 'orthodox' or 'segregationalist' linguistics (these terms seem to be synonymous), individuals are not able to exchange their thoughts directly via the temporally linear transmission of words (spoken or written) which hold fixed meaning. This 'language myth' stands, erroneously, in place of what actually occurs, namely integrative communication, which 'in a general sense concerns the positioning of the communicative situation, in that the interactants must integrate their past experiences with ongoing exchanges in the present and also anticipate future experience and situations' (p. 22). Human beings 'communicate with one another not by exchanging thoughts but by integrating their many activities' (Harris, 2008:112, quoted on p. 23). The integrationist further argues that there is a misapprehension (part of the 'language myth') that words "'stand for" things in the world or for ideas in our heads' (p. 29). For the integrationist, there is an important distinction between 'first-order' experience, and 'second-order' categories, the former being activity (and communication – are these distinct?) in the 'here-and-now', and the latter being concepts and abstractions, crucially, the 'meta-linguistic' labels with which we talk and write about language. We are told that 'there are no (first-order) linguistic objects of any kind', although there are 'linguistic phenomena' which form (part of) the 'temporally situated, ongoing process' that is language. So when we communicate linguistically, we integrate languaging into our ongoing activity.

There is no doubt that integrationism presents serious challenges to many linguistic traditions: as Toolan is quoted as saying, 'it attempts to show the inadequacies of any thoroughgoing adoption and application' of 'segregationalist linguistic analysis' (p. 15). It is, for one thing, an exquisite programme for critical thinking within – and about – linguistics as a discipline. Its role, in this regard, is far from over, but it is not what it once was, and this is largely (and frustratingly) disregarded by the authors – as it was by Harris, in later years. One of the strengths and charms of this book, however, are the questions directed towards integrationism, in the form of acknowledged inconsistencies, and forceful self-critiques: a habit not adopted from Harris. At one point we are told, concerning the (professed) lay orientation of integrationism, of the suspicion 'that integrationists are caught in a performative contradiction' (p. 17). Fundamentally, I think that this diagnosis applies to any self-respecting integrationist: their theory, if followed through, would see them out of a job. They are the Wittgensteinian flies that have found their own way out of the bottle. It would be time to retrain as a mechanic unless enlightening the other flies from within the bottle was calling enough.¹ This proviso is, perhaps, the integrationist glue: offering the wherewithal to liberation of self and society was a crucial part of Harris's *raison d'être*:

What is important is that people should come to recognize and understand the mythological processes which language itself engenders. By these linguistic inquiry proceeds, and these it must also transcend. Only then and thus can language makers become language masters, and a society enter into its linguistic inheritance. (Harris, 1987:174, quoted on p. 49)

If we subscribe to this, integrationism is none other than a – no, *the* – route to linguistic salvation. Pablé and Hutton are more modest, quoting Harris, then deflecting the agentive role of the integrationist in showing the way. Instead, they say that 'the notion of linguistic inheritance [...] does point to powerful underlying themes within integrationism, namely democratic empowerment, demythologisation, even linguistic liberation' (p. 50). Passing over the exact meaning and questionable need for 'linguistic liberation', it is worth focussing upon this concept of 'demythologising'.

The 'language myth' is 'the notion that languages are autonomous and well-defined entities which provide stable systems of representation for members of speech communities' (p. 33). The myth rests on two differentiated components: first, the fixed code fallacy, which sees languages as 'fixed or determinate'; second, the belief in communication as a process of telementation in which thoughts are transferred, using language, from one person's mind to another's. According to the integrationist, with these two beliefs recognised as fallacious, the following obtain: the linguistic sign is not arbitrary, nor is it linear; words do not have meanings; grammars do not have rules; and there are no languages (Harris, 1990, p. 45). It is easy (these days, at least) to find statements in support of refuting the twin ideas of language as a fixed code and telementation as an accurate model of communication; the two quotes below emphasising the discursive and contextualised nature of language practice:

It is a paradoxical fact that linguistics has given relatively little attention to actual speech or writing; it has characterized language as a potential, a system, an abstract competence, rather than attempting to describe actual language practice [...] These assumptions and the neglect of language practice result in an idealized view of language, which isolates it from the social and historical matrix outside of which it cannot actually exist. (Fairclough, 1989, p. 7)

As a consequence, interpretation, like all language-games, involves a form of *praxis*: it cannot be content with glossing and guessing, nor even with translating, since all three operations dwell in the discursive realm of judgement – it must eventually consist in intervention in a situation of enunciation, or discursive conjuncture. (Lecercle, 1999, p. 237)

¹ Harris seems to have come to a similar conclusion: 'Keeping the academic troops busy and the doctoral dissertations churning out, however, would in itself be an unworthy objective in the long run [...] If an integrational linguistics is worth pursuing, it is as a pragmatics of self-understanding and a basis for lay linguistic therapy rather than as part of a university curriculum' (Harris, 1997, p. 310).

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