

Book Review

Komska, Y., Moyd, M. & Gramling, D. 2019. *Linguistic Disobedience: Restoring Power to Civic Language*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

ISBN 978-3-319-92010-8

This book, *Linguistic Disobedience: Restoring Power to Civic Language* by Komska, Moyd and Gramling (2019), reminds us that in these times, when we are inundated with words (on our television screens, computers, and in our everyday lives), we risk becoming overwhelmed and miss where the appropriation of meaning endangers particular people and groups. A case is made that caring for language is a civic duty.

The authors argue that restoring 'power to civic language' is important in overcoming contemporary 'suffering, violence, and racism' amongst other things (2019: 2). They connect diverse historical moments (such as the Third Reich and Black Lives Matter) and reflect on the role of language and characterise its effects as stemming from 'linguistic obedience' and 'linguistic disobedience' (2019: 2-3).

'Linguistic obedience' can take the form of 'orderly decorum, deference, credulity, and even submission', but regardless of its tone or stance, it involves 'hearing toward power' and thus 'hearing away from, or to the detriment of, other meanings' that would empower disenfranchised groups (2019: 2). Dissenting, or 'linguistic disobedience', is usually taken on by those wishing to challenge hegemonic power and empower disenfranchised groups. However, in the current context, the question they ask is what then happens when power itself claims 'linguistic disobedience' as its own idiom and its own badge of honour. 'What stance is left for the powerless' when 'interactional hegemony' (2019: 3), involving the deliberate use of a 'reliably effective set of linguistic tools to "win the hand" in ... real-time ... or ...on social media' (2019: 17) becomes a strategy of the powerful. Such power 'utters, promotes, and unleashes chaos and meaninglessness' when 'those in power ... reject the kinds of order and moderation presumed to be the default ... of the bourgeois, colonial and rationalist Liberal traditions' (2019: 3).

There is no 'simple binary' (2019: 4); instead, Trump and others use tactics such as 'adversity-talk, victim-talk, elitism-baiting, hypocrisy-baiting, truncated performative monolingualism and modular vernacularity' (2019: 7). There are also potentials for 'deeply consequential kinds of interactional misrecognition', whereby we cannot easily differentiate between linguistic obedience (the reinforcement of unjust power) and linguistic disobedience (a challenge to unjust power) (2019: 5). Approaches that are suggested as useful strategies to overcome this by the authors include:



- Rejecting labels that deny people's humanity and perpetuate dangerous myths or outright lies about marginalised peoples or mislead listeners and readers about history (2019: 93-94),
- Reading and digesting the work of authors and activists who are 'thoughtful about language' (2019: 89),
- Refusing the spoils of interactional hegemony in our uses of language (2019: 148), and
- Constantly probing for better ways to express ideas with historical accuracy and sensitivity (2019: 74).

However, the main strategy suggested are the '3Cs' of 'Critique, Correction' and 'Care' (2019: 74): co-existent practices that the authors advocate for exercising linguistic disobedience. It is really through exploring these three acts and what they could achieve that one makes proper sense of the book. The authors discuss Critique, Correction, and then Care. I have taken the liberty of starting with Care which I find a more logical beginning.

Care for language is presented as a 'qualitatively different way of relating to the present, a way of opening an easy door to a complex potential transformation of the social world' (2019: 110). As language is always '*embodied, ecological, extended and enacted*' (2019: 117) and happens in any and every aspect or space of social life it is believed that we should just start caring. "'Start from the verbal end" of civic life' (2019: 122 citing Orwell) in any context and begin demanding that language is inspiring and bravely challenge and draw attention to any 'dangerous form of linguistic obedience, credulity and injustice - the privilege of which we can no longer afford' (2019: 126).

Critique involves 'probing the relationships between language and reality', noticing the 'build-up of lopsided interactional advantages, ... unjust appropriation, ... biases, unequal recognition', whilst noticing the 'beauty and tenacity' implicit to just language (2019: 24). Each of us should be a 'language detective, armed with more alertness, acuity of perception and an analytical mind' (2019: 24-25). In this way, we can 'routinely expose and oppose some of the most far-reaching and baneful social and political transformations which language has aided and abetted' (2019: 27), 'insisting on clearer definitions for "linguistic omnivore" and terms such as "neoliberalism"' (2019: 27). To tackle 'Trumpisms' (2019: 27), we should have 'considered devising counter-languages as sets of oppositional conventions and practices with which to reclaim disobedience from the powers ... that have usurped it' (2019: 28).

'Correction is [an] interruption', a 'reconsideration' and presents an 'opportunity for growth' (2019: 75). It promotes awareness of context, vigilance in the use of language, and attention to underpinning ends and consequences. 'Anyone can make corrections, and anyone can be corrected' (2019: 80). Correction 'prioritises accuracy and provides the opportunity to reframe things' and should be underpinned by hope and ambition (2019: 80).

The exemplar used is that of Kenyan author, academic, and activist, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who generated correction out of a 'profound disappointment and anger that African writers found themselves living in ostensibly independent postcolonial nation states yet still writing in

the languages of their colonisers' (2019: 70). He believed that 'African peoples needed to care for and cultivate their languages' and that 'political change would be incomplete without linguistic change' (2019: 70-71).

I am concerned the book will only be read by those who care, and it will only 'preach to the converted': Those who understand the importance of language as a shared, powerful and valuable resource – either for good or for bad. I am concerned that linguistic disobedience may be (or continue to be) exploited by populists. If anything, Trump has shown how successful that strategy is and, in his wake, how then do we protect these tools from further appropriation?

The density and richness of this book means that no review could ever do it justice, as the analysis will either be too simplistic or too complicated. I enjoyed reading this book as it caused me to pause for thought more times than I could count, and to relate its key messages to various contexts past and present. Moving forward, not only will I continue to 'care' for language, but I will also be more deliberate about correction and critique as my act of 'disobedience'.

Reviewed by

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