The Columnist and the Keyser

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*Whosoever reports a thing in the name of him that said it brings deliverance into the world.*

*Ethics of the Fathers* (sages of the Talmud), Ch. 6.

Fifty years ago, the Great Santa Cruz Mountains Earthquake disinterred an almost intact edition of the collected columns of Geoffrey Pullum. The whole world wide web hummed with anticipation of what it could tell us about linguistics in the 1980s of the previous era, a period now almost totally unknown. The manuscript, which required delicate treatment, was assigned to a committee of scholars, who were charged with producing a critical edition in the space of a year. A year became a decade, a decade became five, and still the works of the Columnist remained under wraps. Rumours flew: the work contained revelations about twentieth century linguistics which some were trying to suppress; unauthorized chapters, possibly forgeries, were being circulated; the book was a hoax. The whole affair was turning into one of the great scholarly scandals of our time. Finally, on Days 105–112 of 983 New Era, a conclave was convened to discuss what has been learned to date about the Columnist and the linguistics of his day. What follows is an abridged report from the First International Conclave on the Columnist.

The Conclave was opened by Prof. Dr. A. G. Schneeweiss, one of the surviving members of the original team, who set out the basic facts. The Columnist wrote toward the close of the Age of the Journals. His own journal was *NLLT*, in which he had a regular column. Though we read of other Minor Columnists, his position appears to have been unique. He had access to the highest circles of generative linguistics, and writes familiarly of the other journals: *JL, LA, Lg, LR, L&P* are some whose names have come down to us. The Columnist railed against the sloppiness of the linguistics of his day, and called for reform. His most scathing critiques were directed at the greatest of the journals, *LI*, and its editor, known as the Keyser, whose seat was at MIT. But of the doctrines of the Columnist and the Keyser—what generative linguistics was actually about—we find surprisingly little.

Prof. Marie Côte des Neiges of the University of Chicoutimi sketched a general portrait of the Columnist’s attitudes towards the linguistics of his day in her talk, ‘Linguistics, that Littlest of Sciences’ (cf. the Columnist, p. 11). This description is surprising to us today, accustomed as we are to thinking of linguistics as the noblest of the sciences. But in the writings of the Columnist, we read that linguists do not behave as well as physicists (p. 127), and especially fall short of the standards of mathematicians (p. 137). Theoretical linguists run a ‘shabby’ operation (p. 145); their vast literature contains much that is ‘ephemeral’, and ‘the transdisciplinary pretensions of the subject are so far mainly self-delusion’ (p. 177). Linguists are ‘extraordinarily sloppy in their work and their publication and citation practices’ (p. 131); they are arrogant and dogmatic (p. 179). Many linguists ‘have a rather uncertain grasp of philosophy’ (p. 128); they are even ‘extremely weak on general knowledge about languages’ (p. 193). He is all too familiar with ‘the bitter accusations of a biased or lazy profession’ (p. 144).

What practices in particular provoked the wrath of the Columnist? Dr. Elizer Sheleg of the University of Damascus addressed this question in his presentation, ‘The Columnist and the Origins of the Credit Crisis’. The Columnist’s overriding concern was the failure to give proper credit. This theme is struck in the Foreword to the collection by James McCawley, who alludes to the ‘shockingly low standards of scholarship that linguists display in their frequent misattributions,
nonattributions, vague attributions, and botched attributions’ (p. ix). The Columnist’s charges against the field almost always concern this point: ‘citation standards are rather low in general in current linguistics’ (p. 36). ‘Crediting others is for wimps’ (p. 156).

This concern animates the Columnist’s efforts to reform the journals. Many of his reforms were designed to make it easier to track the history of an idea. For example, he insists that journals publish the date of receipt of a manuscript: ‘It’s often very important to know just when an article first hit the editor’s in-tray and when it returned from revision after being refereed’ (p. 60).

On the facts presented to here, the Conclave was in agreement. But when it came to the big questions—Why was the Columnist so angry? What was it all about?—fifty years of study and argument had produced nothing close to consensus. Prof. Peter Piqtuluq of the Nunavut Institute of Technology presented the most widely accepted scenario.

On this view, the Columnist had once been an ally of the Keyser and of the founder of generative linguistics, Noam Chomsky. The doctrines of Noam Chomsky were promulgated by others in the pages of *LI* and through interviews, though he seems to have written nothing himself. But Noam Chomsky turned his back on formal linguistics (ch. 7); he lost interest in whether or not natural languages were context-free (p. 137), and he discouraged others from pursuing this question (p. 142). He developed instead a new doctrine, GB. His followers distinguished between counterexamples and exceptions, and engaged in philosophy (p. 145). But there were those who remained faithful to formal linguistics and went into exile, where they split into many factions: LFG, GPSG, RG. They no longer had access to *LI*, where the Keyser, from behind his phalanx of Readers, rejected any articles that were not GB. The Columnist spoke for those who awaited the day when they would return to MIT, and true linguistics would be restored to *LI*.

This theory, however, was challenged by Dr. Zoltan Havas, of the Satu Mare Foundation for Previous Era Studies, who argued that it is not consistent with the emphasis on credit. One is concerned about receiving credit for one’s own ideas, not for ideas one rejects. According to Dr. Havas, the various factions were regional groupings who shared the same ideas, but used different terminologies. On this interpretation, the accusations against the Keyser and his Readers were not that they kept out non-GB ideas, but that they appropriated them and recast them in GB terms.

The most radical suggestion advanced at the Conclave, however, was that of C. P. Snowblower (Salt Lake City Center for the Study of Language and Irony), in her sensational presentation, ‘The Columnist as Ironist’. What everyone has missed, she argued, is that the Columnist was joking! There are numerous hints to this effect in the text, which is to be regarded as ‘daring nonsense’ (p. 215).

But there is more to this: the Columnist’s apparent obsession with credit was meant as a warning. The elaborate attempts to discover exactly who should be credited with an idea are intended as reductio ad absurdum arguments illustrating the futility of such efforts. Not just dates of publication are required for such a project, not even the date when a ms. was received by a journal editor, not just the date it was mailed, but the dates and distribution history of rough drafts, of conference talks and invited lectures, with a record of the audience present, and of everyone they subsequently spoke to or corresponded with. And here is the subtle proof of the Ironist theory: every time the Columnist attempts to definitively establish the credit trail of an idea, even in a case where he was in contact with many of the principals and had access to private letters—in each case, he must later confess to having overlooked a crucial publication (e.g. p. 139, p. 147). Perfect attribution is unattainable.

Epilogue

This revisionist interpretation of the Columnist’s message led to an uproar, forcing a suspension of the Conclave. But however the Columnist intended his work to be understood, we
know where the increasing concern with credit ultimately led. As the field grew, it became harder and harder to track down and cite every publication or handout or classroom remark that might deserve credit for some idea. It soon became necessary to employ professional credit checkers to clear one’s paper before one could make it public. Did somebody in Kurdistan make a drawing on a napkin, which, when put together with a notational convention used three months later in an informal colloquium in Leiden, could be said to anticipate something in a footnote in my paper? It had to be checked out. Bibliographers and historiographers took over the field. Because of the backlog of ideas to be checked, a moratorium on new ideas was declared. As the Credit Crisis deepened, linguistic research ground to a halt.

Ironically, what saved the field was the Big Crash, in which all records of the past were erased. Relieved of the weight of past citations, students and scholars were again free to explore linguistic ideas, and to share them with colleagues and interested news groups.

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