A look back at the Gastronomy Wars

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Besides being a great linguist, the late James D. McCawley was unusually knowledgeable in many other areas, including music, food, philosophy, baseball, and humour, to name but a few. As his interest in food of all kinds is particularly legendary, it is fitting that the LINGUIST List (http://linguistlist.org/cookbook/index.html) is currently inviting contributions to a cookbook dedicated to his memory entitled Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Food…A Feastschrift in Honor of Jim McCawley.

I have no recipes to contribute to this project, but I do happen to have in my files something that can perhaps qualify for the section headed “Miscellaneous (including food-related ruminations)”.

It’s a satirical piece I wrote over twenty years ago with Norbert Hornstein which appeared in Lingua Pranca (Ernst and Smith 1978), a collection of humour on linguistic themes. In this piece, we took as our point of departure rumours that McCawley was about to publish a cookbook of some sort, and imagined what the reaction of various linguists would be to it if they treated it the way they treated his work on linguistics.

The piece is steeped in the linguistic controversies of the time. As some of the references may now be obscure, I add some explanatory notes. Readers are cautioned that, as with any attempt to explain a joke, the notes are liable to erase any vestiges of humour that have survived.

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Current Issues in Gastronomy
Elan Dresher and Norbert Hornstein

The mounting rumours that the noted linguist James D. McCawley has written an annotated translation of a Japanese cookbook on oriental cuisine have proven to be well founded. A usually consistent informant has brought to our attention that a major American publisher is preparing the final galleys, and the author’s students and friends are already hailing it as an “underground classic”.

The layman will find much that is new and provocative in this book—for example, the author’s unorthodox theory that all cooking must be done in one pot and that all spices must be present in the pot from the very beginning. However, McCawley’s theory, an earlier version of which was first published in Organic Foods and Gardens under the title, “The Preparation of Lichee Chicken in a Kitchen with One Wok,” has already received a stormy reception in many quarters of the linguistics community.

Although Noam Chomsky has never commented on the subject directly, he does make an oblique reference to McCawley’s theory in his recent article, “The Responsibility of Dieticians” (New York Review of Books, Feb. 1978), soon to be anthologized in his forthcoming collection Let Them Eat Cake. Briefly, he makes the following points:
1) There is nothing in McCawley’s book that is necessarily peculiar to Chinese cooking. Not only does it not narrow down the class of oriental recipes, it does not even delimit the class of possible human cuisine.

2) Many of McCawley’s recipes are simply incorrect. Chomsky does not discuss this himself but cites the thesis by Bob Fiengo on Spanish cooking, “Spanish Gourmet Delights”, soon to be published by Glouton in The Hague Series Flavour, which goes into them in detail.

3) Finally, McCawley’s theoretical insights are in many respects mere notational variants of Chomsky’s own theory set forth over two decades ago. A concise summary of this theory can be found in his review of Mitbachi, Tapuchi, and Milafefon, “Traditional Jewish Holiday Recipes”, which appeared in the Holy Cross Quarterly, 1956.

A potentially strong challenge is building up in still another quarter. Logicians, never before much interested in home cooking, have now begun to challenge McCawley’s basic distinction between ordinary home cooking and gourmet cuisine. “Tarski’s view that taste should be the fundamental concept in food preparation (see Tarski’s “The Concept of Taste in Gourmet Cooking” in the Journal de l’Association des Chefs et Gourmets, 1937) is as valid for the food you eat in railroad trains as it is in the best four star restaurants,” Princeton philosopher David Lewis told us at Florence’s Diner.

Linguists have voiced objections from other perspectives. J. R. “Haj” Ross of MIT told us that while he found many aspects of McCawley’s book “provocative and stimulating”, he was very unsure about the data base on which it was built. “There’s just no such thing as a well-formed pheasant,” he told us over the phone. “The best we can say is that there are degrees of pheasantness.” He directed us to his note on the subject, “A Squash Squish”.

Professor William Labov of the University of Pennsylvania, reached at dinner at the Inner City Cafe, a well-known soul food restaurant, remarked that McCawley was overlooking the social and ethnic aspects of the recipes he was discussing. “What has happened to the meal?” he asked rhetorically. “The recent emphasis on recipes taken out of their social context has caused many people to neglect the simple fact that a meal involves more than just eating.”

C. F. Hockett was particularly disdainful. He had not been aware of McCawley’s work, but said nonetheless that he doubted that any generative system could capture such an individual and highly variable art in a set of dry tasteless rules: “I think that when all this current faddish furor dies down it will be apparent that the best book on the subject remains Edward Sapir’s Recipes from the Orient, and personally, I think that that epochal work will not be surpassed for a long time to come.”

George Lakoff could not be reached for comment, but his secretary told us that “George isn’t into food anymore.”

Notes

a Japanese cookbook: The rumour was not quite correct. What McCawley did eventually publish was McCawley 1984.

oriental: If we were writing now we would use the term Asian. Oriental has gone downhill as a neutral descriptive term, but at the time it had no negative connotations, at least in our dialect.

an “underground classic”: This term was heard quite a bit. Many papers were circulated in mimeos which quickly became faded, giving them something of a samizdat quality.

in one pot: The view in generative semantics was that there was a relatively continuous mapping from semantic representation to syntactic surface structure mediated by transformations. The interpretive, lexicalist view taken by Chomsky and his students was much more modular, with different types of operations for different components and a stricter separation between syntax and semantics. Semantic interpretation on this view was not identified with underlying structure.
an earlier version: The title has some echoes of McCawley 1968.

an oblique reference: One of the things that infuriated Chomsky’s opponents was his tendency to express his opposition to a position in various indirect and off-hand ways. After some time he would finally come out with a full frontal attack which infuriated them even more. For various recountings of the “linguistic wars” of the late 1960s and early 1970s, see Newmeyer (1986), Harris (1993), and Huck and Goldsmith (1995). By the time we wrote this piece, the war between interpretive and generative semantics was waning and being replaced by a less intense but more multi-lateral diversity of views.

“The Responsibility of Dieticians”: Compare Chomsky 1966, the essay which first brought him to prominence as a political dissident. The title of the fictional anthology was inspired by Chomsky 1973.


mere notational variants: It also infuriated Chomsky’s opponents to hear that their radical proposals were merely notational variants of his own theory. It was not always easy to tell if two different-looking theories were or were not notational variants. It still isn’t.

his review: Early in his career Chomsky reviewed a book on Hebrew grammar (Chomsky 1954), but not in the *Holy Cross Quarterly*. He published some political articles there, however (Chomsky 1972).

never before much interested: With a few exceptions, logicians did not attempt to apply formal logic to natural language, nor was such a project of interest to linguists until the work of Richard Montague (Montague 1973; Thomason 1974) was brought to their attention in the 1970s, notably by Partee (1975).

Tarski’s view: Tarski (1944) held that truth should be the fundamental criterion for a theory of semantics. However, he did not think that this criterion should be applied to natural language. Logicians in the 1970s began to do just that. This move was opposed by both interpretive and generative semanticists, for different reasons. Interpretive semanticists believed that issues of truth were external to grammar. Generative semanticists believed that natural language did not operate with formal logic, but rather with “natural logic” (Lakoff 1972, 1975; McCawley 1971, 1972).

railroad trains: It seemed to us that a larger-than-expected percentage of philosophers of language were train buffs.

Lewis: Lewis 1973 was a particularly influential application of possible world semantics to natural language.

Ross: Ross’s MIT thesis (1967) was very important in focusing syntactic theory on general constraints rather than individual transformations. Ross was also a major figure in the development of generative semantics. The imaginary conversation was suggested by Ross 1972, 1973.

Labov: Weinreich, Herzog and Labov 1968 was the rallying point for those who thought that generative grammar did not sufficiently take into account the social context of language. Labov (1966, 1972) was a pioneer in the development of sociolinguistic theory and methodology, and their application to urban settings.

Hockett: C. F. “Chaz” Hockett, who died in 2000, was one of the leading neo-Bloomfieldian linguists. Hockett 1955, 1958 were the definitive summations of American descriptive linguistics, and he advanced many original and insightful proposals. Yet, he was better known to us for his opposition to generative grammar (Hockett 1968), and as the person who characterized Chomsky as a “neo-medieval philosopher” in the pages of *Scientific American* (1967).

Lakoff: “And by coming out almost yearly with a newly named theory, from ‘fuzzy grammar’ (1973) to ‘global transderivational well-formedness grammar’...to ‘cognitive grammar’ (Lakoff and Thompson 1975) to ‘dual-hierarchy grammar’...to ‘linguistic gestalt theory’ and ‘experiential linguistics’ (Lakoff 1977), Lakoff did not present himself to the linguistic world as a consistent theoretician.” (Newmeyer 1986: 138).

References


