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McCawley's legacy

Salikoko S. Mufwene, Elaine J. Francis, Rebecca S. Wheeler (Eds.), 2005. Polymorphous Linguistics. Jim McCawley's Legacy. A Bradford Book. The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England. xxx + 550 pp. Paperback ISBN 0-262–56209–X. US$ 45.00

The book under review is a somewhat belated memorial volume to honour the Chicago linguist James (Jim) D. McCawley (1938–1999). McCawley was a well-known figure in linguistics, not only because of his often highly creative and original ideas, but also because of his appearance and his decidedly baroque and sometimes histrionic behaviour. His academic importance derives entirely from his earlier work, done between the years 1965 and 1975. After these years, his creativity sagged and he produced nothing that left a lasting impression. During his creative period he was one of the leading figures, if not the leading figure, in the movement then known by the name of Generative Semantics, in this author's opinion by far the most inspired and promising development in theoretical linguistics during the twentieth century. This very movement also became the victim of a vicious sociological character assassination, likewise unique of its kind in twentieth century linguistics if not in the entire history of the subject.[1]

McCawley's most centrally important and innovative contribution is his argument that the conceptual content underlying linguistic utterances is channelled through (an adapted form of) the logical language of predicate calculus, say L_L, whose expressions (semantic representations) are grammatically transformed into surface structures by the specific grammar of any language at issue (McCawley, 1972). Within this overall framework he proposed that the operators (quantifiers and logical connectives) of L_L are, in essence, abstract scope-bearing predicates that only rarely come to the surface as verbs, but mostly in various guises, for example as adverbials, particles, bound morphemes, determiners or

[1] See Huck and Goldsmith (1995: ix):

> But while the generative semanticists unquestionably faced theoretical obstacles of various sorts, there are also good reasons to believe that the demise of their program was not a consequence of theoretical weakness. Indeed … it is not possible to find, internal to the idea of Generative Semantics as it was evidently originally understood by Lakoff, McCawley, Postal and Ross, adequate grounds to explain its widespread abandonment in the 1970s. We will … conclude that one must turn to external explanations to account adequately for what transpired.

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phonological modifications. He developed a creative and influential analysis of the English tense system (McCawley, 1971),[2] and made some proposals regarding syntax. One such proposal (McCawley, 1970a) was his hypothesis that the underlying semantic L_L-structure of sentences in English and many other languages does not have the constituent order NP–VP but Verb–Subject–Object (verb-initial), while in other languages (Japanese, Hindi, Turkish) the underlying order is Subject–Object–Verb (verb-final). He showed convincingly that this hypothesis has a dramatic simplifying and generalizing effect on the syntax of the languages concerned. (For reasons that lacked academic argument but had directly to do with sociological pressures in the field, he later retracted this hypothesis.) He also developed a fledgling theory of prelexical syntax (McCawley, 1968), presenting his legendary analysis of the verb *kill* as CAUSE-BECOME-DEAD (also known as CAUSE-BECOME-NOT-ALIVE). And he proposed a theory for the derivation of noun phrases (McCawley, 1970b) that proved illuminating in many respects.

All these proposals were inspired by a profound vision but, unfortunately, lacked sufficient formal and foundational support, while the empirical support was, more often than not, suggestive but not quite convincing. An unsympathetic critic might even say that these proposals were sloppy and immature, but such a criticism should be countered by saying that visionary approaches are often just that, but will, if one is lucky, lead to real progress and insight once they are worked out more carefully and more completely.[3] The problem with McCawley was that he did not do that. He did not persist along the road taken and did not elaborate his early ideas in a more mature fashion during his later years. Nor did he use support from elsewhere, even though that support was quick to come.

For example, in a private letter of December 20, 1967, Noam Chomsky wrote to McCawley (Huck and Goldsmith 1995: 65):

> Evidently it won't do to have quantifiers as "higher verbs", if one wants to preserve the structure of quantification theory. In fact, I have to say that I really don't know at all what you are talking about when you make these remarks about "logic" in the framework of phrase-markers and transformations.

At the time, this was shortsighted of Chomsky and just shows his unwillingness to follow the direction McCawley had taken. Yet he was right in that McCawley's notion of quantifiers as predicates (verbs) lacked sufficient formal backing. However, this backing came in Barwise and Cooper's famous article of 1981 (based on Mostovski, 1957), in which they show that quantifiers are better represented in the language of logic as (higher-order) predicates over pairs of sets. The existential quantifier then requires for truth that the two sets have a non-null intersection, while the universal quantifier requires that the set of objects quantified over be a subset of the set of objects quantified into. This would have been grist to McCawley's mill, but he failed to capitalize on it.

Similarly, Chomsky criticised McCawley for his analysis of *kill* as CAUSE-BECOME-DEAD, saying that there was no empirical support for this analysis, which involves the transfor-

[2] He did not realize that his analysis had a predecessor in the work on the verbal tenses of French by the eighteenth-century French grammarian Nicolas Beauzée (1717–1789), who anticipated quite a few other notions that were developed anew in Generative Semantics (see Seuren 1998: 71–74).

[3] Compared with Chomsky's Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995), McCawley's proposals were a model of rigour and consistency (see Seuren, 2004).

mational rule of PREDICATE RAISING ("the otherwise quite unnecessary rule of predicate raising" Chomsky 1972: 142). Though, at the time of writing, Chomsky may have been right in maintaining that such a rule lacked empirical support, since it was obvious that McCawley had invented the rule just for the purpose of his prelexical analysis of *kill* as CAUSE-BECOME-DEAD, that support was provided almost immediately. Evers (1971, 1975) and Seuren (1972) showed that there is unusually strong evidence supporting that rule in ordinary "open" syntax, provided one looks at languages other than English. All three publications were well-known to McCawley (and many others), yet he failed to capitalize on them.[4]

After 1980, the quality and inspiration of McCawley's publications rapidly declined. There is his 1981 book (McCawley, 1981a) about logic and language, whose unamusing and unoriginal title (copied from a then widely publicised American TV programme on sexual education)[5] gave it a certain notoriety, and whose contents was, though not quite as unoriginal as its title, on the whole disappointing because whatever innovative features it presented lacked formal and philosophical, and where needed also empirical, backing. McCawley's (1988) book on English syntax strikes one as bleak, unprincipled and eclectic—nothing like the highly inspired earlier publications, sloppy though they might be.

Curiously, the book under review makes hardly any mention of McCawley's momentous achievements during his days of glory and concentrates entirely on his later, much bleaker, period. Besides a biographical sketch of McCawley by the senior editor Mufwene, a complete list of McCawley's (incredibly numerous) publications and an introduction presumably by the three editors, the book consists of one article on phonology (Part I), nine on syntax (Part II), four on tense, aspect and mood (Part III), four on semantics and pragmatics (Part IV), three on knowledge of language (Part V), and one article on encyclopedia and language (Part VI)—all caught under the title *Polymorphous Linguistics. Jim McCawley's Legacy.* I shall refrain from a review of each of the articles, as that would make for a very boring piece of writing. Instead of going through the book in detail, I will concentrate on the quintessence of the book, which is, in effect, an attempt at diminishing McCawley's greatness as one of the main initiators of Generative Semantics, and at the same time an attempt at concealing the fact that he turned out to have weak knees when times began to be less easy.

I must make an exception, though, for Robert Binnick's contribution "On McCawley on tense" (pp. 249–260), which is a both delightful and insightful description and comparison of McCawley (1971) and Barbara Partee (1973), focusing on the deictic—anaphoric aspect of the simple past tense in English, and in explicit reference to the "legacy of Jim

[4] One should realize that even in the early 1970s the sociological pressure was already making itself felt. Chomsky had started his offensive in or around 1968 and turned it on full blast in 1971. In fact, Evers put himself in an awkward position with his 1975 thesis. Though overtly applauded in the Chomskyan circles to which he belonged, his defence of predicate raising (which, for political reasons, he renamed verb raising) has remained a sociological embarrassment to those very circles till the present day (see Seuren 2004: 201). Seuren (1972), though well-publicised and repeated in many subsequent publications, was deliberately ignored, as there was no sociological pressure to mention work done by an independent, and a great deal of pressure not to do so.

[5] The publisher (Blackwell) asked me to try and persuade McCawley to drop that title, but he proved unmovable. Katharine Beals compounds this bad taste by repeating it in the title of her contribution: "Everything That Linguists Have Always Wanted to Know about Ironic Presuppositions and Implicatures but Were Ashamed to Ask."

McCawley in the realm of tense and verbal aspect'' (p. 258). Nor do I wish to leave unmentioned the contribution by Jerry Morgan and Georgia Green (pp. 454–478) on the difficult question of verb agreement, which is as well researched and well thought out as one would expect from these eminent authors. Binnick, Morgan and Green are, indeed, stalwarts of the school taught by McCawley during the 1960s and the only contributors who fully acknowledge McCawley's status as a generative semanticist.

The title of the book is ominous: what is ''polymorphous linguistics''? As far as I know, it is not a known brand of linguistic theory. Then why this title? Obviously as an excuse for the fact that this collection of articles has little or no connection with the theory that established McCawley's fame and is, in fact, as disoriented and eclectic as McCawley's own views and publications during his later years. Never do the authors of the articles in question (but for Binnick) address the basic issues that McCawley addressed in his better years but left unfinished, even though at least some of the authors would have been competent enough do so. References to McCawley's classic publications before 1980, such as those mentioned in the list of references of the present article, are rare and fully swamped by those to his later works. There are, of course, the obligatory references to McCawley at the beginning and/or end of almost all these articles—a mere matter of good form. But it is hard to detect any identifiable link with what looks like a coherent theory or set of views. The book is a motley collection of articles that could do for any other purpose if the unessential references to McCawley are omitted. To some extent, this is a feature of most festschrifts and memorial volumes, but in the case at hand not only is this feature predominant, it also reflects the widespread fear of paying attention to a theory that is apparently still under a sociological cloud.

Generative Semantics is mentioned no more than eight times, all but once in writings authored or co-authored by the chief editor Salikoko Mufwene (the exception is Robert Binnick's article mentioned above). Other than Mufwene and Binnick, none of the contributing authors dare mention THE WORD. And when Mufwene mentions it, it is with a certain embarrassment, three times calling it ''abstract'' but without giving any reason why ''abstract'' should be bad. It is as if one hears a theoretical physicist advocating the abandonment of relativity because it is ''too abstract''! McCawley's famous exchange with Newmeyer on the nature and history of Generative Semantics in the 1981 volume of *Linguistics* (Newmeyer, 1980; McCawley, 1981b,c) is not mentioned at all.

Mufwene does mention McCawley's role in the development and establishment of Generative Semantics, but not quite in an adequate relation to reality (p. xii):

> In collaboration with fellow MIT graduates George Lakoff and John Robert (Haj) Ross, he developed the Generative Semantics Approach (see below), which was very influential in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although this research program had crested by the late 1970s, its mark on Jim's own brand of syntax and semantics, which he would resist identifying by any name, was embodied in both *Everything that Linguists Have Always Wanted to Know about Logic—but Were Ashamed to Ask* (1981, revised 1993) and *The Syntactic Phenomena of English* (1988, revised 1998). Throughout his career, he distinguished himself as a leading authority in phonology, syntax, semantics, lexicology/lexicography, and other areas, such as philosophy of language and philosophy of science. He was one of the most eclectic and encyclopedic linguists of his time, and indeed of the twentieth century. He was highly regarded even among those who did not practice his brand of linguistics.

This pictures McCawley as having come into his own after 1980, but the opposite is the case. After 1980 he was more of a displaced person than of a theoretical linguist with a coherent set of principles. Most of his fellow generative semanticists had knees that were as weak as his and ran for it, but some seem to have found, or built, a new home. McCawley did not find a new academic home, nor did he build one. Instead, he lodged in rented accommodation, picking his earnings, so to speak, from whatever sources were available, while trying, as far as possible, to keep up his flamboyant academic and personal style (which, one must say, did grow a little tired in the end). He did, of course, try to justify his new orientation, or rather the lack of it, but that is certainly not what he will be remembered for.

It may be true, as Mufwene writes, that McCawley "was one of the most eclectic and encyclopedic linguists of his time"—at least after 1980—but what is so laudable about being eclectic? Eclecticism is, on the whole, a sign of intellectual weakness, as it amounts mostly to a license to appeal to some other, less stringent or less well-known, theory to account for unaccounted-for phenomena. Such appeals are, more often than not, vacuous in that the theory appealed to does not exist, or fails to provide the answers, or is outright incompatible with the theory started from. In science one wants well-delimited data to begin with—an aspect elaborated with great insight in Barbara Luka's contribution 'A cognitively plausible model of linguistic intuition' (pp. 479–502). Then one wants empirical questions, principled answers, preferably in the form of one or more compatible theories, and thus explanations to the extent that this is possible, while there should be a candid admission when relevant data are unaccounted for. This does not exclude the concept of a plurality of interlocking systems working together to produce a data complex (as is stressed by Barbara Luka), but it does exclude plastering over cracks in the wall that may well signal dangerous faults in the building.

Science is intellectually serious and does not compromise, unlike politics, where a compromise is usually the best solution attainable. Strangely, in his politics McCawley was the opposite of eclectic: his political views were as monorail and dogmatic as they were quixotic and unrealistic. Likewise in philosophy of science, where he became a staunch doctrinal anarchist, an ardent follower of the Swiss-Californian philosopher Paul Feyerabend, who advocated the cynical principle that, in science, "anything goes" as long as one has the political, financial and sociological support needed for the propagation of one's ideas, no matter how nonsensical these may be. One wonders what Freudian twist of mind made him turn to precisely that philosophy that would justify the destruction of the school of thought he had played such a central role in founding.

The book will probably soon be forgotten, unlike the man it honours, whose real legacy consists not in what the book tells us about him but in something quite different, something which the book is silent about, and for the wrong reasons.

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