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Linguistics and the True Believers

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The producers of the movie Star Wars exploited an inherent need in each of us--the need to believe, if only for a moment, that things we knew were fantasies could actually happen. And as though our natural desire for momentary belief were not enough to hold us, the writer reinforced that desire by sprinkling in a little theology with the phrase, "may the force be with you." We recognized that the movie was fiction, but we allowed ourselves to be swept along into a world of fantasy reminiscent to many of us of Buck Rogers adventures, but entirely new and refreshing to the post-Vietnam war generation.

Star Wars is now history, but the need to believe, which preceded it, still persists. And we continue to believe in many things which, like Star Wars, are more fantasy than reality, but which are not packaged into neat one-hour-and-forty-five minute presentations. If they were packaged that way, it would be easy to keep our thinking straight, but they are not, so we do not always succeed in separating reality from fantasy. In linguistics, our desire to believe, often coupled with either discontent, ignorance and/or arrogance sometimes leads us into narrow, indefensible patterns of belief that could earn for us the dubious title of "linguistic true believers," a title no one really wants, because it connotes blind, unthinking acceptance of unproven ideas. Although we like to think that we have a clear view of the issues, and that our causes are just, there is probably a little of the true believer in each of us.

Over the past years I have been subconsciously gathering data on linguists and would-be linguists as true believers, so one day I decided to do a structural analysis of my data. As I analyzed my linguistic true believer-etics, I decided I could justify an inventory of four true believer-emes. I would like to describe the salient features of each, make some diachronic observations, and comment briefly on their synchronic distributions.

The first true believer-eme is the mass movement true believer, the person who ardently gives allegiance to the prevailing trend, even though he may not really understand it. He believes that others wiser than he do understand, and that's good enough for him. No self-respecting linguist would confess to being a true believer in this sense, although in the judgment of others he may be one. The second type of true believer is the ivory tower true believer. He is convinced that what he is doing is the truth, and he

can't understand why others don't see things the way he
does. The third type is the <u>moral value true believer</u>. He
equates linguistic stability with national or individual
morality. The fourth type is the <u>smug relativist true
believer</u>. He is characterized by an aloof vanity, for he
sees the foibles of all the rest, and considers himself
above them all. My following remarks then will touch upon
each of these: the mass movement true believer, the ivory
tower true believer, the moral value true believer and the
smug relativist true believer.

THE MASS MOVEMENT TRUE BELIEVER

     The mass movement true believer has been the most obvi-
ous and wide-spread of them all in recent years, so my ana-
lysis is more heavily weighted with data regarding him.
This person is seen not only in political revolutions, but
also in what has appropriately been called the "linguistics
revolution," referring to the challenge and meteoric rise of
transformational-generative grammar in the 1960's. Every-
thing associated with the linguistics revolution fits snugly
into a model for describing social or political revolu-
tions--the social conditions, the leader, the leader's lieu-
tenants, and the true believers who followed.

     With respect to social conditions we must recognize two
primary factors. First, in the fifties there was a growing
discontent with rigid Bloomfieldian structuralism, and many
linguists were pursuing alternative models of description.
Teachers were finding that students were not excited about
memorizing Fries' sentence patterns, and language labs were
becoming remedies for insomnia. In the midst of this dis-
content, American linguists and language educators received
the greatest windfall of support that they had ever had (or
probably ever will have) when the Soviets successfully
launched their first Sputnik. That single event sent mil-
lions of dollars cascading into language programs, scholar-
ships, and linguistic research. To add fuel to the fire,
elsewhere in academia, mathematicians were "selling" the
"new math," and the would-be true believers were asking,
"How about the new grammar--the new English?" Social condi-
tions were right for revolution.

     Eric Hoffer, who coined the expression "true believer,"
comments on the need for right social conditions:

     No matter how vital we think the role of leadership is
     in the rise of a mass movement, there is no doubt that
     the leader cannot create the conditions which make the
     rise of the movement possible. He cannot conjure a
     movement out of the void. There has to be an eagerness
     to follow and obey, and an intense dissatisfaction with

> things as they are, before movement and leader can make
> their appearance.   When conditions are not ripe, the
> potential leader, no matter how gifted, and his holy
> cause how potent, remains without a following.[1]

The conditions were clearly right for the leader of the
linguistics revolution to emerge. But not any leader would
do. Hoffer describes the kind of leader necessary for an
effective mass movement:

> The most decisive [qualities] for the effectiveness of
> a mass movement leader seem to be audacity, fanatical
> faith in a holy cause, an awareness of the importance
> of a close-knit collectivity, and above all, the abil-
> ity to evoke a fervent devotion in a group of able
> lieutenants. (p. 109)

Need I say more about Chomsky's qualifications to be leader
of the revolution. The audacity, fanatacism, and close-knit
collectivity of Chomsky and his early colleagues remains
unequalled in the history of American linguistics.

The meeting of right social conditions with right
leader caused a national revolution.   Within a short time
there were federally funded workshops nationwide for lan-
guage teachers to learn the new theory. Teachers wanted to
believe, even though they didn't understand. They were sure
that the little they did understand would be sufficient to
guarantee the success of the much they didn't understand.
They bought textbooks by the gross for their schools because
the books had a "linguistic" orientation. They had a kind
of naive belief that the new grammar possessed panacean pow-
ers, that it would solve their problems in teaching English
structure and even English composition. The true believing
grew so strong in such a short period of time that even
explicit warnings and repeated disclaimers from the leader
went unheeded. Surely, teachers, and many other linguists,
seemed to reason, this will be a better way. But it did not
take too long for the faith of most believers to be shaken.
Soon the books were left on the shelves to gather dust, and
teachers stopped attending summer institutes and night
classes to learn the latest diluted rules from MIT.

Hoffer's description of the mass movement true believer
accurately describes the early true believer in transforma-
tional grammar:

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[1]Eric Hoffer, The True Believer (New York: Harper and
Brothers, 1951), p. 109. Subsequent references from same
source.

It is the true believer's ability to shut his eyes and
stop his ears to facts that do not deserve to be either
seen or heard which is the source of his unequaled for-
titude and constancy; he cannot be frightened by danger
or disheartened by obstacle nor ·baffled by contradic-
tion because he denies their existence.   Strength of
faith, as Bergson pointed out, manifests itself not in
moving mountains but in not seeing mountains to move.
It is the certitude of his infallible doctrine that
renders the true believer impervious to the uncertain-
ties, surprises and unpleasant realities of the world
around him.   Thus the effectiveness of a doctrine
should not be judged by its profundity, sublimity or
the validity of the truths it embodies, but by how tho-
roughly it insulates the individual from his self and
the world as it is . . . It is obvious, therefore,
that in order to be effective a doctrine must not be
understood, but has to be believed in. We can be abso-
lutely certain only about things we do not understand.
(pp. 78, 79)

Before leaving the mass movement true believer, I would like
to share with you a final quotation from Hoffer. Although
He writes of political mass movements, to me the following
paragraph epitomizes the atmosphere in some linguistic con-
ferences in the 1960's. He continues:

We usually strive to reveal in others the blemishes we
hide in ourselves. Thus when the frustrated congregate
in a mass movement, the air is heavy-laden with suspi-
cion. There is prying and spying, tense watching and
tense awareness of being watched. The surprising thing
is that this pathological mistrust within the ranks
leads not to dissension but to strict conformity.
Knowing themselves continually watched, the faithful
strive to escape suspicion by adhering zealously to
prescribed behavior and opinion. Strict orthodoxy is
as much the result of mutual suspicion as of ardent
faith. (p. 121)

So much for the mass movement true believer.

THE IVORY TOWER TRUE BELIEVER

The ivory tower true believer takes pride in not being
one of the sheep following the mass movement. He may be a
linguist, a teacher, a methodologist or a graduate student.
Whoever he is, he feels he can think for himself. If condi-
tions are right, and if he has sufficient audacity, and
ability to evoke fervent devotion in a group of able lieu-
tenants, he could be the leader of a mass movement, since he
already has his fanatical faith.   Seldom, however, are con-

ditions right, so he remains in his ivory tower, convinced
of the rightness of his own way and unnoticed by almost
everyone except those with whom he has occasional debates.
He may or may not have a leader to follow, but in either
case he is sure of his own ideas. When others don't seem to
understand or agree, that's their problem; they have either
been deluded with notions of the mass movement, or have
their own axes to grind.

He doesn't want to accept the notion that all linguis-
tic models are faulty metaphors, each drawing attention to
different aspects of language, but obscuring other aspects.
For him, such a notion applies to all other models except
the one of his persuasion. At times he may be found associ-
ated with the mass movement, but most often he stands rela-
tively alone as the mass movement rushes by; but he gains
strength from this, for although he is only one, his heart
is pure.

THE MORAL VALUE TRUE BELIEVER

The third type of true believer is the moral value true
believer.   He is the author of expressions such as, "If
English was good enough for Jesus it is good enough for me."
He is often the ardent nationalist concerned with preserving
the integrity of his nation by purging its language of
foreignisms. If not a nationalist, he may be the son or
daughter of parents who were preoccupied with correctness,
and made him feel that "ungrammatical" usage was an indica-
tion of moral decay. This type of true believer finds that
abandoning any of the usages he holds dear is a very painful
experience--one that evokes feelings of indignation and
regret similar to those evoked by tearing down historic
landmarks, or burning grandma's diaries.   To many, such
abandonment would be an admission that they had given in to
a permissive society, rejected the values of the past, and
assented to a softening of moral fiber; in fact, for some it
seems it would be easier to give up a son or daughter than a
distinction between shall and will.   It is surprising how
high emotions run with this true believer, but I can person-
ally empathize with him. I am not ready to give up the use-
ful distinction between infer and imply. Somehow losing
that distinction seems like losing mental rigor, and accept-
ing a softening or weakening of analytical skill. The dis-
tinction is a valued friend, but perhaps one day I will have
to give it up, but I hope not.

We may be tempted to point an accusing finger at the
English language teacher as a moral value true believer. Of
course some of us are, but we must appreciate the fine line
that the teacher must walk.   He has a responsibility to
exert a conservative influence over linguistic change in the

name of order, to insure that although one generation's
slang may be unintelligible to the next, the standard level
of language does not change so rapidly that one generation's
wisdom is lost on the next. Of course, when the time
arrives that new usages clearly overshadow the old, they
must be given up. Finally, to be an unwavering moral value
true believer in language usage is to find one's self in a
very awkward position, because the past is replete with lin-
guistic change. Thus at the outset one is already lost in
an abyss of linguistic immorality.

THE RELATIVIST TRUE BELIEVER

The fourth type of true believer, the relativist true
believer, is, as his name suggests, a kind of paradox. He
is characterized by an aloof vanity; he is above all the
other believers. He can see the foolishness of their narrow
commitments and their grave pronouncements. Since no one
has the final answers, he sees no sense in committing him-
self to any belief; and he considers his indecision, or
non-committal attitude, as evidence for his scholarship.
Too often it is a substitute for scholarship. He could
never be the leader of a mass movement, for he has no firm
belief in a cause. He could never be a mass movement true
believer, for he has no desire for committment. He could
never be an ivory tower true believer, for he has no self-
confidence. He could never be a moral value true believer,
for he has no constant values. He is the most insidious
type, for his smug cynicism masquerades in a cloak of aca-
demic wisdom, and he cheats himself and others by giving up,
or causing others to give up, in the struggle for truth,
since "there are really no final answers."

CONCLUSION

Perhaps no one of us fully fits any of these descrip-
tions, but no one of us completely escapes them all, either.
It is the extremes in each case which must be avoided. Like
the mass movement true believer, we need hope and faith in
the work of those we admire, but it should never become
blind fanaticism. Like the ivory tower true believer, we
need a set of firm principles to guide our professional
lives, but we need to recognize the difference between moral
principles and arbitrary linguistic change. And, like the
smug relativist true believer, we need skepticism, but we
must avoid the vanity of cynicism.

Each of these four poles of true believing exerts its
tension on us, trying to win our allegiance. We would all
do well to keep the tensions taut on all four, and consider
the consequences of giving our all to any one--and I truly
believe it.