3-30-1978

Linguistics and the True Believers

Melvin J. Luthy

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/dlls/vol4/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Deseret Language and Linguistic Society Symposium by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
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 moral value true believer. He equates linguistic stability with national or individual morality. The fourth type is the smug relativist true believer. 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 obvious and wide-spread of them all in recent years, so my analysis 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. Everything associated with the linguistics revolution fits snugly into a model for describing social or political revolutions--the social conditions, the leader, the leader's lieutenants, 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 discontent, 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 millions of dollars cascading into language programs, scholarships, 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 conditions 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.\footnote{Eric Hoffer, \textit{The True Believer} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 109. Subsequent references from same source.}

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 ability 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 language 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 powers, 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 transformational grammar:
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 unequalled fortitude and constancy; he cannot be frightened by danger or disheartened by obstacle nor baffled by contradiction 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 uncertainties, 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 thoroughly 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 absolutely 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 conferences 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 suspicion. 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 conditions are right, and if he has sufficient audacity, and ability to evoke fervent devotion in a group of able lieutenants, 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 linguistic 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 associated with the mass movement, but most often he stands relatively 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 indication 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 personally empathize with him. I am not ready to give up the useful distinction between infer and imply. Somehow losing that distinction seems like losing mental rigor, and accepting a softening or weakening of analytical skill. The distinction 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 unswerving moral value true believer in language usage is to find one's self in a very awkward position, because the past is replete with linguistic 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 himself 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 commitment. 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 academic 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 descriptions, 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.