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Matthew Lauzon, *Signs of Light: French and British Theories of Linguistic Communication, 1648-1789*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010. x + 256 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4847-8.

Review by Joanna Stalnaker, Columbia University.

Matthew Lauzon's *Signs of Light* offers an admirably clear survey of French and British theories of linguistic communication from the mid seventeenth century to the French Revolution. Although he acknowledges the important contributions that recent scholarship has made to our understanding of early modern theories of language, Lauzon argues that much of this scholarship has focused too exclusively on the Lockean heritage of a preoccupation with the clear and transparent representation of ideas. This focus has led historians and literary scholars to frame their studies of early modern language schemes in terms of a crisis of representation and to neglect alternative linguistic ideals based on what authors such as Thomas Sheridan called "social communication" (p. 3). Lauzon does not intend to downplay the influence of John Locke, nor does he deny that clarity was an important linguistic ideal in the early modern period. But he calls attention to other qualities of language—such as ambiguity, wit, and expressive energy—that early modern writers also valued and sought to promote. In doing so, Lauzon hopes to connect two areas of recent historical scholarship that he claims have thus far been treated separately: the study of changing conceptions of language on the one hand, and the study of new ideas and practices of sociability on the other.

The book is divided into three parts: part one treats debates about the relative merits of animal and human languages, part two focuses on the idealization of "savage" languages, and part three addresses the contrasting characterizations of the French and English languages. Although the study is not rigorously chronological, the three sections trace an overall historical arc, from Thomas Hobbes' idealization of animal languages, which Lauzon views as a response to the strife of the English civil war, to the politically charged debates surrounding the French and English languages in the decades leading up to the French Revolution. The book ends with a coda that briefly explores how these national language debates got played out in the wake of the American and French Revolutions.

Lauzon begins in his first chapter by demonstrating that writers such as Hobbes, John Webster, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau attributed civil discord to the perilous ambiguities of human speech. This account is in line with previous scholarship which has emphasized early modern attempts to regenerate society through the reform of existing languages or the invention of new languages (such as the gestural language schemes studied by Sophia Rosenfeld).^[1] Nonetheless, Lauzon insists on the fact that historians have overlooked the important place of animal languages in these debates (curiously, he does not acknowledge the trend of animal studies, which is now making its presence felt in eighteenth-century studies, in the work of Laura Brown for example).^[2] Lauzon then turns in his second chapter to writers such as Jonathan Swift, Guillaume-Hyacinthe Bougeant, and Bernard Mandeville, for whom it was precisely the ambiguity of human language—with the attendant qualities of levity, wit, and irony—that served as the basis for social life. In both chapters, the concept of "moral redescription" plays an important role: for Hobbes and Rousseau, it was the human tendency "to take advantage of the ambiguities in certain defective abstract terms to redescribe moral categories" that led to civil violence (p. 66); for Swift and Mandeville, in contrast, the human capacity to shift meanings and perspectives not

only made social interactions pleasurable, but also served as a means of defusing tensions and negotiating conflicts.

In part two, Lauzon shows how the idealization of the American Indian orator emerged in the discourse of Christian missionaries, and then served as the basis for the broader linguistic ideal of so-called savage speech. This ideal hinged on what Lauzon calls the “thermal metaphor of communication,” in other words the notion that savage speech was both persuasive and sublime due to its warmth and expressive energy (p. 71). In the first of two nicely contextualized chapters, Lauzon insists on the overlap between Puritan and Jesuit representations of American Indian eloquence, nuancing previous historical accounts that have drawn a stark opposition between Puritan and Jesuit approaches to communication. In the second, he outlines the Lockean theory of primitive speech as a locus of linguistic clarity, but then argues that “By making Locke the hero of early modern linguistics, historians have ignored a different but important early modern characterization of the virtues of savage speech” (p. 108). This characterization emphasized social communication rather than the representation of ideas, and emotional warmth rather than clarity.

Part three opens with a chapter entitled “French Levity,” which is perhaps the most nuanced and suggestive in the book. Here, Lauzon shows that despite the idealization of savage languages, French continued to be valued throughout the eighteenth century as a clear and rational language that was immune to the irrational energy of the passions. But the term “light,” around which the entire chapter revolves, refers not only to the light of human reason, but also to the lightness or levity of French wit. In an interesting development, Lauzon demonstrates that even the relatively restricted (or “light”) lexicon of the French language was not always considered a disadvantage, since it was thought to facilitate the ambiguity, wit, and punning that made French the language of civility and refinement. Lauzon then shows in his second chapter how the initially negative characterization of the English language as rude and barbarous gradually gave way to the view that English was “praiseworthy precisely because of its savage character” (p. 180). This view had political undertones, as more refined languages such as French were thought to promote social inequality. Lauzon expands upon this political theme in his coda, where he traces the American revolutionaries’ rejection of British English as a politically corrupt language, and the decline of French levity in the wake of the French Revolution.

It is tempting, in reviewing a book about theories of language, to reflect on the author’s own use of language and its relationship to his argument and methodology. Lauzon’s book is to be valued for its consistently clear exposition and its careful attention to its sources. Nonetheless, I occasionally felt that this clarity was in part a function of a straightforward and somewhat limiting approach to textual interpretation: Lauzon is primarily concerned with what texts say, rather than with how they say it, whether in terms of rhetorical devices, literary forms, or style of exposition. I found this neglect of language particularly striking in Lauzon’s readings of Rousseau: whatever one thinks of Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of Rousseau in *De la grammatologie* (which is not included in Lauzon’s bibliography), it seems questionable in light of that influential reading to discuss Rousseau’s views of language with so little attention to his use of language. [3] There is one striking moment in the book when Lauzon uncharacteristically gestures toward poststructural theory, with reference to an ironic quotation from Joseph Priestley about light particles having weight: “If one is to follow the poststructural precept to begin acts of interpretation with discursive tensions it would be difficult to find a better passage than this one that played on the semantic instability of the English word ‘light,’ which can suggest not only clarity and, to Newton’s followers, weight but also levity” (p. 147). Indeed, with his evocative title, *Signs of Light*, Lauzon captures not only the notion of enlightened and enlightening signs, but also the idealization of French as the language of levity and wit. Yet although he calls attention to what early modern authors had to say about linguistic ambiguity, irony, and punning, as a historian he does not engage in what might be called “literary” readings of his sources, that is to say readings that are attentive not only to the ideas expressed (clearly and transparently) but also to the linguistic forms in which those ideas are expressed and to the ambiguities those forms might entail.

Granted, Lauzon is a historian and not a literary scholar; nonetheless, Dominick LaCapra has argued convincingly that intellectual historians cannot ignore the contributions of literary theory in developing their methodologies of reading and interpretation.[4]

Nor does Lauzon pay a great deal of attention to the social contexts in which his sources were produced, disseminated, and discussed. This omission is somewhat surprising given his expressed intention to draw connections between recent scholarship on theories of language and practices of sociability. Although Dena Goodman's classic study on the salons is included in the bibliography (whereas Antoine Lilti's more recent polemical account of the salons as a locus of aristocratic sociability is not), there is little acknowledgement of the role that the salons might have played in the elaboration of the linguistic ideals specifically associated with the French language.[5] Lauzon does touch on the question of gender in his final chapter on British critiques of the frivolity of the French language, but this discussion is again grounded in ideas rather than in cultural practices (such as English coffee houses versus French salons).

Nonetheless, Lauzon's book considerably enriches and complicates our understanding of early modern theories of language, by bringing animal languages into the picture and by highlighting the tensions and ambiguities within the early modern discourse on language. It opens new avenues of research into the ways that early modern theories of social communication were linked to practices of sociability. And it does so with considerable clarity, elegance, and tact, respecting both the Lockean heritage in its clear exposition of ideas and the ideal of social communication in its nuanced and constructive dialogue with recent historical scholarship.

NOTES

[1] Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problem of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[2] Laura Brown, *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010). It should be noted that this book had not yet come out when Lauzon published *Signs of Light*.

[3] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967).

[4] Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[5] Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

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