A New Philosophy of Language

1 Point of Departure

Denise Riley begins her analysis of ‘bad words’ with the followings words:

The worst words revivify themselves within us, vampirically. Injurious speech echoes relentlessly, years after the occasion of its utterance, in the mind of the one at whom it was aimed: the bad word, splinter-like, pierces to lodge. In its violently emotional materiality, the word is indeed made flesh and dwells amongst us – often long outstaying its welcome.

What exactly does it mean to begin the question of language and subjectivity, of subjectivation by language, of naming and identity, by considering insults or ‘bad words’? More generally, can such an opening be of interest if our aim is to produce a philosophy of language, by which I mean a theory of language, subjectivation and interpellation? Is there any sense in beginning to look at language from the vantage point of ‘bad words’?

The answer is yes. Bad words, of any type (insults, swear words, aggressive naming) have a certain number of advantages over the usual ‘the man hit the ball’ tame assertion, in the shape of a simple declarative sentence, evincing elementary linguistic structure. In a word, bad words give us an idea on how to bridge the gap, emphatically indicated in The German Ideology, between ‘language’ and ‘the language of real life’.1 For bad words are words, and yet they undeniably partake of ‘the language of real life’, in the shape of agonistic action, a form of praxis. In other words, they have the considerable advantage of inducing us to
start the question of language from the point of view of the social situ­
ation of interlocution, not the abstract system we have learnt to call lan­
gue. At the cost of the construction of another philosophy of lan-
guage, one that will be utterly unpalatable to mainstream linguistics
and current philosophies of language (of the analytic kind, but not
only those).

This shift, bad words allow because they have four striking charac-
teristics:

(1) Bad words suggest that the primary function of language is not dis-
course, the (cooperative) exchange of information, but naming. What is
known as deixis, verbal gesturing, pointing at, becomes (becomes again,
if we believe those who claim that language finds its origin in gestures of
indication, that is, if we read Tran Duc Thao, the Vietnamese Marxist, or
Merleau-Ponty2) the original, if not the central, function of language.

(2) Bad words are a form of verbal action, not discourse as representa-
tion of states of affairs. This does not merely suggest that pragmatics
(the performative function of utterances) is the centre of language
(rather than mere syntax), but that language is concerned with subjec-
tivation in the shape of the interpellation of subjects. This has been
excellently analysed by Judith Butler in her Excitable Speech.3 It tends to
support the idea that if pragmatics is the core of language, it is because
language is the archetypal human praxis, in the Marxist sense, and
must be analysed as such.

(3) Bad words, as Riley forcefully demonstrates, are wounding words (a
fact we have always already known, to our detriment). They inflict
pain, of a quasi-physical nature. In that sense, when faced with bad
words, we are all like Louis Wolfson, the schizophrenic who could not
read or hear words in English, his mother tongue, as they caused him
physical discomfort (more on him later). This points out the materiality
of language, its capacity to act on bodies, to be inscribed on the human
body as a trace, from the erotic and symptomatic tracing of the
mother’s words on the baby’s body in Leclaire, to the effects on bodies
of performative utterances, provided they are endowed with social
felicity (the best example of this is the death sentence) – in other
words, such materiality is not merely physical, but also social-institu-
tional.4 The body is captured by language and, as a lived body, at least
in part constituted by language, as symptoms are not only affections of
the body, but inscriptions of words or sentences on it; it also bears the