

Talking Voices. Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse. By Deborah Tannen. Second Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 233 pp. 15.99 pounds / \$24.99 paperback.

This is a new edition of a 1989 milestone in the development of conversation analysis, and thereby of empirical pragmatics. At a distance of almost 20 years, one is surprised at the revolutionary simplicity of Tannen's observations and arguments, none of which ever quite amount to stating the obvious. The basic propositions might be: that language use is profoundly dialogic; that understanding requires the involvement of subjects in discourse; that repetition is a constitutive feature of the way involvement is created and we make sense in language; and that a whole range of iconic features similarly create involvement in discourse, such that apparently literary prosody is being used virtually everywhere. Much of that has become normal fare in empirical pragmatics, yet still surprises.

At that distance of almost 20 years, Tannen does well to add a 16-page Introduction to the Second Edition. Here she emphasizes "intertextuality" as her true concern, building an intellectual pedigree that involves, among much else, correcting Kristeva's take on Bakhtin, thus enabling conversation analysis to inherit a good part of twentieth-century literary analysis. The almost obvious propositions gain some intellectual weight, as if the linguist had suddenly decided to play in the big league. What is more intriguing, however, is the extent to which the intellectual references, especially the literary ones, were already there in the first edition. Tannen was always able to draw, one after the other, on snippets of psychology, neurology, sociolinguistics, anthropology and novels. She was always writing in clear prose silhouetted by erudition. Yet none of that has ever really placed her in the kind of league where books are cited across many disciplines. And this second edition will not quite get her there either.

Part of the problem is that Tannen's book only really has one simple thing to say – language use creates involvement – and that thing is said with much repetition and too little complication. The kind of dialectic involvement at work in intellectual discourse, perhaps based on the masculinity of *disputatio* as jousting with words, is a long way from the kind of constant agreement used here. For example, Tannen's long analysis of Jesse Jackson's speech to the 1988 Democratic National Convention is decidedly

sycophantic, and the two page afterword “Toward a Humanistic Linguistics” has the right title but no substance. Neither of those contributions picks up the classical ethical problem of rhetoric being used to mislead. Indeed, what is missing entirely is the great opposition between rhetoric and ethics, at a time when the British tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis was implicitly drawing on that problematic opposition to try to make people aware of what is being done to them through language. Tannen seems to miss the critical part. Here we thus find no systematic study of *failed* dialogue, of what happens when language goes wrong. The wide-ranging references all feed into the one stream – Tannen’s theses cannot be wrong, since she can only find them reinforced wherever she looks. She states what is there, what is being done, and implies rather than argues that what is there, and what is being done, is good. That is not enough.

In keeping with her regime of repetition as reinforcement, Tannen makes no mention of other kinds of linguistics. Not a word about Chomsky, nothing substantial on cognitive linguistics, for example. This is not a book that speaks to debates in its discipline, but neither has it connected with other disciplines (deconstruction, for example, could pick up on most of this, especially the critique of the "conduit metaphor" since 1979). The great risk is that Tannen might be mistaken as a populist researcher with quaint empirical case studies

Tannen, along with the general development of pragmatics, has long been in the league of linguists. Yet not enough people, beyond linguists, have paid enough attention.

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