BOOK REVIEWS

John F. Sawyer and J. M. Y. Simpson (eds.). *Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion*. Amsterdam: Elsevier. 2001. xxxi + 580 pp. Cloth (0–08–043167–4) NLG429.00/Eur 194.67/$211.50.

Reviewed by David Crystal

My very first book, back in 1965, was called *Linguistics, Language and Religion* (thereby, perhaps, qualifying me for this review, for the work was granted – uniquely in linguistics? – Vatican 'nihil obstat' and 'imprimatur'), and over the years I have kept closely in touch with this field. Religious language was a big issue in the 1960s, with the Vatican Council changing the linguistic basis of liturgical Catholicism, the Bishop of Woolwich arguing for new linguistic images of God, and the authenticity of the Pauline epistles being debated on stylistic grounds. Mouton's *Janua Linguarum* (the 'Syntactic Structures' series) devoted a volume to it (Clarke 1966). A whole conference took place on 'language and religion' at the 1972 Georgetown Round Table, with 11 influential papers later published in an edited collection by Samarin (1976). The seventies saw a remarkable explosion of thinking about religious language, especially by theologians and philosophers, with important works by Van Buren (1974), Ebeling (1975), Helm (1974), Jeffner (1974), and Ladrière (1974); see the review in Crystal (1978). And then, a few years later, we got the naming of the subject, *theolinguistics*, a theography of language, whose potential for development as a new domain of applied linguistics was demonstrated in two collections (Van Noppen, 1981, 1983).

Now I mention all this to show how pleased I was when I first heard about this book. An encyclopedia on language and religion, from a linguistics-orientated stable, is not before time for a subject that has been the focus of linguistic interest for nearly half a century. Imagine my incredulity and disappointment, then, when I discovered that *none* of what I had believed this subject to be about was included. Not a mention even of the term *theolinguistics*. To be fair, the editors do bow in my direction on page 1, referring in passing to my 1965 book, but I am one of the least in the theolinguistic kingdom, and it is in any case a token bow, taking up none of the general issues. Only seven of the 46 contributors to the Samarin and Van Noppen volumes are even mentioned in the index: myself, Ricouer, Samarin, McFague, Long, Ferguson, and Nida, with only the last-named given serious coverage. Charles Ferguson's work on religious language was especially insightful and influential, but he is mentioned here only for diglossia and Arabic (p. 166). Bill Samarin did a great deal more than expound glossolalia, but you would never know from this book. And

several other linguists who were influential in fostering an intellectual climate of ideas for the study of mythology and religion are not here – the most obvious omission probably being Otto Jespersen.

So what *do* we get, in a book which is nearly 600 pages? A certain amount of good stuff, as one might hope, but an enormous amount of padding. To see why, you have to appreciate what is going on here. The publisher, doubtless wanting to recoup the enormous investment on the 10-volume *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, has gone in for 'spin-off' volumes (the editors' words) on a variety of topics (of which this is not the first). The huge database would provide sets of articles on specific themes, suitably updated, and additional articles would be commissioned. The editors tell us that 'over 110' articles have been specially written for the present book. And they have selected a glossary of 'relevant entries' from the big glossary that was in the mother-book, augmented 'by a few items from the pens of the present editors' (p. xxxi).

However, as soon as you open the book you get suspicious. There is a listing of Contents over 23 pages (I say again, 23, in case you think that is a misprint) in a double-spaced large-type lay-out full of white space: the material could have been neatly fitted into 4 or 5 pages. It does not augur well for the content, when someone, evidently, wants a big book to come out at the end. The suspicion proves to be well-founded.

There are 310 articles, grouped into seven themes, plus short editorial introductions to the first six themes by Sawyer. 'Language in the context of particular religions' (62 articles), 'Sacred texts and translations' (27), 'Religious languages and scripts' (42), 'Special language uses' (33), 'Beliefs about language' (17), 'Religion and the study of language' (16), and 'Biographies' (112). The general grouping is uncontentious enough, and quite enticing, really, though you might begin to wonder how conceptual issues of use and belief could be so outnumbered by biographies, in a domain like this. Surely there should be rather more such issues from as many as 112 focused specialists. Either there are too few theolinguistic concepts in this book, or too many people. Or both.

As the biographies are the largest section, I deal with the last point first. My impression is that about half the entries should not be here, because they contribute nothing to the theolinguistic domain. To take the very first entry: just because Aelfric was an abbot and wrote a grammar does not qualify him for inclusion in a book which has a focus on how 'language and religion interact' (editor's introduction, p. 1). Aelfric wrote a grammar because he was an educated monk, and that was the sort of thing educated monks did. Our understanding of his religion is not increased by what he wrote in his grammar, nor is there anything in his account of language which is inspired by particular aspects of his religion. By contrast, the inclusion of Panini is well justified on these grounds (even though I baulk at his tabloidal description as 'the greatest grammarian of all time', p. 465).

The biographical section is totally split in this way. On the one hand, there are people whose relevance to the subject-matter of this book is unquestionable,

such as Aquinas, Jerome, Nida, Pike, and Tyndale. But there are not very many of these in the history of the subject. So the section is padded out by adding religious professionals (like Aelfric) who wrote grammars or made observations about language in general, such as Lowth and Priestley. I can sympathize to a degree with the inclusion of missionaries who did sterling work in language descriptions. But I can't understand the inclusion of philologists and anthropologists who would be surprised to learn that they had made a contribution to religious linguistic studies – Champollion, Frazer (of *The Golden Bough*), Herder, Humboldt, Malinowski, Whorf. The intellectuals are all here, too – Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Heidegger, Lacan, Levi-Strauss, Max Weber. The classic irrelevant entry, for me, was Saussure, an excellent succinct summary but not a mention of religion in it. Yet even he is dwarfed by the four pages devoted to Wittgenstein, whose specific contribution to theolinguistic thought or practice also escapes me.

The Glossary, similarly, is a contrivance – 16 pages of routine entries on such topics as *ablaut*, *adverb*, and *alveolar*. You would expect the entries to have been selected on grounds of relevance to the articles – and indeed this is what the editors claim – but it is just not so. It is impossible for a reviewer wishing to do other things in this life to check whether all the entries in the glossary actually turn up on some page of the book, but it is easy to check the other way round. I open the book at random on p. 311 and there I find *binding*, *recursiveness*, *self-embedding*, and *concatenation*, none of which are in the glossary. Plainly, nobody has gone to the trouble of checking which terms are actually used by the contributors and ensured that they are covered. That is what a 'relevant' glossary would be. Instead, we get many useless one-line definitions on obvious notions, such as those on *alphabet*, *vocabulary*, and *punctuation*.

At times, I began to wonder whether a computer had not put this book together. I was horrified by the person index, which showed no sign of human intervention. A machine has evidently gone through the main text and extracted proper names, but nobody has bothered to standardize. So we get *Goethe* at one place and *von Goethe* at another. The same individual turns up under adjacent entries, if different initials appear in article bibliographies, such as *A P* and *A Hayman*, *W* and *W J Samarin*. Even the surname-first principle is not respected. *Ezra Pound* turns up under *E. John*, *K J* is followed by *John of Dacia* and a few other '*John of*'s', and then by *John Rogers*, *John Ross* and *John Searle* (aka *Searle, J R*, a few pages later). *Charles Hockett* appears just as *Hockett*, with no first name; on the other hand, some people get listed under their titles: *Sir James Frazer* and other 'Sirs' appear under *S* (as well as, in his case, under *F*). I think it is the worst index I have ever seen.

The articles vary enormously in depth, from a few lines to several pages. I can see no rationale. In Section 1, the whole of 'Greek religion' gets the same space as 'Macumba'. The amount of reference to language varies, also. Several articles are just historical accounts of how a religion developed, and do not mention language at all. 'Shamanism', for example, just tells us what a shaman is and

nothing about the language he uses; and after four pages on 'Confucius' we are no nearer being told what he actually said about language. Then at the other extreme, there are some superb articles, informative, balanced, detailed, and insightful, such as 'Ancient Near Eastern Religions' or 'Christianity in Africa'. It is the balance between general observation and linguistic detail which makes all the difference in a book of this kind; and also (from a sociolinguistic perspective) the balance between linguistic forms and functions. Many of the contributors fail to appreciate this. Some articles go into linguistic forms in depth, with a passing nod at functions, some into functions with no examples of forms. Most are woefully short on examples, though there are some exceptions (such as the pieces on 'New religious movements' and 'Rastafarianism').

Section 2, on religious texts, is more straightforward, with some good summaries, but there is a hugely disproportionate bias towards the Bible, with its articles taking up 30 of the 50 pages. Compare 'Hindu sacred texts', given one page. This is certainly one of the most wide-ranging books on religious language ever, but breadth of coverage should never be an excuse for unbalanced treatment.

The padding issue starts coming to the fore in Section 2. An extraordinary decision was to include an article of nearly 12 pages on the history of translation (as a mass noun) – all very interesting, but hardly relevant. It gets worse in Section 3: seven pages on the development of the alphabet which do not refer to religion at all, seven pages explaining what palaeography is, five pages telling us what Chinese is like, eight pages on Semitic languages and scripts, a whole page listing the symbols of the Devanagari alphabet, another page on Tamil writing, and so on. Half this section could have been omitted without any loss to the focus of the book. The same point applies to Section 6, where several long articles, such as 'Aristotle and the Stoics on language' and 'Chinese linguistic tradition', do not refer to religion.

For readers of this journal, a particular interest will be Section 4, 'Special language uses'– but here too, the potential is dissipated by irrelevance. 'Blessings' is a good example of how all the entries should have been written, and there are a few nicely reflective and well-illustrated entries, such as 'Meditation' and 'Hwyl'. But these are swamped by the entries which could have been relevant but are not, because – once again – they contain no reference to religion, such as the six pages devoted to 'Language and power', or the six pages devoted to 'Metaphor'. There is nothing on religion in 'Archaism', which is illustrated entirely from literature, or in 'Euphemism'. A lovely article on 'Silence' gives religion only a passing mention. 'Taboo words', in Section 5, likewise makes little reference. Quite plainly, these articles were not written with this book in mind, and the editors have done nothing about it. On the other hand, topics which should have been given real space do not receive it. For religion, these would include 'Performative utterances' and 'Prayer', which get only half a page each.

The alphabetical ordering is a nuisance, in all sections apart from the last, for it separates articles which should belong together (such as Candomblé and

Macumba) and permits overlap and repetition. I lost count of the number of times the Vedas are explained. But the alphabetical ordering has a more serious effect, for it makes it difficult to take up relevant issues. For instance, 'Religions tend to be linked more closely to scripts than to languages', says one author (p. 92) – one of many intriguing generalizations which can be found in this book – but the point is not taken up in Section 3, where 'Religious languages and scripts' are taken together. Many major issues are left unaddressed, in fact. The article on 'Myth' makes no reference to religion – notwithstanding the crucial role this concept has played in theology in recent decades. And, disturbingly, the book avoids any reference to the difficulties encountered when religion and language come together: A critical perspective is missing from such articles as 'Missionaries' and 'Summer Institute of Linguistics'. It is all sweetness and light, though sociolinguists and anthropologists know that it is not always so. Nor is the language of a-theism taken into account. 'A J Ayers' (according to the Index) is mentioned briefly just on one page, notwithstanding the immense influence of his approach in stimulating a theolinguistic response.

I had really looked forward to this book, and have learned several good things from it. In coverage it represents the range of the topic quite well. But in treatment it is a travesty of what a specialist encyclopedia should be about. The subject deserves better than this.

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