

Excommunicated on the grounds of *Harris*.
Roy Harris, linguistics and freedom of speech

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On the office-door of a colleague of mine there has recently been a poster with a quote from the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei – it reads as follows:

Liberty is about our rights to question everything.

I would like to take this quote as the starting-point of my paper, which considers the linguistic theory of Roy Harris, a philosopher and linguist who has stressed precisely this in his work in general, and in his articles dealing with the issue of ‘freedom of speech’ in particular. Roy Harris held the Chair in General Linguistics at Oxford, but also worked at the same university as I am currently working: The University of Hong Kong. It was during his time as Chair of the English Department in Hong Kong, in fact from 1988-1991, that Harris published several articles on freedom of speech. As we will see, the issue of ‘freedom of speech’ concerned Harris directly, and personally, throughout his career as a critic of modern academic linguistics.

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While Ai Weiwei is interested in the individual’s right to question political systems and forms of government, Harris has been particularly concerned with *freedom of inquiry* within academia. He mentions specifically linguistics because, in his view, the orthodoxy within that discipline has never allowed its students to ask certain questions, and to question what most linguists take for granted. Harris’ own brand of linguistics, which he chose to term respectively *Integrational Linguistics* and *Integrationism*, arose, in part at least, because he believed that orthodox linguistic inquiry does not foster freedom of inquiry on the grounds that *only certain views can be expressed* if one talks qua professional linguist. Hence there is no real freedom of speech for linguists who think that the discipline needs a radical reorientation (as Harris does). For Harris, *everything* has to be subjected to critical scrutiny. In fact, in the Postscript of his *Introduction to Integrational Linguistics* he writes:

What integrational linguistics attempts to provide is an alternative perspective on language and the whole process of linguistic inquiry. This includes, by definition, the kind of inquiry conducted under the aegis of orthodox linguistics. Consequently, it provides a basis on which orthodox linguistics can be subjected to critical scrutiny. Does this apply the other way round? Does the orthodox position in turn provide a basis on which to subject the assumptions of integrationism to critical scrutiny? (Harris 1998: 150)

Certain branches of linguistics, especially those associated with some kind of political activism (like sociolinguistics, applied linguistics), arose because it was felt that non-linguists (politicians, teachers, but also the man in the street) held ‘problematic’ beliefs about languages. Sociolinguists would therefore dismiss non-linguists’ attacks on linguistics as ‘unscientific’, and proceed to argue that there was scientific evidence that non-linguists were simply wrong in the way they reasoned. In the case of Roy Harris, however, linguists have had a harder time dismissing a Harrisian critique as irrelevant, or as unfounded, or as based on naïve mythological thinking: it is relatively easy,

within academia, to dismiss elitarian prescriptivists or political demagogues as lacking the intellectual insights, but how do you cope with an Oxford professor of linguistics who accuses his colleagues of operating under mythical assumptions, while promoting a linguistics founded on the lay speaker's perspective? By and large, the strategy adopted by the community of professional linguists has been not to respond to the Harrisian critique, excluding his writings from the Canon and thus to excommunicate him on the grounds of heresy.

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In order to understand the Harrisian notion of 'freedom' it is necessary to keep in mind Harris' own career as a writer and academic spanning more than 50 years. Although Harris made himself a name as an expert on Saussure, whose 1983 English translation of Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* was awarded the Scott-Moncrieff prize for translation, he has been largely ignored by his colleagues for his innovative work on integrational linguistics. The academic world, and especially linguists, somehow decided that students didn't need to bother with this thinker as part of their education. This, in turn, has led to a new generation of young professional linguists who have never heard of, let alone read, Roy Harris.

Excommunication is, in Harris' eyes, the worst that can happen to an academic eager to engage in intelligent debates with others. As he has argued in an article on freedom of speech, excommunication is deeply immoral:

The antithesis of freedom of speech is not censorship but excommunication: the denial of the right to participate. And the ultimate intellectual perversion of politics is to claim that such denials may be justified and sometimes necessary in the interests of the freedom of others, or even of the excommunicated themselves (Harris 1990: 159-160)

To think that one's students are no longer free once they have been 'contaminated' by the Harrisian thought, is tantamount, from Harris' perspective, to refusing to advance knowledge within a discipline. In a recent article, in fact, Harris writes:

If discussion of certain topics is banned (for whatever reason), or if only certain views about them can be expressed, there can never be any guarantee that important questions have been thoroughly examined from all sides [...] freedom of inquiry presupposes freedom of speech, and without freedom of inquiry there is no hope of pushing back the frontiers of ignorance. (Harris 2009a: 125)

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For Harris, the individual's right to freedom of speech is *a principle worth dying for*. He talks, for instance, with great admiration of Socrates, who chose to die for his idea that education was not essentially about teaching the young the 'right' social values. For Socrates, being an *educated* individual has nothing to do with adopting society's accepted standards. Harris comments as follows:

What marks Socrates' thinking is a supreme indifference to society and social values. He just did not care what other people thought of his teachings. It is no accident that he was eventually put on trial for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. And it is typical of the man that he refused to recant – as he easily could have done – and preferred to be put to death. [...] The death of Socrates is one of the great landmarks in intellectual history. He was put to death not by a vindictive tyrant but under a democracy. The democracy decided to

deny Socrates any further freedom of speech by the radical means of silencing his voice permanently. Socrates' death teaches the unforgettable lesson that a democracy can be as profoundly mistaken in its judgements as any dictator. The majority is not always right. The death of Socrates also teaches us the lesson that it takes a remarkable individual to value personal intellectual integrity above the dictates of society. (Harris 2009a: 122)

Harris emphasizes that in a Socratic view of education, one has to learn how to value one's own beliefs, and be prepared to defend them – what this means, I believe, is that one has to *learn to take responsibility for one's views*. As Harris states:

Education, for Socrates, is a matter of developing your own potential as an individual mind. Nothing of intellectual substance is to be taken for granted, whether from your peers or from your would-be educators. That is Socrates' message to posterity. It is arguably the most valuable message about education that has ever been given in the Western tradition. (Harris 2009a: 123)

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Socrates concedes that in order to become educated, it is necessary that one acquires certain skills through *instruction* and *training*: however, to be educated, in the Socratic sense, is to 'learn to think for oneself', and to be ready to admit one's own ignorance. Moreover, one's view has to be put to the test continuously *through debate*, ideally by confronting oneself with a diametrically opposed antagonist. Harris, in turn, was denied the right to debate upon fundamental questions concerning language, communication and linguistic inquiry. This lack of stimuli to further debates with equals must have made his life as an intellectual very difficult. Harris, I assume, would say of himself that in the past forty years or so, he has not enjoyed full freedom – in fact, I interpret his discussion of the difference between 'freedom' and the 'exercise of it' as relating to his own personal situation:

...there is no point trying to convince myself that I am still free to go to London if the reason that I cannot go there is that I am in jail serving a lengthy prison sentence in Dartmoor. The reason why I am in jail, presumably, is that the judge found that an appropriate punishment for what I had done was deliberately to deprive me of many of the freedoms I had formerly enjoyed as a law-abiding citizen. It would be twisted thinking for me to reason that a prison sentence had not really deprived me of any freedoms, but only of the opportunity of exercising those freedoms. Or that I had not lost any freedom because I was perfectly content with life in my prison cell. (Harris 2009a: 114)

Analogously, the point could be made that in solitary confinement, by definition, there simply cannot be any 'free speech'. As Harris points out elsewhere:

In order to be free in the sense in which the human mind is free, the possibility of assent or dissent must exist. And this is a possibility which only language makes available [...] That is why the denial of freedom of speech, however temporarily and for whatever reason, is a violation of the humanity of those to whom it is denied. (Harris 1990: 158-159)

It is true that Harris has tirelessly made public his dissent in his many monographs, articles and reviews, but retrospectively it appears to have been in the form of a *monologue*, and when there were reactions (e.g. in the form of a reply to a review of his, or in a review of his book) it must often have felt like his adversaries did not really want to understand the position by him advocated. Harris has asked many questions without getting many (satisfactory) answers. This includes such questions as: 'do

languages really exist, and should they be the prime focus of academic linguistics?', 'what makes the professional linguist's insight into language superior to the ordinary lay speaker's?', 'why is it justifiable to separate the scientific study of the activity of speaking/writing from the scientific study of all other activities concomitant with speaking/writing?', and many more.

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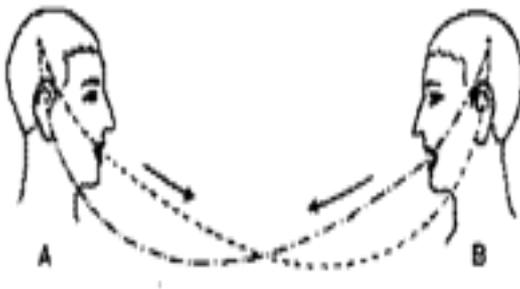
Harris has claimed that the question of freedom of speech cannot be asked (and coped with) within mainstream linguistics because it falls outside the scope of the theoretical framework that linguistics provides. But that is precisely where, for Harris, the perversion lies. He notes the following:

The intellectual biases built into an academic discipline are most clearly revealed by considering not what range of explanations it makes available for the phenomena falling within its domain but rather what questions pertaining to those phenomena cannot be raised within the theoretical framework it provides. A case in point is linguistics and the question of freedom of speech. (Harris 1990: 153)

He goes on to say:

The orthodox linguist defends his theoretical model by arguing that the question of freedom of speech involves moral and political value judgements, and these have no place in any scientific study of speech. (Harris 1990: 153)

The theoretical model of linguistics, in fact, has been one of the targets of the Harrisian critique for the past thirty years. What is this model? The answer is: Saussure's representation of the 'Talking Heads' (also known as the 'Speech Circuit' of communication).



This model is supposed to explain verbal communication and it is this model, Harris has argued insistently, that has informed mainstream linguistics since then. What Harris finds deeply problematic about this model is that it postulates the legitimacy of three abstractions (Harris 1990: 153), namely:

- (i) *It abstracts from the identities of both speaker and hearer;*
- (ii) *It abstracts from the social setting of the speech act;*
- (iii) *It abstracts from the content of what is said.*

For Harris, interpersonal communication is *crucially* about 'saying something'. Saussure's talking heads, however, 'say nothing' (Harris 1987: 163-171).

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‘Saying something’, for Harris, implies taking responsibility for what you say, but how can *A* or *B* in Saussure’s model take responsibility for *anything*? In this model neither speaker nor hearer, not being real persons but just anonymous stand-ins, can ever understand that they have linguistic rights. How can we say of *A* and *B* that they have acquired – and competently exercise – a social proficiency, if they don’t understand the rights and responsibilities that are, by definition, part of that proficiency? But that is precisely what, according to mainstream linguistics, the ‘talking heads’ are engaged in doing: i.e. *competently* exercising the social proficiency called language. In this model, *A* and *B* are claimed to be ‘proficient’ at the social exercise of the ability called ‘language’ because they share the same code enabling them to transfer mental concepts from mind to mind. This is supposedly what happens when we communicate verbally: the speaker *encodes* and the hearer *decodes* the verbal message. The common language allows *A* and *B* to ‘speak their minds’, as it were – both *A* and *B* seem to be enjoying exercising their freedom, or right, to speak. The hypothetical *common language* is a guarantee of that freedom. Harris has attacked the Saussurean speech communication model throughout his career, and pleaded for a linguistics that recognizes no code and hands language back where it belongs to, namely to the language-users themselves. As Harris makes clear:

Linguistics [...] will not be an academic discipline worth preserving if it continues to shirk the issue of freedom of speech by perpetuating the convenient theoretical fiction that membership of a (homogeneous) linguistic community automatically confers the same linguistic rights – or none – on all, and attributing any departure from this egalitarian state of affairs to the interference of external, pragmatic factors which are by definition non-linguistic. This is certainly one way of idealizing the problem out of existence, or at least out of linguistics. The difficulty is that it leaves the linguist in no position to construct any plausible account of that particular mode of articulating social behaviour which has traditionally been called ‘language’. (Harris 1990: 160)

For Harris, what matters in relation to freedom of speech is not primarily the question who belongs to the ‘linguistic (or speech) community’ (and who doesn’t), but the question whether a community (by whatever criteria we choose to define it) is also a “communicating society” (Harris 1990: 157). A language must be useful for public communication: it must be a language that is audible, which facilitates communication, which allows everyone to participate in it publicly. If participation, i.e. the right to have one’s view heard, is denied on the grounds that one’s language is not couched in ‘appropriate’ language, then it is no good having a common language which, as advocated by an idealist linguistics, presents communication as a mere matter of generating identical thoughts via a shared linguistic code. As is well known, there is always a way for governments, parliaments and courts to set up new standards of linguistic propriety: a code, in fact, can always be divided into sub-codes, *ad infinitum*.

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Harris has been described by some as displaying strong idealistic – even utopian – tendencies. If this is right, it is indeed ironic that Harris has spent most of his career criticizing linguists for having ‘dehumanised’ the study of language, such as the notion of an *ideal* speaker-hearer in a *homogeneous* linguistic community. It is important,

however, to understand that a Harrisian ‘utopia’ is different from, say, a Chomskyan one. For instance, as Chris Hutton makes clear:

For Harris, human beings are capable of unbounded and as yet unrealized forms of creativity. The model of language which has arisen in the Western tradition and been institutionalized by modern linguistics is not merely impoverished intellectually, but has socio-cultural and ideological effects which prevent the realization of [what Harris refers to as] ‘the full gamut of human and humane values’. (Hutton 2011: 509)

Harris has vehemently opposed *idealization* as a necessary step towards turning linguistics into a science. In a recent publication, Harris (2012: 92-93) has the following to say concerning the ‘sacred cow of idealization’:

Suppose there is a theorist – let us call him Professor Dumsky – who decides to set up a science of athletics on the basis of what an ideal athlete can do. Dumsky’s first problem is to specify exactly what this is. Can the ideal athlete run a hundred metres in ten seconds? Or nine? Or eight? Or seven? Where does one draw the line? Competing in the high-jump, can the ideal athlete manage six feet? Or seven feet? Or fifteen feet? Can he swim a mile, or two miles, or the English Channel?

The absurdity of pursuing such questions is twofold. First, there is *no* line that can be drawn, even in principle, because we do not know what muscles the ideal athlete has, how tall he is, or any other details about his physique. But second, Dumsky’s whole line of inquiry is grotesque because anyone interested in constructing an empirical theory of the abilities of athletes can observe their running, jumping, swimming and other activities without bothering with unanswerable questions about the fictional ideal athlete.

Appeals to idealization are invariably either simplifications or theoreticians’ excuses for the lack of relevant empirical evidence. It is only because the linguist cannot observe and report the mental processes underlying speech that it seems attractive to set up a non-existent ideal speaker-listener as the subject of inquiry. (Harris 2012: 92-93)

In the above passage, Harris is obviously targeting Noam Chomsky’s idealist linguistics. It certainly deserves mention, given the theme of this paper, that Chomsky has equally been interested in questions of freedom, particularly freedom of speech, including the individual’s right to express opinions one vehemently disagrees with. The parallels between Harris and Chomsky stop here, however. In a lecture on the topic of ‘language and freedom’, delivered in 1970, Chomsky upholds the much cherished idea of *constrained creativity*:

There is no inconsistency in the notion that the restrictive attributes of mind underlie a historically evolving human nature that develops within the limits that they set; or that these attributes of mind provide the possibility of self-perfection [...] To use an arithmetical analogy, the integers do not fail to be an infinite set merely because they do not exhaust the rational numbers. Analogously, it is no denial of man’s capacity for infinite ‘self-perfection’ to hold that there are intrinsic properties of mind that constrain his development. I would like to argue that in a sense the opposite is true, that without a system of formal constraints there are no creative acts. (Chomsky 1996: 93)

For Chomsky, therefore, it makes perfect sense to state in a later passage of that very lecture:

Man is fundamentally a creative, searching, self-perfecting being. (Chomsky 1996: 96)

And he goes on to say:

The many modern critics who sense an inconsistency in the belief that free creation takes place within – presupposes, in fact – a system of constraints and governing principles are quite mistaken [...] Without this tension between necessity and freedom, rule and choice, there can be no creativity, no communication, no meaningful acts at all. (Chomsky 1996: 100)

Everything that Chomsky has written in the quoted passages is diametrically opposed to the Harrisian view of language, mind and freedom. It is not that Chomsky and Harris happen to have different, culture-related conceptions of what ‘freedom’ really is (or what the word really means): it is a much more fundamental difference: for Harris, there simply couldn’t be any question of *freedom* if language-use really were underlyingly constrained by rules. For Harris, signs (linguistic or other) cannot exist as invariants in a realm of pure thought. According to integrationists, every sign is *made* in the here-and-now by *someone* as part of an integrated activity. The constraints that integrational linguistics acknowledges are the constraints that Harris (1998: 29) has termed ‘biomechanical’, ‘macrosocial’ and ‘circumstantial’: these three factors are universal, but how they interrelate and how exactly they limit the processes of semiosis will depend on the individuals involved and the particular circumstances. As far as the integrationist is concerned, *anything can become a sign of anything for anybody*. This is how Harris conceives of ‘creativity’ and ‘freedom’.

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Chomsky has criticized the Western educational system for ‘miseducating’ the youth. But rather than encouraging a Socratic model that fosters the individual mind, Chomsky seems to put complete faith in scientific knowledge and scientific truth as a means of creating a society of individuals capable of rejecting state propaganda, especially that of (Western) democratic systems (e.g. Chomsky 2000). Harris, in turn, is a sceptic when it comes to the concepts of truth and knowledge as something extraneous to the individual (Harris 2009b), as something that no longer needs to be put to further critical scrutiny. For Chomsky, therefore, it is beyond doubt that language correlates with thought, that there is a universal grammar and that language has a real psychological existence outside its temporally circumscribed use in the here-and-now. Harris has argued persistently, however, that Chomsky’s programme is culturally biased, i.e. it could never have been developed outside a highly literate time accustomed to treating language as sponsorless and decontextualized, with written representations of language being treated as corresponding to spoken language. If students of Chomskyan linguistics are not *free* to question the theory underlying their work, but only strive towards putting forward new so-called ‘evidence’ that their theory turns out to hold for any known language, they are not, on Harris’ view, *free and creative minds* but merely cogs in a generative machine. As Harris recently remarked in a speech entitled ‘Freedom and hypocrisy’,

[m]ost academics need an orthodoxy to cling on to, because they don’t have the intellectual originality to think ‘outside the box’. (Harris 2009c)

It is to be hoped that integrational linguistics will not become for its adherents merely another orthodoxy.

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