

A MAXIMALIST: TASSOS, LINGUISTICS AND CAMBRIDGE

TERENCE MOORE

One morning in Cambridge in the Michaelmas term 1976, Tassos dropped in on a lecture I was giving in Room 6 on the Sidgwick site. I was glad he did because the outcome was that I learned something of his views on what the study of language should be about. The topic of my lecture was Ferdinand de Saussure – the alleged ‘Father of modern linguistics.’ During the lecture I was at pains to draw attention to Chapter V in the ‘Cours de Linguistique Générale’, a chapter normally little-noticed in which Saussure lucidly, but I believe with a faint air of regret, lists the topics he is **not** going to discuss. These include:

- the links between the history of a language and the history of a race or civilisation,
- the links between language and political history, e.g. colonisation,
- the links between language and institutions, the Church, the salons, the courts, the national academies,
- the links between geographical spreading and dialectal splitting.

None of these were to figure in Saussure’s account of language as a system. His credo, expressed in the final sentence of the ‘Cours’ runs: ‘the true and unique object of linguistics is language studied in and for itself.’ Saussure was the first minimalist.

Talking over the lecture later with Tassos he made a comment that shed light on the breadth of his own outlook. ‘Everything Saussure excludes’, he said, ‘I want to include.’ And in his subsequent work as a linguist, he did: Tassos, where language was concerned, was a maximalist.

He was, however, a maximalist who remained intrigued by minimalists, in particular, the arch-minimalist Noam Chomsky and his theories of grammar. In those early years he was sufficiently intrigued to write his innovative doctoral dissertation –examined by Professor John Lyons and myself– on the role of Adverbials in a transformational generative grammar. Tassos was challenged rather than deterred by Chomsky’s cautious observation in ‘Aspects of the Theory of Grammar’ that ‘Adverbials were a rich and as yet relatively unexplored field.’

Yet Chomsky’s theories of grammar, Tassos would remind me in later years, were not theories of language. In the professional life following the award of the Ph.D, Tassos showed evidence of a wide-ranging and far-reaching interest in many of those aspects of language excluded by Saussure, and later Chomsky: the links between the history of a language and the history of a race, for instance, evidenced in his work on the history of the Greek Language, the links between geographical spreading and dialectal splitting, and the links between language and institutions. One of the most ancient of these last was the oracle of Dodona, the study of whose oracular tablets was one of Tassos’s major projects.

Through all these years Cambridge remained a special place for him. Free of academic responsibilities we would meet over a meal –wine for me, coke for Tassos– and talk over whatever we were currently reading – including often the latest Chomsky. For a maximalist, Tassos kept up with minimalism and read I believe almost everything that Chomsky wrote. But for the maximalist in Tassos it’s unlikely I would ever have read Deacon’s ‘The Symbolic Species: the co-evolution of language and the brain.’ And I know because he told me how stimulating he found my counter-offer, Mithen’s ‘Prehistory of the Mind.’

I shall miss those happy, relaxed, wide-ranging conversations. Adapting Terence on being human, we could truly say of Tassos: he was a linguist, therefore everything about language mattered to him.

