

Preface

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Linguistics Inside Out: Roy Harris and his critics

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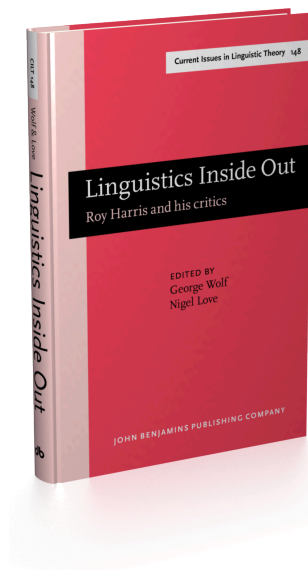
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Preface

This book started life, or gestation, as a traditional Festschrift. For a number of reasons that project was soon abandoned. In the first place, the traditional Festschrift, compiled as it apparently so often is by inviting a random selection of the schriftee's friends and colleagues to send in whatever they happen to have handy, is all too likely to consist of an assortment of pieces with no better reason to appear bound together in a single volume than their authors' wish to be associated with it. Surely something more useful, and more appropriate, could be contrived.

Instead we decided on a collection of critical essays. Contributors were asked to focus on (an aspect of) Roy's work, and either develop or rebut some specific point he has made, or else endorse or reject his whole approach to a given area of linguistic inquiry; Roy himself was invited to write a composite reply. The idea was to advance the debate on the issues he has been concerned with. Books of this kind are perhaps commoner in philosophy than in linguistics, and there are plenty of precedents there for what we had in mind: collections of essays that mark a scholar's achievement by discussing the work itself, and are to that extent worthwhile irrespective of any celebratory intention, as opposed to the sort of unfocusedly encomiastic production that lionises its hero by presenting a miscellany of articles some of which may have no point of contact with what was supposed to make such a book worth publishing in the first place.

A collection such as the following is appropriate because, whether he would answer to the name of philosopher or not, Roy is best known for the many controversial things he has said not so much within linguistics as about it. For reasons to do with the way it has come to be institutionalised, academic linguistics is on the whole unfriendly to controversialists as wholehearted and thoroughgoing as he has never flinched from being. Having issued our invitation to potential contributors, we were therefore confident that there would be a great deal more rejecting than endorsing in the eventual book. So confident were we of this that the working title was *A Blastschrift for Roy Harris*. We sat back waiting for adverse, even hostile commentary. On one level, a Blastschrift is an anti-Festschrift. Even a Blastschrift is not as backhanded an honour as it might at first appear: on another level it pays its anti-honorand the compliment of taking his work seriously enough to subject it to criticism.

In any case, given the above considerations, Roy Harris would be a hard man to honour with a *Festschrift* of the traditional, more unctuous kind. Outside the ranks of what one contributor calls his “cadre of talented and devoted students”, most linguists are inclined to give short shrift to his ideas. The resulting volume would have been slim. A *Shortschrift*, in fact.

In the event not all the contributions proved to be blasts, so the working title was dropped. But all make contact in one way or another with Roy’s work. And Roy in his reply has something to say about all of them. In that sense his reply comprehends them all. Whether it comprehends them all in the other sense is something we originally envisaged taking it upon ourselves to pass judgement on, in a long editorial epilogue. In the end, to avoid trying the reader’s patience, not to mention usurping his rightful role, we settled for drawing attention to one or two of what strike us as the more salient points arising from the debate. The sandwich is completed by a brief scene-setting prologue.

Cape Town
New Orleans

N.L.
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