

***The Essence of Jargon: Argot and the Dangerous Classes.* Alice Becker-Ho. New York: Autonomedia, 2015. 178 pages.**

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When I have my students read Michel Foucault's "Panopticism" (included in David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky and Stacey Waite's *Ways of Reading*), I ask them to determine (using *Ways'* conceptual framework) whether Foucault is reading Panopticism (as a theory and practice of power) with or against the grain. But what I am really asking them to do is to determine Foucault's attitude toward the logic of power he describes so meticulously—does he endorse it or condemn (or resist) it? For those who first encountered Foucault in graduate school (or in undergraduate courses inclined toward theory), the question may sound ridiculous, but I began asking students to work on the text this way once I noticed that an overwhelming majority took Foucault to be enthusiastically endorsing Panopticism. Moreover, they made quite compelling arguments defending this position, and often found it hard to imagine why Foucault would be criticizing this political machinery. I had to acknowledge they had a point—there is not a single word in the text overtly criticizing Panopticism, and even those points that seem inescapably, if implicitly, critical (like the concluding sentence: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?") easily become ambiguous on closer examination. In fact, the only way one can confidently claim that Foucault's aim is to resist or subvert Panopticism is to presuppose that he shares the humanist values (liberty, privacy, the integrity of the individual, rule of law, etc.) that are so transparently trampled by Panopticism—but, while the students don't know this, part of Foucault's project is to empty those values of their self-evidence.

What is really impossible for the students is to understand how a regime of practices that makes incarceration safer and more effective, increases the productive forces, raises the moral level of society, enhances the general health and well-being of the community, educates, provides knowledge, makes power more accountable and objective, and so on, and on, could possibly be seen in "negative" terms. Certainly the cultural memory of a working class leftist politics would make it possible to read irony into some of these accomplishments of Panopticism, but even such a memory would leave most of those values untouched. Unless they are reading contemporary Autonomist literature out of France, they can't imagine why one might revolt against, say, "productivity," or "responsibility," or "morality." My own interest is in my students as readers, writers and thinkers, not potential revolutionaries, but what I would like to make possible for students is to read every word as bi- or multi-valent—not just to detect a multiplicity of valences where the author has "placed" it, but to bring to the text the assumption that any and all words might carry diametrically opposed, even warring, messages for differing readers.

Alice Becker-Ho's *The Essence of Jargon* helps us to understand the constraints on students' reception of a text like Foucault's. Becker-Ho, a longtime participant in the

Situationist International (and wife of its most famous member, Guy Debord), distinguishes between “jargon” and “slang”:

Jargons do not, strictly speaking, employ secret terms The basic aim of these jargons is to come across as a specialist, not to deceive This type of speech serves more to mark out a distance than to set up a real barrier Unlike slang, it does not imply a different conception of the world. On the contrary, it defends and reinforces a world based on the division of labor by protecting the privileges of a caste, extending this protection even to the words the latter uses. (p. 65)

Slang, as far as I can tell, is used synonymously with “argot” by Becker-Ho—or her translator, John McHale—as well as Roger Farr in his “Introduction.” In “argot,”

words are weapons that can be loaded and unloaded at leisure, as circumstances dictate. They “give cover,” or give the signal, inform or disinform, amuse or threaten. Argot is *the power of those words that constantly remind us that it is dangerous to talk*: sometimes too much, sometimes not enough. “Have a snack but never sit down to table” is one of slang’s chief precepts. Slang is the truth of man. It is the very core of the human spirit struggling also with its language. (p. 66, italics in original)

We are teaching students facility in jargon, which presupposes protection and privilege; slang is predicated upon an absolute antagonism between the social and the anti-social, with the latter (the “dangerous classes”) characterized by a complete lack of protection. The requisite means of self-protection are embedded in the language and require that words mean one thing for those in the group and another for outsiders, actual or potential threats. The problem Becker-Ho’s book might pose for us, then, is whether it is possible to make slang visible within jargon. I have noticed, in fact, that the students most likely to express a kind of spontaneous horror at some of Foucault’s descriptions are those with less facility in the acquisition of jargon—for them, the proposal to raise orphans in isolation so as to later use them to test out various philosophical hypotheses regarding the state of nature (which must be one of Foucault’s undeniably satiric moments in the essay) is repellent, while the more jargon-inclined are likely to go along (it’s just a paper for a class after all) with Foucault’s assurances that it’s all for the greater good. The imperative to wrap all language up in jargon renders slang invisible, and therefore occludes certain uses of language for the student.

Part of Becker-Ho’s project is to point out the multi-vectored and polysemic nature of slang. She attacks what seems to be a French lexicographic version of the currently fashionable project, first broached by Franco Moretti in his *Distant Reading*, of employing databases in the study of literary texts. Becker-Ho polemicizes against some recent figures she accuses of seeking to rationalize the language as part of a larger project of social rationalization, pointing out that, however “successful” such an approach might be with standardized and canonized texts, it cannot work for slang, because slang intrinsically resists such rationalization, requiring for its understanding that one enter imaginatively into the lives of its speakers. Those lives are decidedly anti-social, dividing the world into the potential marks (“mugs”) and threats to be found in normal society, on the one hand, and the

self-protection of the marginal, “dangerous classes,” on the other. Within the margin itself, the all-inclusive division is between victors and victims, dominant and subordinate.

This structure is what leads slang to “view [] the world as a dialectical totality where everything contains its own negation: a place consequently where everything can be turned around and take on the opposite or a complementary meaning”(p. 81). One can readily imagine “translation” exercises based on this principle, involving students converting terms into the opposite or complementary meaning: nice=moron, educated=socially inadequate, moral=either “fanatically loyal” or “traitor”, and so on. Slang overturns the bourgeois norms of civility and equality that conceal the truth:

[I]t is the law of the strongest that prevails everywhere: by force of arms, money, sex, as well as intelligence. Only the dangerous classes dare to proclaim it loud and clear: where there is no equality or justice among men, then by the same token there can be none between the sexes. The world of outlaws is, needless to say, no angels’ paradise (pp. 82–83).

Indeed, the more civilized and domesticated we become, the more euphemistic, and hence the more duplicity to be uncovered and exploited among the jargon of the academy and social world more broadly.

We can think of “critical thinking” as another layer of jargon upon the already accumulated layers, but we could also think of it as a practical study of slang through the experimental production of slang out of our ever more pretentious and inflated jargons. (What translations of “critical thinking” might students produce if set to it?) The purpose, to repeat my earlier avowal, is not to turn students into anti-bourgeois rebels, a task at which we surely would, and should, fail. Rather, it is to open them to the possibility of treating language as, most fundamentally, a source of paradox. What is desired is what is impossible, every success marks a failure, to build is to destroy, to make peace is to lay the groundwork for war. Jargon, with the best example being, perhaps, the logical positivist project of expelling paradox from the language, is the attempt to suppress paradox, but as Gödel showed, any self-coherent system of proofs must rely upon some truth that cannot be proven within the system. A slangy pedagogy would be an irreverent exercise in outing the shared, disavowed loyalties and disloyalties inhabiting neutralized concepts. And carefully culled excerpts from *The Essence of Jargon* would be among the texts used in its workshops. ⌘