Hocus pocus or God's truth: 
the dual identity of Michael Stubbs

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Abstract

Text analysis is in an anomalous position: hovering on the borders between the sciences on the one hand, and the arts on the other. As science it seeks to be descriptive rather than prescriptive, replicable by other analysts, expounding objective facts about language use. As an art it evaluates and prescribes, imposing the writer's views upon the external world, saying as much about the analyst as the analysed. This chapter explores the position of Michael Stubbs in relation to this dichotomy, suggesting that, while he advocates objectivity, and has made an outstanding contribution to linguistic description, his achievement - almost despite himself - is also to be an evaluator and interpreter. Like a good literary critic, he is worth reading not only for what he tells us about the external world (which is a great deal) but also for his own unique ideas.

"Pure induction will never get you from empirical observations to interesting generalizations. You have to know where to look for interesting things. As Grice (1958:173) puts it: 'you cannot ask [...] what something is unless (in a sense) you already know what it is'. However, this is true only 'in a sense', since the aim is to say systematically and explicitly what something is: and that is where empirical, observational analysis can contribute. It is not possible (or desirable) to avoid subjectivity, but observational data can provide more systematic evidence for unavoidable subjective interpretation." (Stubbs 2005)

1. Hocus pocus or God's truth

In the early 1950s, when Michael Stubbs was just starting school in Glasgow, the lexicographer and semanticist Fred Householder, reviewed a book called 'Methods in Structural Linguistics' by Zellig Harris and evoked a distinction between two positions in linguistics.

"On the metaphysics of linguistics there are two extreme positions, which may be termed (and have been) the 'God's truth' position and the 'hocus pocus' position. The theory of the God's truth linguists [...] is that language 'has' a structure and the job of the linguist is (a) to find out what the structure is, and (b) to describe it [...]. The hocus pocus linguist believes that a language (better, a corpus, since we describe
only the corpus we know) is a mass of incoherent formless data, and the job of the linguist is somehow to arrange and organize this mass, imposing on it some structure [...]." (Householder 1952)

Householder describes both positions as extremes. He assumed perhaps what we would now call a negative discourse prosody for both phrases, and that nobody would want to be identified as either. He criticises Harris for being too much of a "God's truth" linguist, but implies that a "hocus pocus" position would be just as flawed. The good linguist should be somewhere between the two poles and not at either end.

Householder was thinking of the division of his time between armchair structuralist linguists using examples drawn by intuition from their own minds, and empirical anthropological linguists going out and studying language behaviour. Given how linguistics has developed since, there are quite a few complications in applying Householder's distinction to linguists today. For one thing, there has been a revolution in corpus linguistics, in which that Glasgow schoolboy went on to play a leading part. The modern linguist is no longer limited to "only the corpus [the linguist] know[s]", but has access to millions of words beyond their own immediate experience. Nor are their corpora "a mass of incoherent formless data"; linguists like Michael Stubbs seek and find in them patterns and connections undreamed of in Householder's time. So it is now the corpus linguist who believes "that language 'has' a structure and the job of the linguist is (a) to find out what the structure is, and (b) to describe it".

Stubbs himself has paid attention to this dichotomy, though in different terms. Considering the ideas of Saussure, he writes:

"In a famous and influential statement, Saussure (1916) argued that 'far from the object of study preceding from the point of view, it is rather the point of view that creates the object'. Due to advances in technology, new observational methods have made it possible to collect new types of data and to study patterns which had previously been invisible, but the point of view does not create the patterns. What we see certainly varies according to point of view, and it follows that any view is partial, but it does not follow that what we observe has been created by the point of view or by the observational tools." (Stubbs 2002a:220)

Saussure in other words was too hocus pocus, and has moreover been overtaken by events. But Saussure's work, though contested and discussed, is far from dismissed by Stubbs. It is a recurrent point of reference in his work. Saussure's ideas, my intuition suggests, are ones with which he has a love/hate relationship.

In this chapter, I shall use this distinction between 'God's truth' and 'hocus pocus' liberally and with poetic licence, interpreting it beyond the context of the time it was written to mean simply that there are two opposite tendencies in linguistics. In both, language is seen as ordered, but in the first case (God's truth) the order is an objective one, out there to be discovered, while in the second case