

BOOK REVIEW

Sylvain Detey, *Savons-nous vraiment parler ? Du contrat linguistique comme contrat social*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2023, 416 pp. ISBN: 978 2 200 63634 0.
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The book begins with a message that encourages readers to consider the commonplace use of language and how it is used accurately and effectively. It encourages readers to think about whether speaking is a right, an obligation, or a freedom. These issues become the core arguments of this work.

Starting with a question: *is communication a handicap?*, Detey focuses on human communication and invites readers to reflect on their capacity as speakers. Referring to de Saussure's (1966) theoretical linguistic dichotomy *langue* and *parole*, the author journeys around *langue*, identified by Saussure as competence, and *parole* which Saussure identifies as individual production and perception or performance. Even though we speak the same language, everyone has his/her own way of speaking. Have we ever observed ourselves while we communicate, especially when we communicate in a language that is not our mother tongue? Why do we call a friend? Why do we speak publicly? When someone speaks, he/she must have an objective or motivation to speak even if he/she is not fully cognisant of the objective or motivation. Referring to Jakobson (1960)'s scheme identifying six actors and functions of communication, the author takes one on a journey of reflection on several aspects of communication involving the speaker, the listener, the message, the context, the code, and contact.

From the speaker's point of view, Detey considered human beings as social creatures who have deep needs to be satisfied if they are to survive, but that he/she cannot fulfil these needs without having good relationships with other members of their community. Any language community has its own system (norms or *langue*) that should be applied in a communication but nonetheless, everyone has his/her way of speaking. From the listener's point of view, there are differences between speaking privately or publicly; Detey details these in a table with thirteen items, which is helpful for speakers to prepare their speech with proper regard for the listener's assessment of whether it is poor or good communication. The author goes on to observe that in modern life with ever new and evolving technology, we must understand that there is a progressive, but diminishing division between private and public speaking, and that based on the form of technology used, even a public speech could be broadcast as being either professional (journalism) or amateur (social network). All these differences, Detey argues, should cause one to think about the impetus to speak and if we wish to do so publicly or privately.


Detey continues by inviting readers to think about why we need to understand our own language well. A good speaker might or might not be an expert, but there are four points to check: form (pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical errors), adaptation to the context (expressions depending on the context) and function

(pragmatic function: what we say, what we want to say and the result of what we say); and background. The same is true when we learn foreign languages if we are to reduce uncertainty or misunderstanding in communication, because successful interaction can only happen if there is an awareness by both communicating persons in what to say and what not to say within a given amount of time. Even the concept of freedom of speech should not ignore these aspects, but rather, as Detey states in his penultimate chapter, it should be seen as freedom of information circulation and flow.

He also argues that we should control ourselves when communicating publicly or privately through different types of media. Teaching language nowadays, for example, is not only teaching how grammar works or which words to produce, but also which sentence structure should be used in a given situation and when certain words cannot be used according to our interlocutor. A non-native teacher normally gives more detail on the usage of the language due to his/her experience in learning and in using the language.

We also need to be aware of the need for changes in communication due to changes in one's environment. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, for example, children studying online and employees working from home faced difficulties using virtual communication. Detey closes his book hoping that humans live together harmoniously by better understanding their linguistic responsibilities, and balancing general and individual interests.

Detey states in the beginning that this book is for students and professionals who work in communication, but in fact this book is useful for everyone because he not only covers every aspect of the world of communication, but also past, present and future social and cultural aspects. His synthesis of numerous opinions and observations is impressive. The book would have an even greater impact if it were to be translated into other languages, because Detey clearly shows that the principles, rules and observations are applicable to the majority of modern languages.

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