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Uli Windisch

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European Monographs in Social Psychology

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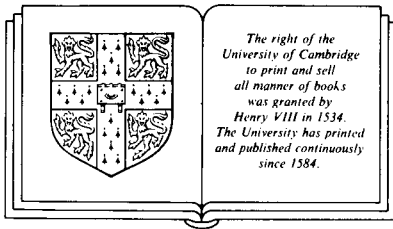
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Speech and reasoning in everyday life

Uli Windisch

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 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
 this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,
 or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Spoken language such as we all use all the time seems to me not to be purely intellectual at all, but deeply affective and subjective in its methods of expression and action.

Charles Bally, *Le Langage et la vie*

Let us expressly rectify what I believed correct in 1910: there is not a primitive mentality distinguishable from the other by *two* characteristics which are peculiar to it (mystical and prelogical). There is a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among 'primitive' peoples' own societies, but it is present in every human mind.

L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Notebooks*, trans. P. Rivière

How does it come about that people capable of behaving logically so often act illogically?

E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*

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Foreword by Michael Billig

There are a number of reasons why an English language translation of Uli Windisch's *Le Raisonnement et le parler quotidiens* is so timely. At the most obvious level, Windisch's work provides further information about the language of contemporary racism and nationalism. In recent years there have been a number of studies examining the subtle and not so subtle discourses of prejudice. Investigators have listened to the way that white British people talk about West Indians, the French about North Africans, the Dutch about Surinamese, and, of course, about the ways that white North Americans still talk around their continuing American Dilemma. Most of these studies seem to ignore Switzerland. It is as if scholars assume that this traditional haven of European peace, neutrality and cuckoo-clocks could not possibly be a site of social prejudice. In overlooking the geographical entity of Switzerland, researchers overlook the work of Windisch.

Over the years, Windisch has collected a vast corpus of discourse of Swiss racism, having gathered his material from a variety of written and spoken sources. The results have been published in a series of books which provide a remarkable documentation of contemporary social insecurities. It is doubly unfortunate that this material has been overlooked by researchers from other countries. Not only is Windisch's data source fascinating in its own right, but he has sought to organise his material in a theoretical way, which, despite its independent genesis, parallels a number of important developments in critical social science.

The central theoretical concept in *Le Raisonnement et le parler quotidiens* is that of 'sociocognitive' structure. This very concept contains its own critical discourses. Windisch criticises those psychological approaches which ignore the social dimensions of human knowledge and which treat thinking purely as a matter of individual psychology. Similarly he rejects sociological or semiotic approaches which ignore the thinking subject. In this respect, his notion of 'sociocognitive' structure resembles that of 'social representation'. However, Windisch's treatment is much more firmly located within the analysis of language and discourse structures than is the work of most social representation theorists. In this respect, there is the potential for a future *rapprochement* with some of the new developments in the work of those critical

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discourse theorists, who are moving towards an analysis of ideology from a background in ethnomethodology and pragmatics.

One striking factor to emerge from Windisch's analysis is the complexity of racist thinking, even when such thinking itself grossly simplifies the social world. The voices to emerge from his text do not attribute causes to social events in the antiseptic manner described by attribution theories in social psychology. Causal explanations are not innocent, but are often argumentative. As speakers give the 'causes' for the behaviour of 'foreigners', so they are blaming, excusing, describing and, above all, drawing upon myths about time and history. Windisch has devoted much effort to analysing the underlying patterns of the various discursive moves and their underlying 'logics'. With care, he has categorised the patterns of sociocognitive structures under different analytic headings and then examined the interrelations between the headings.

The discursive act is seldom a simple one, and the categorisations in some ways represent the beginning, rather than the end, of the analytic enterprise. The same form of words uttered at different times and in different contexts may have very different meanings. The rhetorical and argumentative functions of different discursive strategies need to be examined. One important issue is the ability of one and the same speaker to switch from one sociocognitive structure to its seeming opposite: at one time the speaker might adopt a 'material' (or sociological/economic) explanation of social events and at another time a more personal one, concentrating upon the actions of 'deviants'. Sometimes a speaker may draw upon the myth of linear historical progress and at other times that same speaker may articulate the notion of a decisive rupture with a mythic past. In *Le Raisonnement et le parler quotidiens*, Uli Windisch himself brings up these issues of variability and contradiction, and no doubt will address them again in his future work.

As such, Windisch has come by a different and independent route to a position which discourse and rhetorical theorists within social psychology would recognise. Like them, Windisch seeks to examine social thinking through the complex patternings and functions of discourse. Yet, he has worked at his long-term project in comparative intellectual isolation. It is to be hoped that the publication of the English edition of *Le Raisonnement et le parler quotidiens* will mark the end of this isolation, as monolingual English-reading scholars become aware of Uli Windisch's significant contributions to analysing the discourses of contemporary ideology.

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