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NANCY RIES, *Russian talk: Culture and conversation during perestroika*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997. Pp. xii, 220. Hb \$39.95, pb \$16.95.

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What makes Russians Russian? Is it a special national character, or their common emotional or intellectual spirit? Ries helps us get rid of these slippery essentialist commonplaces with her interpretative anthropological study of Muscovites' everyday private talk around 1990. Her effort is outstanding in both description and theory: Few have undertaken to describe and analyze Russian (or Eastern European) urban everyday discourse from the anthropological perspective, as she does (though recent macro-studies and studies of public discourse are more numerous). At the same time, she creates and defends a thesis of everyday talk as a vital medium of social value creation and maintenance – as it constructs “Russianness,” in her example.

Quite unprecedentedly for a Western anthropologist before the perestroika era, Ries had the opportunity to spend nine months in Moscow in 1989–90, with the original aim to study everyday discursive constructions of war, peace, and “Russianness” – as they influenced political discourse, and thus US–Soviet relations and the Cold War. She came to realize that the inescapable and recurring narratives of poverty, suffering, and the absurd Russian world (“Anti-Disneyland,” 42) were more than normal reactions to the situation. Thus we can glimpse Ries's heuristic path as she develops her theory of discourse as social reproduction, emphasizing negotiations and challenges rather than common discursive structures or general cultural meanings and values. Though her structure of chapters is somewhat vague, she discusses the central themes, genres, symbols, tropes, and keywords that support the common core of a culture world as diverse as Russia.

She develops, for example, a two-dimensional schematic diagram of 34 genres that roughly characterize Russian discourses along the axes of power and gender (p. 37). Among these, a whole chapter is devoted to the most characteristic ones: litanies (of complaint) and laments, which serve multiple roles. Apart from helping to digest the turbulent times, and by their sub-genres and themes serving as identity markers, they “effected paradoxical value transformations through which suffering engendered distinction, sacrifice created status, and loss produced gain ... [and thus] may have helped to sustain relative powerlessness and alienation from the political process at the same time as [they] lamented them” (83). The detailed analysis leads us to acknowledge the omnipresence of these genres in everyday Muscovite talk. However, although Ries targets the nature of the consequence that litanies “are a diffuse but very powerful reproductive agent of the politically destructive ideological paradigm that characterizes much of contemporary Russian politics” (114), i.e. the nature of the micro-macro link, unfortunately she does not discuss it in detail anywhere in the book.

Other genres analyzed include, for example, “tales of heroic shopping” or “mischief tales,” characterizing female vs. male discourse respectively – a field in which Ries specializes. The discursive construction of femaleness as orderly, enduring, generous, and heroic, but also dominating, is described as rooted in Russian history, where males were habitually absent because of industrialization, war, or exile. Maleness is constructed as mischievous, opposing the constructed female values and at the same time resisting the official Soviet values: “the iron-jawed, iron-willed man of socialist morality” (70). Another dimension of ideological oppositions appears to be that between praising pragmatic values and simultaneously sacralizing suffering and poverty; the latter is traced back not, as might be expected, to general Christian tradition, but to more particular Russian Orthodox ideologies (148–50, 160). Ries’s ideological examinations are illuminated with analyses of symbols, e.g. bread (136–40), or with historical and semantic analyses of keywords like *narod* ‘people’ (27–30) and *podvig* (approx. ‘heroic achievement’, 53–54).

Ries claims, and successfully defends her thesis, that private talk has been the essential mechanism of value creation in Russia; other anthropological domains have been restricted, partly because of poverty and partly from fear (21). But her thesis on the role of discourse is formulated even more strongly:

How, after all, was the entire Soviet project constructed, shaped, promoted, maintained, and challenged, if not through *talk*: discussion, argument, cajoling, and declamation? In any culture, people (whether peasants, workers, academics, bureaucrats, businesspersons, or national leaders) do not just act, they act in particular ways because discourse makes these forms of action meaningful, appropriate, and valued. (20)

However, to claim that “the entire Soviet project” was constructed through talk seems to be a gross oversimplification, as well as a denial of the terror and repression that lasted over seven decades in the Soviet Union, in which millions were executed or sent to labor camps (*gulag*), or the forty years or more of occupation in some satellite countries, including Hungary. A more fruitful approach would have been a discussion of the fact that, though only a part of the society has to face personal threat in a dictatorship, the rest of the process is carried out through words. What Ries describes as the world of talk that rationalizes inaction or suffering, or even valorizes it, may be a consequence of that historical context.

As far as methodological problems are concerned, Ries acknowledges that the “observer’s paradox” – the problem that her Russian interlocutors were always facing a foreigner curious about their lives and problems – partly caused the overflow of lamenting and complaint (84). She triangulates by using a wide array of other sources, including overheard conversations, contemporary plays and films, TV shows, periodicals, folk songs, and historical sources ranging from Russian literature (Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn) to a petition to the tsar dating from 1905. The latter sources are the most useful in Ries’s discussion of the

(pre-Soviet) Russian and Soviet influences on present-day ideologies and discourse. (The eight photographs, by John Einarsen and Robert Kowalczyk, do more than just support the message.)

The basic problem of Ries's argumentation is that it is weakly rooted in the numerous examples. Transcripts are only illustrative, withholding any chance of falsification. Since all the transcripts are presented in the monolog format, the reader tends to have the impression that Muscovites, contrary to the very title of the book, do not TALK or CONVERSE, but can only monologize to the attentive Ries. Unanimous identities and ideologies escape any possible conflict either with one another, or with Ries's rare (and failing) attempts to move the discourse toward problem-solving – a genre more frequent in Western discourse. Thus we are implicitly led to the assumption that the definitional NEGOTIATIVE aspect of discourse as creating values (19) is to be understood not procedurally, but mentally. The single dialog among Muscovites (192–93) is presented in the Epilogue, an assortment of illustrative excerpts which were collected in Ries's later visits (1994–95) and therefore lack an analysis.

The book is completed with an index and a rich bibliography, though the latter is sloppy on a few points; e.g., I could not find Basso & Selby 1976 (p. 1) or Willis 1977 (p. 38) in the reference list, or the listed Bourdieu 1991 in the text. Since Ries often alludes to political events of the era discussed (approx. 1985–1995), an appendix outlining those events would have helped the forgetful reader.

To sum up, I can definitely recommend Ries's book to those interested in linguistic anthropology. Chaps. 2–3 are worth adding to the reading list of general anthropology courses and women's studies anthropology courses, respectively.

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ALI A. MAZRUI & ALAMIN M. MAZRUI, *The power of Babel: Language and governance in the African experience*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Oxford: James Currey; Kampala: Fountain Publishers; Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers; Cape Town: David Philip, 1998. Pp. xii, 228. Hb \$40.00, pb \$15.25.

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To understand this book, a little background information helps. I first encountered Ali Mazrui in 1968–70 when I was the first lecturer in linguistics at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda; Mazrui, a member of the political science faculty, was already a famous orator, acknowledged by all as possessing “a golden tongue.” Since then, he has gone on to become probably the most famous African