

“state capture” encompasses *all* serious threats to democracy and that democracy encompasses all political values that matter, to salute with gratitude the teaching of those lessons.

The Politics of Language. By David Beaver and Jason Stanley. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023. 520p. doi:10.1017/S1537592725001094

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In our hyper-mediatized societies, language has so obviously exceeded its propositional dimensions that “information,” “facts,” even “lies,” seem concepts too quaint to do the work required to describe its political power. *The Politics of Language* begins with this simple empirical observation. This phenomenon is surprising, David Beaver and Jason Stanley argue, only because we have been assuming the wrong notion of meaning, the “content-delivery model.” According to this view, language is a simple conduit for ideas and the success of discourse lies in the uptake of these ideas. Stanley and Beaver’s proposal is to replace the content-delivery model with an account of meaning as practice. The meaning of a certain phrase, sentence or discourse, lies, they argue, in its “resonance,” which should be cashed out as a power that solicits “attunement” in the listener. Attunement, in turn, is plugged into everyday behavior and ideology in ways that are politically salient: “the function of speech is to attune audiences to each other and to facts of the world, and this attunement occurs via the resonances of what is said” (p. 13, see also, pp. 60, 166). This basic setup is established in the opening chapters. The rest of the book is dedicated to drawing out the consequences of this new model of meaning along two lines.

First, chapters 3–6 are concerned with mapping out how resonance networks constitute relatively homogenous milieus within which there is no categorical gap between meaning, action, behavior, ideology-building, habitus, and so forth. Understanding language adequately, the authors show, means understanding that we live in a world which is always-already linguistic as well as always-already political (see especially 388 ff.). It is also, therefore, understanding that politics and language are bound up at the deepest level. Because we move to a contextual account of meaning, we can also, as a bonus, avail ourselves of incremental accounts of the influence of discourses because, in this picture, discourse is always *more* or *less* mediated: it is not a matter of reducing the influence of discourse to the eliciting of any kind of all-or-nothing belief. Correlatedly, their model offers ways to quantify and “probabilistically” (p. 64) predict degrees of resonance and attunement (p. 44).

The second line of discussion (chapters 7–9) adds an interesting twist: Not only is the content-delivery model of language false, but the authors lament, it also enables what they call *hustle*, a kind of bad-faith political discourse that hides behind the content-delivery model to claims deniability for its unpalatable resonances. The idealized view of communication that underpins that model, it turns out, contains several other kinds of idealizations that are routinely used in hustle, such as false transparency, the appeal to “straight talk”, and false neutrality. The authors’ “main thesis” by contrast, “is that words can never be neutral” (p. 293). One important implication is that this kind of false cover is pervasive in free-speech protections (especially in their North American form). Stanley and Beaver conclude that their own pragmatic resonance-attunement view should ground a more nuanced approach to free-speech legislation: speech should be regulated like actions are.

The picture that results from the book is certainly appealing in its refusal to separate discourse from the world, in reminding us that world-making is the shared heart of both politics and language, and in making some systematic sense of the ways in which a bad philosophy of language can underpin bad politics. Yet, in its quest for an audience, the book risks running into a degree of incomprehension.

First, the book is probably best read as presenting a *picture* of the interaction between language and political behavior, not an argument. This is because it opens with its main conclusion: that language is inseparable from political practice. From then on, the only place left for demonstration must lie in the authors’ response to the causation or motivation questions: how should we think about language if we are to account for the interaction between discourse and action? Yet the resonance-attunement pair and the several modalities of their interactions traced through the book (“harmony,” “accommodation,” “presupposition,” etc.) do not explain this interaction as much as they presuppose it. The authors alternate between rejecting the idea that any demonstration is necessary at all (pp. 3, 220), proposing an account where causation is done the usual way—i.e., by appeal to emotion and irrationality (pp. 2, 119)—and admitting that we are before a mystery and all one can do is not explain *how* meaning carries action, but *that* it does (in the case of the direct effect of slurs for example, pp. 293, 387).

Secondly, it is arguably more rewarding for the reader to think of this book as joining a certain tradition in the philosophy of language and social epistemology, rather than as introducing a new theory. After all, the rejection of the content-view and the practice-based view of meaning and ideology-formation are squarely inherited from Wittgenstein (in ways partly acknowledged on pp. 48ff.) as well as ecological theories from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Donald Gibson and later. So is the authors’ contextualism and the suggestion that “practices” (Wittgenstein says “forms of life”) are the relevant category to think of the

relation between language and behavior. Similarly, emphasis on speech as direct action resembles the speech-act theory from J. L. Austin to John Searle, as well as the Habermasian idea of “strategic” (vs “deliberative”) uses of speech. Likewise, the resonance-attunement pair harks back to the more recent yet lively literature on implicit bias as association (pp. 26, 151, 168, 216, 394 *passim*). Finally, their emphasis on context echoes the hermeneutic tradition, all the way to Jacques Derrida even (p. 344). In short, the idea that meaning is irreducible to content and that discourses are plugged into larger forms of life, including whole cultures, ideologies, and political paradigms, is well-acknowledged in the literature. This raises questions about where the content-delivery model the book targets, in fact, dwells (certainly not in the philosophy of language, as the authors acknowledge on p. 28). In my view, this leaves two directions in which the reader might be looking for the novelty in the book’s argument.

The first has to do with how one should take Beaver and Stanley’s claim that the content-delivery model is false. The book oscillates between different ways of cashing it out. The first consists in a critique of neutrality: the discursive conduit for meaning is not neutral. This cannot be the core of their argument, since it is well-established in the traditions I listed. A stronger view would suggest that meaning is not just more than content, it is no content at all—but rather it is all practice. One advantage of this radical option is that it provides a principled reason why the question of explanation is irrelevant to Beaver and

Stanley’s picture: in this scenario, discourses and political behaviors are so bound up within general “practices” that there is not enough difference between them for the question of the nature of their relations to arise (see p. 64). However, this cannot be satisfying. It runs the risk of collapsing into a sort of behaviorism, where meaning is simply inferred from some behaviors (e.g. p. 80). It is a controversial view for other reasons too. After all, Beaver and Stanley themselves account for bigotry by suggesting that “practices carry presuppositions” (p. 224), and it is fairly intuitive to suggest that there must be at least some *grasping* going if it is *this* and not *that* discourse that is to have a political effect. Resonance, if it is to have any effect, must come from somewhere that is not resonance (p. 290), lest we fall into an infinite regress. In other words, some sense of content, it seems, must be retained after all.

Here’s a third way to approach the argument, therefore. There are several places where the authors seem—in passing—to reject not so much the content-delivery model as the reduction of all content to *doxastic* content: what beliefs are about (pp. 191, 258). Perhaps, therefore, one should read the book as a critique of the explanatory role generally assigned to belief, usually via the vaunted belief-desire model (whereby actions follow belief). This is welcome: rejecting the belief-desire model is required by the phenomenon of post-truth politics (a chief kind of hustle targeted—implicitly—in the book) and would open up to further theoretical possibilities.

AMERICAN POLITICS

Watchdogs: Inspectors General and the Battle for Honest and Accountable Government. By Glenn Fine.

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In *Watchdogs*, Glenn Fine presents his experiences and insights as the Inspector General of the U.S. Justice Department from 2000 to 2011 and as the acting U.S. Defense Department IG from 2016 to 2020. Both assignments took place when events stress-tested the federal IG system. As Justice IG, Fine investigated misconduct by the Attorney General, resistance to oversight by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and politicized firings of U.S. Attorneys. As acting Defense IG, Fine was designated to coordinate oversight of the Pandemic Response Accountability Committee, which consisted of IGs from many agencies with responsibilities related to the COVID pandemic and which

was tasked with preventing and detecting fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement. In 2020, President Donald Trump prematurely replaced him.

What do we learn from Fine’s experiences? Most of the book consists of cases studies from Fine’s point of view, supported by summaries of IG investigations. But first, Chapter Two sets the stage, providing an overview of the need for government oversight and the emergence of the Inspectors General concept as one tool through which the federal government could promote integrity and accountability in its leadership and operations.

Since Fine’s book starts in 2000, it can be seen as a follow-on to Paul C. Light’s *Monitoring Government: Inspectors General and the Search for Accountability* (Brookings Institution Press, 1993) and Frank Ancherico and James Jacob’s *Pursuit of Absolute Integrity* (University of Chicago Press, 1998). These books present the evolution of the federal IG system as an aspirational project that is often needed but not always successful. The fact that the authors are scholarly observers, not central characters, results in a balanced and dispassionate analysis.