THE ART OF
Conversation

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Contents

Preface

Although learning languages has long been a hobby of mine, it was only in the late 1970s that I began to read the sociolinguists and to think seriously about the problems of incorporating language into social and cultural history. I soon discovered that other British historians were thinking on similar lines – Raphael Samuel, for instance, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Jonathan Steinberg. Discussions with them and conferences in Dublin, Cambridge and Brighton helped me to formulate these problems more precisely, and to reflect on possible methods of approaching them. Working with Ruth Finnegan on the series of Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture increased my awareness of the variety of oral styles. Most important of all has been the dialogue with Roy Porter in the course of our editing two volumes of essays on the social history of language (not to mention planning a third).

Written originally as conference or seminar papers, these essays are deliberately exploratory rather than definitive, an attempt to reconnoitre terrain which the next generation may well cultivate more intensively. I have taken advantage of the opportunity afforded by this collected edition to revise or develop the argument in some places, to add more examples, and to take account of recent work in both history and linguistics, as well as eliminating repetitions and making the system of references uniform.

I am grateful to Cambridge University Press for permission to reprint chapter 1, and to the Center for Kulturforskning, Aarhus University, for permission to reprint chapter 3. The essay on silence will be delivered as my 'farewell lecture' at the University of Nijmegen in 1993 and published by the university press there, while the essay on conversation appears in print for the first time.

The international Republic of Letters, more effective than ever in the age of jets and word processors, has been extremely supportive of this project. I have learned a good deal from the discussions following talks on these themes in different parts of the world (including the polyglot environments of Helsinki and Vienna). I am especially grateful to Rudolf Dekker for the information – on Dutch, on Latin, on silence – which he has sent me over the years. Chapter 2 in particular has benefited from the advice and the references offered by an international group of scholars, including Rino Avesani, Derek Beales, Dietrich Briesemeister, Zweder von Martels, Robert Muchembled, Eva Österberg, Roy Porter, Nigel Spivey, and Joe Trapp. I am most grateful to them all. My wife, Maria Lúcia Pallares-Burke, read the draft chapters with a critical eye and drew my attention to some eighteenth-century texts. She has also initiated me into life in a bilingual environment. The book is dedicated to her.

1

The Social History of Language

In the last few years a relatively new area of historical research has developed, which might be described as a social history of language, a social history of speaking, or a social history of communication. Consciousness of the importance of language in everyday life has become widespread in the last generation or so. As the rise of feminist and regionalist movements shows, dominated groups have become more sharply aware of the power of language as well as the involvement of language with other forms of power. Again, the philosophers, critics and others associated with the movements commonly labelled structuralism and deconstruction, despite their many disagreements, share a strong concern with language and its place in culture.

Whether they are involved with one or more of these movements, or with oral history, another recent development, a number of historians have also come to recognize the need for the study of language for two reasons in particular. In the first place, as an end in itself, as a social institution, as a part of culture and everyday life. In the second place, as a means to the better understanding of oral and written sources via awareness of their linguistic conventions.[1] All the same, there still remains a

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[1] Recent collections of essays along these lines include Burke and Porter (1987, 1991) and Corfield (1991). Earlier examples of work by historians include Armstrong (1965); Béranger (1969); Brosnahan (1963); Macmullen (1962); Richter (1975, 1979); Bertelli (1976); as well as the pioneers cited in note 23.

gap between the disciplines of history, linguistics, and sociology (including social anthropology). The gap can and should be filled by a social history of language.

It is no new idea that language has a history. Ancient Romans, such as Varro, and Renaissance humanists, such as Leonardo Bruni and Flavio Biondo, were interested in the history of Latin.[2] Discussions of the origin of French, Italian, Spanish, and other languages were published in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, forming part of the debates about the relative merits of Latin and the vernaculars and the correct ways of speaking and writing the latter.[3]

In the nineteenth century, the dominant school of linguists, the so-called 'neogrammarians', was much concerned with the reconstruction of early forms of particular languages, such as 'protoromance' and 'protogermanic', and with the formulation of laws of linguist evolution.[4] This was the approach against which the linguistic Ferdinand de Saussure, now seen as the father of structuralism, reacted, on the grounds that the historical school of linguists was too little concerned with the relation between the different parts of the language system.[5] In Saussure's day, however, the historical approach remained dominant. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, planned, as its title-page declared, on 'historical principles', began publication in 1884, while its French equivalent, edited by Emile Littré, began in 1863.[6] Histories of English, French and German which have since achieved the status of classics date originally from the years around 1900.[7]

All the same, this approach to the history of language lacked a full social dimension. Children of their time, these nineteenth-century scholars thought of language as an organism which 'grows' or 'evolves' through definite stages and expresses the values or 'spirit' of the nation which speaks it. Their concerns were national – or even nationalist – rather than social. They studied the internal history of languages, the history of their structure, but neglected what has been called their 'external his-

[2] Klein (1957).
[3] Bembo (1525); Pasquier (1566); Cittadini (1604); Aldrete (1606).
[4] Aarsleff (1967); Bynon (1977), ch.1; Crowley (1989), 13–50.
[5] Culler (1976), esp. ch. 3; Corfield (1991).
[6] Crowley (1989).
[7] Behaghel (1898); Jespersen (1905); Brunot (1905–).

tory', in other words the history of their use.[8] They showed little interest in the different varieties of the 'same' language spoken by different social groups. On the other hand, this concern is central to contemporary sociolinguistics, which crystallized into a discipline in the late 1950s in the United States and elsewhere.

Of course, awareness of the social significance of varieties of speech is far from new. It has been argued with some plausibility that in Italy the sixteenth century was 'the time in which language first came to be regarded as a primarily social phenomenon'.[9] One Italian writer published a book in 1547 'On Speech and Silence', organizing the study according to the modern-sounding categories 'who', 'to whom', 'why', 'how', and 'when',[10] thus reminding us of the debt which sociolinguistics owes to the tradition of classical rhetoric.

Other writers also made acute sociolinguistic observations at this time. Vincenzo Borghini, for example, noted and tried to explain the archaism of the speech of Tuscan peasants, arguing that 'they converse less with foreigners than townspeople do, and for this reason change less.' In his famous dialogue on 'civil conversation', Stefano Guazzo described the harsh accent of the Piedmontese, the Genoese propensity to swallow their words, the Florentines with their mouths 'full of aspirations', and so on.[11]

A similar sociolinguistic awareness can be found in the plays of Shakespeare. In a famous scene in *Henry IV*, for example, Hotspur criticizes his Kate for saying 'in good sooth' because this turn of phrase was not aristocratic. 'You swear like a comfit-maker's wife,' he tells her. What Hotspur wanted to hear was 'a good mouth-filling oath'. In the seventeenth century, Molière, as we shall see below, had his ear particularly well tuned to the social nuances expressed by different varieties of language. One might say the same of Goldoni in the following century.

Nineteenth-century novels, from Jane Austen and George Eliot to Leo Tolstoy and Theodor Fontane, are a still richer source of observations on the social meaning of differences in speech. Think, for example, of Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, objecting

[8]   Hall (1974).
[9]   Hall (1942), 54.
[10] Politiano (1547).
[11] Borghini (1971), 139; Guazzo (1574), 79.

to her mother's phrase 'the pick of them' as 'rather a vulgar expression', while her carefree brother Fred counters with the assertion – which has its parallel among linguists today – that so-called 'correct' English is nothing but 'the slang of prigs'. When the old lawyer Standish, in the same novel, swears 'By God!', the author intervens to explain that he was using that oath as 'a sort of armorial bearings, stamping the speech of a man who held a good position'. He used it, as we might say, as a status symbol.[12]

The perceptiveness and articulateness of these writers was out of the ordinary. All the same, there would be little need for a social history of language if ordinary speakers were not more or less aware of the social meaning of styles of speech, while social climbers have always been hyperconscious of such matters.

Again, it is no new idea that language is a potential instrument in the hands of the ruling class, an instrument which they may employ as much to mystify or to control as to communicate. The use of Latin in early modern Europe is an obvious example, and it will be discussed in detail below (p. 37). The use of another foreign language, 'law French', in English courts was criticized on similar grounds by men as diverse as Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, King James I, and the seventeenth-century radicals John Lilburne and John Warr.[13] Again, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the British sociologist Herbert Spencer was already recommending historical research on what he called 'the control exercised by class over class, as displayed in social observances – in titles, salutations and forms of address'.[14]

All the same, as the philosopher Alfred Whitehead once remarked, 'Everything of importance has been said before by someone who did not discover it.' In other words, there is an enormous difference between the vague awareness of a problem and systematic research into it. In the case of the relation between language, thought and society, pioneering explorations were made from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, notably by the sociologist Thorstein Veblen, the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, and the linguists Fritz Mauthner, Benjamin Whorf and Antoine Meillet.

Veblen, for example, paid serious attention to linguistic

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[12] On English novelists, Phillipps (1984), *passim.*
[13] Hill (1972), 269–76.
[14] Spencer (1861), 26.

phenomena when formulating his famous 'theory of the leisure class'.[15] Bakhtin criticized the structural linguist Saussure for his lack of interest in change over time and developed the theory of 'heteroglossia' (*raznorechie*) according to which a language, Russian for instance, is the result of the interplay or struggle between different dialects, jargons and so on, different forms of language which are associated with different social groups and their diverse points of view, so that each user of language has to appropriate it from the mouths of others and adapt it to his or her own needs.[16]

Fritz Mauthner by contrast was a linguistic determinist. Developing Nietzsche's idea of language as a 'prison' (*Gefängnis*), Mauthner once declared that 'if Aristotle had spoken Chinese or Dakotan, he would have produced a totally different system of logical categories' ('Hätte Aristoteles Chinesisch oder Dakotaisch gesprochen, er hätte zu einer qanz andern Logik gelangen müssen').[17] Whorf's controversial but influential essays made essentially the same point, arguing that the fundamental ideas of a people, such as the Hopi Indians – their conceptions of time, space, and so on – are shaped by the structure of their language, its genders, tenses, and other grammatical and syntactical forms.[18]

In France, Antoine Meillet, a former pupil of Saussure's but committed to a historical approach, described language in Durkheimian terms as 'eminently a social fact ('éminémment un fait social'). He was a semi-determinist who argued that 'Languages serve to express the mentality of the speaking subjects, but each one constitutes a highly organized system which imposes itself on them, which gives their thought its form and only submits to the action of this mentality in a slow and partial manner.'[19]

The French historian Lucien Febvre, a former pupil of Meillet, illustrated his theory of the relation between language and mentality in a study of François Rabelais and the problem of unbelief. In this study, Febvre argued that atheism was impossible in the sixteenth century, among other reasons because of the lack of abstract concepts in French which might sustain such a world-

[15] Veblen (1899); Hall (1960).
[16] Bakhtin (1929, 1940). On him, Clark and Holquist (1984), ch. 10.
[17] Mauthner (1902–3), vol. 3, 4. On him, Kühn (1975), esp. 73ff. On Nietzsche, Strong (1984), ch. 6.
[18] Whorf (1956).
[19] Meillet (1921), 16, 210.

view.[20] Earlier in his career, between 1906 and 1924, Febvre had written a number of review articles on the history of language in the *Revue de Synthèse Historique*, praising the work of Meillet and telling historians that they needed to follow what the linguists were doing, for example the study of the introduction of French into the south of France in the centuries before the French Revolution.[21]

The subject was also of great interest to Febvre's friend and colleague Marc Bloch. Indeed, it has been suggested that Bloch learned the comparative method of which he set such store from the linguists, from Meillet in particular.[22] Historians in other countries and other fields – the church historians Gustav Mensching, Jozef Schrijnen and Christine Mohrmann, for example, the Spanish cultural historian Amerigo Castro, and the Swedish historian Nils Ahnlund – were also studying aspects of language and society at about this time.[23]

As for the stage of systematic research, it was reached a generation ago, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with the development of what has been variously called 'sociolinguistics', 'ethnolinguistics', 'the sociology of language', the 'ethnography of speaking' or 'the ethnography of communication'. In the English-speaking world, the most influential figures include Joshua Fishman, John Gumperz, M. A. K. Halliday, Dell Hymes, and William Labov. The different names for the new discipline or subdiscipline represent substantial differences of approach, macrosociological or microsociological, concerned with 'language' in the wide or the narrow sense. All the same, they should not be allowed to obscure what the different schools have in common, or the relevance of this common body of ideas for social historians.[24]

Since some British, American and German historians have recently taken what has been called a 'linguistic turn' and are now very much concerned with certain aspects of language and communication, it may be worth attempting to define the differ-

[20] Febvre (1942), 385ff.
[21] Brun (1923).
[22] Bloch (1939–40), ch. 5, part 2; Walker (1980).
[23] Mensching (1926); Schrijnen (1932); Mohrmann (1932); Castro (1941); Ahnlund (1943); Woodbine (1943).
[24] Fishman (1972); Gumperz (1972); Gumperz and Hymes (1972); Hymes (1974); Labov (1972a), esp. 183–359. Trudgill (1974) is a lucid introduction to the field.

ence between their approaches and the social history of language recommended (and, I hope, practised) in this volume.

On one side, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas are concerned with general theories of hermeneutics and of communicative behaviour. They do not ignore history, but their interest is in the major trends in the history of the modern West, rather than in everyday communication at a local level.[25]

On the other side, in the six massive volumes of their *Grundgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Reinhart Koselleck and his colleagues concern themselves with language as a source for the 'history of concepts' (*Begriffsgeschichte*) rather than with speaking or writing as human activities worthy of historical attention for their own sake.[26] In a similar way to Koselleck, some English-speaking historians of political thought (notably J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner) have focussed on changes in what they sometimes call the 'language of politics', while social historians have examined the 'language of class' and 'the language of labour'.[27]

My aim here is not to criticize either of these important enterprises, but simply to suggest that there is or ought to be what might be called 'conceptual space' between them for a third approach, more sociological than Koselleck's, Pocock's or Skinner's and more concrete than that of Habermas. This third approach might be summed up as the attempt to add a social dimension to the history of language and a historical dimension to the work of sociolinguists and ethnographers of speaking.

The concern with speech as well as with written communication in the past deserves emphasis. Like the history of popular culture, the historical ethnography of speaking involves a shift of historical interest from the communicative acts of a minority to those of the whole people. As in the case of popular culture, it is difficult to find sources which are both rich and reliable, but sources for the history of speech do exist, as we shall see.

What do these ethnographers and sociologists have to offer historians? They demonstrate an acute awareness of 'who speaks what language to whom and when'.[28] They show that the forms

25   Gadamer (1965); Habermas (1970). On their debate, Jay (1982).
26   Brunner et al. (1972–90); Koselleck (1979). Cf. Grünert (1974).
27   Pocock (1972) esp. ch. 1; Pagden (1987); Briggs (1960); Sewell (1980).
28   Fishman (1965).

of communication are not neutral bearers of information but carry their own messages. They have put forward a number of theories which historians can test. They have also created a rich analytical vocabulary. Just as the Bedouin have many words for 'camel', and Eskimos for 'snow', because they draw finer distinctions in these areas than most of us need to do, so the sociolinguists have many words for 'language'.

In this vocabulary, a central place is taken by the term 'variety' or 'code'. (The term 'code', used by the structuralists in opposition to 'message', seems to be going out of use because of its ambiguities).[29] A variety may be defined as a way of speaking employed by a particular 'speech community'.[30]

The notion of 'speech community' has been criticized – like other notions of community – for assuming social consensus and ignoring conflict and subordination.[31] To ignore social and linguistic conflict would indeed be mistaken, but the rejection of the idea of community surely goes too far. After all, solidarity and conflict are opposite sides of the same coin. Groups define themselves and forge solidarities in the course of conflict with others (a point which will be argued in more detail on pp. 67–76 below). Hence the validity of this criticism of the idea of 'speech community' depends on the way in which the concept is used. In these pages it will be employed either to describe common features of speech or to refer to individual or group identification with particular speech forms, without making assumptions about the absence of linguistic or other conflict or about the overlap between a community defined in linguistic terms and the social or religious communities to be found in the same region.

Simplifying brutally, as brief introductions inevitably do, it may be suggested that sociolinguists have used this idea of a variety of language to make four main points about the relations between languages and the societies in which they are spoken or written. These points may well seem rather obvious when they are stated in a bare and simple form, but they have not, so far at least, been fully integrated into the practice of social historians. They are as follows:

[29] Halliday (1978), 11
[30] Gumperz (1972). Cf. Vossler (1924).
[31] Calvet (1987); Pratt (1987); Williams (1992).

1 Different social groups use different varieties of language.
2 The same individuals employ different varieties of language in different situations.
3 Language reflects the society or culture in which it is used.
4 Language shapes the society in which it is used.

The following pages will comment on these points one by one and offer a few historical illustrations.

(1) Different social groups use different varieties of language.[32] Regional dialects are perhaps the most obvious example of varieties, which not only reveal differences between communities but also – at least on occasion – express consciousness of these differences, or pride in them. What linguists call 'language loyalty' may also be described as a consciousness of community, at least of what Benedict Anderson has called an 'imagined community'.[33] However, a common speech may coexist with deep social conflicts. A distinctive accent – if nothing else – unites Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and blacks and whites in South Africa or in the American South.

Some other varieties of language, based on occupation, gender, religion, or other sectors, from football to finance, are known as 'social dialects', 'sociolects', or 'special' or 'sectional' languages (*Sondersprache, langues spéciaux, linguaggi settoriali*).[34] The secret language of professional beggars and thieves (variously known as *Rotwelsch, argot, gergo*, 'cant' and so on) attracted the interest of writers relatively early, and guides to it appeared in print from the sixteenth century onwards.[35] The language of soldiers (say) or lawyers has attracted less attention so far, but deserves extended analysis from this point of view.[36]

Again, the language of women was and is different from that of men in a number of ways. In many societies these differences include a predilection for euphemisms and for emotionally charged adjectives, a rhetoric of hesitancy and indirection, and a closer adherence to standard or 'correct' forms. Women do not simply

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[32] On varieties, Saville-Troike (1982), 75ff.
[33] Labov (1972a); Anderson (1983).
[34] Devoto (1972); Beccaria (1973).
[35] Avé-Lallemant (1858–62); Sainéan (1907); Camporesi (1973).
[36] Fiorelli (1984).