

牛津社会语言学丛书

Language Myths and the History of English

语言神话与英语历史

Richard J. Watts 著

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

语言神话与英语历史/(瑞士)理查德·J·沃茨著.

—上海:上海外语教育出版社,2017

(牛津社会语言学丛书)

ISBN 978-7-5446-5014-4

I.①语… II.①理… III.①英语—语言史—研究—英文 IV.①H310.9

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2017)第 232745 号

图字:09-2016-736

© Oxford University Press 2011

"Language Myths and the History of English" was originally published in 2011. This reprint is published by arrangement with Oxford University Press for sale/distribution in the Mainland (part) of the People's Republic of China (excluding the territories of Hong Kong SAR, Macau SAR and Taiwan province) only and not for export therefrom.

本书由牛津大学出版社授权上海外语教育出版社有限公司出版。

仅供在中华人民共和国境内(香港、澳门、台湾除外)销售。

出版发行: 上海外语教育出版社

(上海外国语大学内) 邮编: 200083

电 话: 021-65425300 (总机)

电子邮箱: bookinfo@sflep.com.cn

网 址: <http://www.sflep.com.cn> <http://www.sflep.com>

责任编辑: 奚玲燕

印 刷: 上海信老印刷厂

开 本: 787×1000 1/16 印张 22.25 字数 578千字

版 次: 2018 年 1 月第 1 版 2018 年 1 月第 1 次印刷

印 数: 2 100 册

书 号: ISBN 978-7-5446-5014-4 / H

定 价: 75.00 元

本版图书如有印装质量问题,可向本社调换

出版说明

社会语言学是研究语言与社会多方面关系的学科,它从社会科学的不同角度,诸如社会学、人类学、民族学、心理学、地理学和历史学等去考察语言。自 20 世纪 60 年代发端以来,社会语言学已经逐渐发展成为语言学研究中的一门重要学科,引发众多学者的关注和探究。

“牛津社会语言学丛书”由国际社会语言学研究的两位领军人物——英国卡迪夫大学语言与交际研究中心的教授 Nicolas Coupland 和 Adam Jaworski(现在中国香港大学英语学院任教)——担任主编。丛书自 2004 年由牛津大学出版社陆续出版以来,推出了一系列社会语言学研究的专著,可以说是汇集了这一学科研究的最新成果,代表了当今国际社会语言学研究的最高水平。

我们从中精选出九种,引进出版。所选的这些专著内容广泛,又较贴近我国学者研究的需求,涵盖了当今社会语言学的许多重要课题,如语言变体与语言变化、语言权力与文化认同、语言多元化与语言边缘化、语言与族裔、语言与立场(界位)、语言与新媒体、语用学与礼貌、语言与法律以及社会语言学视角下的话语研究等等。其中既有理论研究,又有方法创新;既有框架分析建构,又有实地考察报告;既体现本学科的前沿和纵深,又展现跨学科的交叉和互补。

相信丛书的引进出版能为从事社会语言学研究的读者带来新的启示,进一步推动我国语言学研究的发展。

Language Myths and the History of English

Richard J. Watts

To all my former students with thanks and fond memories

Preface

Books take a long time to fix themselves in the mind of the author and to emerge as a (more or less) coherent text, and the present book is certainly no exception to this general pattern. The gestation period in this case, however, can be traced back very far into my own past, as far back as the time when I began to sense an interest in language, languages and the central place that language occupied in the social and cultural fabric of the communities into which I was socialised, in which I lived and grew up, and out of which I finally had to break. I remember being told, in my preadolescent days, not to say this or that, or to avoid this or that pronunciation because it sounded so “horrible”, or to speak “grammatically”—the typical kinds of comment aimed at children of lower-middle-class origin in late 1940s and 1950s Britain, which unwittingly prompted many of them to do the very opposite! So I learned at an early stage in my life that people have some decidedly odd ideas about language in which they believe fervently, and I later learned, as a young university graduate, that it’s not such a good idea to try to convince them of the “error” of their linguistic ways.

When, in the 1970s, I began to develop an interest in the history of the English language and then to teach the subject to Swiss undergraduates, I also realised, with the benefit of my training in second-language acquisition, pragmatics and sociolinguistics, that there were also some decidedly odd ideas about language circulating in the heads of first- and second-year students that I had to battle against. Even more dispiriting was the discovery that the canonical ways in which “the history of English” was taught, including the textbooks that were in use at university level, seemed to preserve many of the misconceptions about English which I recognised from the admonishments of my own family in my youth. As a consequence, I decided to ask awkward questions in my teaching and writing and to encourage generation after generation of students

in English linguistics not only to question their own ingrained beliefs about language and the history of language, but also to submit the canonical “histories” of English to similar kinds of critical litmus test to those that I had used.

My first major attempt at asking awkward questions in print was made together with Tony Bex in the book that we edited in 1999 on the acrimonious debates over the teaching of Standard English in the new National Curriculum in England and Wales (*Standard English: The Widening Debate*). I was deeply gratified to realise that I was by no means alone in asking such questions and that a number of linguists had “been there and done that” before Tony and me. Among them were Tony Crowley, Deborah Cameron, Peter Trudgill, Jenny Cheshire, Ron Carter, Rosina Lippi-Green, Linda Mugglestone, Dennis Preston, David Crystal, Laura Wright and—above all, and with my warmest thanks and appreciation—Jim and Lesley Milroy.

My second attempt was to use different ways of conceptualising time (and thereby history) and an apolitical notion of “ideology” that I had developed in a book on language ideologies edited by Jan Blommaert in 1999 to put a little more historical meat onto the bones of the notion of *language myth*, a term used in a splendidly usable book edited by Laurie Bauer and Peter Trudgill in 1998 (*Language Myths*, London: Penguin), which I had already used with students in introductory linguistics classes. As a result, I began to unearth some of the myths underlying the canonical versions of the “history of English” (see Watts 2000).

From this point on, I became a natural convert to the idea that there was in fact no one single story of how English developed, since this would mean that the canonical history of English presented a teleology of the emergence of standard English which validated the set of myths that I was busy unearthing. A myth, however, remains a myth—a culturally important narrative means of explaining some present aspect of a cultural group. This does not mean that the myth is an untruth; myths always reveal a grain, maybe more than a grain, of “truth”. But it does mean that a belief in those myths tends to bar the way to considering the sociohistorical facts that would lead to alternative histories. It was this which Peter Trudgill and I intended to show in our 2002 edited collection, *Alternative Histories of English*, and in a very real sense the present book develops that line of reasoning further. The idea of alternative histories has been picked up in David Crystal’s book *The Stories of English* (London: Penguin, 2004), but *Language Myths and the History of English* attacks the issue from the point of view of the underlying myths that, it should be added, are still with us today.

In the making of the book, a number of people—colleagues, students, publisher and family—have kept up my hopes of fighting through to the end by being prepared to listen to my thoughts on language myths in the context of the history of English, by displaying immense forbearance toward my frequent impatience with myself and with the university department from which I have now been retired for two years, and by quietly and unreservedly encouraging me to continue.

My first heartfelt thanks go to my wife, Anne-Marie, who wonders, despairingly sometimes, why I still find the time to write but who, I know, understands and forgives me because she has come to realise that I cannot do otherwise. Having endured me through almost 40 years of marriage, my heart goes out to her in love and thanks for enduring it all one more time. Our son Chris and his family have been well out of the firing line for a number of years, but I would nevertheless like to express my gratitude to them for the support they have shown.

Books are not written without discussing and sometimes arguing rather forcefully about ideas with colleagues, and I should like to acknowledge the help and support of the following old friends and colleagues: Peter Trudgill, who agreed to edit the book on alternative histories with me that was published in 2002 and has given me such warm and friendly support through the years; Jim Milroy, with fond memories of discussions over convivial pints of beer in earlier years; Daniel Schreier, whose infective sense of humour and unfailing friendship always boost me to continue asking my awkward questions; Miriam Locher, whose solid common sense and enthusiasm kept my feet firmly planted on terra firma; Jürg Strässler and Franz Andres Morrissey, two old friends and erstwhile students from Zürich, who, I have no doubt, have always sensed a waywardness in me that needs humouring; and a host of others whom I will mention in fond acknowledgment of their support—Margaret Bridges, Anita Auer, Wim Vandenbussche, Stephan Elspass, Joachim Scharloth, Nils Langer, Peter Maitz and many others. I owe a special vote of thanks to Brian Hurley at Oxford University Press for being so amazingly patient and, above all, so helpful and supportive. And my list would not be complete without my thanks to Nik Coupland and Adam Jaworski for being interested in an idea that was based on those awkward questions in the first place. I simply need to add that none of those mentioned bears any responsibility for the errors in judgment, fact, or interpretation that might be found in the book.

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Language Myths and the History of English

Metaphors, myths, ideologies and archives

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on
—Shakespeare,
The Tempest, act 4, scene 1

1. DEFINING MYTHS

This book is about myths that have been told throughout the history of what is commonly referred to as “the English language”, most of which are as alive and kicking today as they were centuries ago, and also about myths that are currently in the process of construction. I shall start at the obvious place—by defining what I understand by the term “myth”. I argue that underlying all myths are commonly shared “conceptual metaphors” (see section 2 for a definition), and that the myths help to drive forms of ideological discourse about English and to construct “discourse archives” (see section 5 for a definition) of various kinds. This first chapter thus focuses on defining how I understand all of these terms and outlining the content of the following chapters.

To start with, consider the central term of this book, “myth”. It is derived from the Greek word *μύθος*, which literally means “story”, and the following chapters will trace out and describe that deepest urge of human beings: the urge to narrate objects, events, beliefs and explanations into being. In our modern world, myths lead an odd kind of dual existence. We talk about myths as though they are equivalent to untruths, but we should bear in mind that this is not the same as saying that they are lies. If we are told that a story we

have listened to or an account we are given is “just a myth”, we tend to dismiss it as being fictional. Indeed, by appending the gradable adverb “just” to the assessment of that story or account, we automatically place it below what we take to be truthful, faithful to fact, in a hierarchy of believability.

But although myths are essentially fabrications, they are not lies; they are not told to deceive us. Most of the accounts and stories we believe in are venerated as part of a long cultural tradition. They are the narratives that we need to believe in to make sense of the complex world in which we exist, but as with popular folk traditions it is not possible to identify an original narrator. A myth is not a personal story or an individual act of narration; it is transferred to each of us socially in the course of our interaction with others, and culturally through a history of transference that has made it the property of a group. As we go through life, we learn to accept beliefs about aspects of the sociocultural groups to which we belong (or feel we belong), and we do this by listening to and learning to produce the legitimate narration of myths in social institutions such as the family, the education system, the church and the political system. Myths thus form an all-important part of dominant forms of “discourse” (see section 4 for a definition). In our cognition, they provide a narrative cultural embedding of beliefs, and they help us to construct a foundation for performing acts of identity in emergent social practice. For example, who would be likely to dismiss the significance of classical myths or the modern myths of nationhood or the myths at the foundation of religion, even if, deep down, we might have a sneaking suspicion that they, too, are fabrications?

Despite all the factual evidence, the major reason for the survival of myths is that they “fulfil a vital function in explaining, justifying and ratifying present behaviour by the narrated events of the past” (Watts 2000: 33). Doubting a myth to be factual can even be interpreted as an act of heresy if the story, or even only part of it, is firmly and widely believed by the group.

The French sociologist and social anthropologist Bourdieu (1977: 164–169) used Husserl’s term *doxa* to refer to a set of beliefs that are taken for granted within a society: *doxa* is that which “goes without saying because it comes without saying” (1977: 169). Myths are thus part of a *doxa*. In Greek, *δόξα* meant a common belief or a popular opinion, and if that belief or opinion was considered incontestable, it constituted an “orthodox” belief. Bourdieu’s term “orthodoxa”, which is derived from the Greek adjective *ορθός* (right, true, straight) + *δόξα*, thus refers to a body of beliefs and ways of thinking which are taken to be right or true. “Heterodoxa”, derived from the Greek adjective *ετερος* (different, other) + *δόξα*, refers to explicit challenges to accepted ways of thinking and believing.

Introducing Bourdieu into the argument at this early point in the proceedings is not an arbitrary move. If myths articulate orthodox beliefs, they represent ways of thinking and believing that have been legitimised by a social group. They represent part of what Bourdieu calls “symbolic power”, by which he means the power to make people see and believe certain visions of the world rather than others. In Bourdieu’s terms, exercising symbolic power