The Linguistics of History

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Roy Harris

The Linguistics of History

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Marx was fond of quoting Heraclitus: panta rei, *all things move. This is the one truth we seek to recapture when we write history. We know that our version, being set into words, is itself false.*

A. J. P. Taylor

There is no reason to renounce traditional modes of speech, yet we have to free words of the metaphysical meanings ascribed to them.

Leszek Kolakowski

*It was all so unimaginably different
And all so long ago.*

Louis MacNeice

History is too serious to be left to historians.

Iain Macleod

Preface

The reader should be forewarned not to expect in the following chapters any detailed study of the language of historical accounts, or of the rhetoric of the great historians, or of the controversies which surround the definitions of some of the key terms historians have used. The stylistic devices, compositional techniques and vocabulary used by Herodotus, Livy, Gibbon, Macaulay *et al.* are not my primary concern. Had I written that kind of book, its title would have been *The Language of Historians*. Nor do I envisage as linguistics of history the kind of interdisciplinary enterprise that treats language as 'both input and output to historical scholarship' (Downes 1994), although my conclusions do have a bearing on various questions that arise for any such project.

What I think of as the linguistics of history concerns the assumptions *about* language that historians have made in constructing their accounts of the past. It is clear, for example, that many historians of the present century make very different linguistic assumptions from their predecessors in previous centuries. It is also clear that such differences are reflected in taking very different views of what history is, and how the task of the historian should be construed.

My main thesis will be that, throughout the Western tradition, the basic options in philosophy of history have been determined by the basic options in philosophy of language. Thus I shall attempt to present an argument of the following general form: a type-A philosophy of language sponsors a type-A philosophy of history, while a type-B philosophy of language sponsors a type-B philosophy of history.

My own linguistic and philosophical assumptions underlying the inquiry are derived from adopting an integrationist theory of language and communication, the relevant details of which I shall set out in due course. My reason for proceeding in this way is that I believe that integrationism offers an original and powerful account of how language and history are related, bringing to the fore considerations which have

been virtually ignored in all philosophy of history hitherto. I further believe that an integrationist approach makes it possible to pinpoint the factors that were decisive in establishing this pattern of dependence between views of history and views of language in the development of Western civilization. In other words, I am advancing a historical thesis as well as a philosophical thesis.

Some historians have made (some of) their linguistic assumptions quite explicit. Marc Bloch, for instance, declares that, for the historian's purposes,

> the first tool needed by any analysis is an appropriate language; a language capable of describing the precise outlines of the facts, while preserving the necessary flexibility to adapt itself to further discoveries and, above all, a language which is neither vacillating nor ambiguous. (Bloch 1954: 130)

Bloch here specifies certain linguistic requirements for the successful writing of history, and implies that unless these requirements are met history will be distorted. Whether they can be met in principle, and if so how, are difficult questions, to which Bloch does not supply any very clear answers; but it is nevertheless evident that he believes he has identified an important linguistic challenge that the historian must face.

To take another example, according to E. H. Carr, 'The very use of language commits the historian, like the scientist, to generalization' (Carr E. H. 1987: 63). What Carr had in mind was the presence of general terms such as *war* and *revolution* in the traditional historian's vocabulary. From this Carr drew certain conclusions about the relationship between history and science: in particular, he thought it followed that Aristotle's definition of history as being concerned only with particular persons and events was untenable. (This is plainly a linguistic argument: unfortunately, it is not only a bad argument but also bad linguistics.) Similarly, when F. R. Ankersmit posits that 'Narrative language is autonomous with regard to the past itself' (Ankersmit 1994: 36) he is making a contentious linguistic claim in order to bolster an even more contentious claim about historical writing. But in most cases the linguistic assumptions that historians make about their enterprise are not stated as overtly as in the above cases; and it is with the concealed bulk of covert presuppositions that I shall be mainly concerned.

Why do I think the linguistics of history of any more interest than, say, the linguistics of ornithology or the linguistics of cookery? Not simply because historians produce more varied and wide-ranging texts, but because history stands in the first rank of those conceptual supercate-

gories that provide our modern bearings in all thinking about human affairs. It does so both at the lay and the academic levels of inquiry. Like other supercategories in the same league, such as 'science' and 'art', it is more often invoked than precisely defined. Like its peers, it finds favour with those who need magniloquent terms in which to couch weighty general pronouncements about the achievements of outstanding individuals, of societies and of the human race as a whole. Like them, it is easily presented in personified or quasi-personified form, providing a basis for statements that are all the more impressive for teetering on the edge of nonsense. Like them, it is given to appearing in print with an initial capital letter, mysteriously awarded as if to confirm its supercategory status. Thus, just as 'science' often becomes 'Science', and 'art' becomes 'Art', so we are often invited to contemplate not 'history' but 'History'.

I think it is important for us to understand the linguistic basis of these master-concepts and make sure they are not what Bacon memorably called 'idols of the market'. In the case of history, I know of no attempt to probe this question, which is what I have tried to do in the present book.

That language and history are somehow interconnected no one seriously doubts. Historians treat linguistic evidence (in the form of documents and eye-witness testimony) as important for their understanding of what happened in the past; while many linguists treat languages as historical continua, open to change over time. But linguistics does not seem to be an area in which historians are very happy. Some historians have apparently been so bemused by the semantics of adverbs like *now* and *then* as to think there is no serious possibility of writing about the present at all. One of these announces solemnly that 'the historian can hardly talk about the present because, by the time he has evidence to examine, it has become the past' (Cannon 1980: 12). But at the opposite end of the scale come those who have convinced themselves by similarly spurious reasoning that language somehow deludes us into believing that the past is past. 'For historians, in fact, past events are ever "present," the tense in which we speak, write, listen, read, and of course, remember; and the deployment of past tenses is a linguistic strategy for giving the illusion of time passing' (Kelley 1998: 11).

Those beleaguered historians who misread this book as yet another sceptical attack upon their profession will doubtless be the first to point out that the sceptical author himself makes many historical claims. So he does. Such blatant self-incrimination might suggest that an 'anti-historical' reading of my argument must have missed something important. And it has. The catch 22 in writing a book of this kind is that even discussion of the issues requires reference back to what others

have written, and thus appears to engage the writer in the very same historical conspiracy that is being investigated. To claim that this invalidates the investigation *ab initio* is to employ a form of counter-argument which charges the writer with 'performative self-contradiction'; that is, committing the very same errors of which your opponent accuses you. A simple example, in the case of history, would be Bernard Williams's contention that 'the attack on [. . .] historical truth itself depends on some claims or other which themselves have to be taken to be true' (Williams 2002: 2). Thus anyone who attacks the notion of historical truth emerges as pot calling kettle black.

I anticipate that critics will be tempted to use some kind of 'performative self-contradiction' argument against the main thesis of this book. So it may be as well to say in advance why I do not think such criticisms carry much weight. In the first place, 'performative self-contradiction' arguments in general, even when they are convincing, do not establish the validity of the position they are deployed to defend, but merely point out the weakness of attacking that position in a certain way. Thus, for example, even if Williams is right, it would not follow that we can now carry on as before, reassured that the notion of historical truth that came under attack is sound after all. In the second place, if critics are debarred under pain of 'performative self-contradiction' from conducting the debate in the historians' terms, then the world is safe for historians, for ever and a day. But there is something deeply suspect about drawing up the rules of debate in this way. It is rather like insisting that no illegal organization can reliably be exposed by an infiltrator, because infiltrators are automatically party to *and guilty of* the very same illegality as the organization which, under false pretences, they have managed to infiltrate. If that rationale were sound where academic studies are concerned, all criticism of historians would be stifled at birth and the mere existence of the discipline would be its own justification.

This book might be regarded as a sequel to one I wrote nearly a quarter of a century ago called *The Language-Makers* (Harris 1980). Language-making and history-making I have always regarded as correlative and inseparable processes; for language invariably operates within some framework of beliefs about the way our bit of the world is and how it came to be that way. Anyone who doubts this should try the thought-experiment of attempting to make sense of this morning's newspaper while suppressing all such beliefs. These frameworks are in part supplied by historians, who in turn rely on language to construct them. That is why there has to be an umbilical connexion between the accounts of the past that historians construct and their assumptions about the language they

use in constructing them. This connexion is the basis of some of the longest-running controversies concerning the historian's task.

I have been selective in my discussion of topics and focussed mainly on issues connected with meaning and truth, rather than with issues concerning 'objectivity' or 'evidence' or whether history is 'scientific' (although these too have an obvious linguistic dimension). This is because I take the core of any historical account to include or presuppose statements of the type: 'event E occurred in place P at time T'. (For example: 'King Harold was killed at the battle of Hastings in 1066', or 'Pressure flaking was introduced in Europe during the Middle Solutrean'.) Historical accounts include many other types of statement as well; but unless a linguistics of history can at least explicate statements of this simple nuclear type, then it has no foundation – in my view – for dealing with anything more complicated.

I am grateful to Robert Burns, Paul Hopper, Rosy Singh and Romila Thapar for directing my attention to publications which would otherwise have escaped my attention and to Peter Hacker, Steve Farrow and Paul Maylam for pertinent comments on various points. Parts of my argument were tried out on sceptical audiences at the University of London's Institute of Historical Research and Dulwich College: from these I had valuable criticism. I have also profited from the discussion of some of these issues at the conference on language and history that was held by the International Association for the Integrational Study of Language and Communication at New Orleans in March 2002.

R. H.
Oxford, September 2003

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CHAPTER ONE

Language and the historian

Oscar Wilde's *boutade* 'The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it' plays mischievously with two familiar but apparently conflicting ideas. One is the idea that history is something over and done with, and therefore cannot be altered. The other is the idea that history is something written down, and hence, far from being unalterable, can be altered with every rewriting, just as any tale can be expanded, embroidered or abbreviated ('to cut a long story short') each time it is told. These two ideas – the mutability and immutability of history, its rigidity and plasticity – need to be reconciled. But how?

My case will be that this question cannot be tackled within the confines of philosophy of history, unless philosophy of history includes some philosophy of language, or, more generally, philosophy of communication. The nucleus of my case is the claim that history-making is a complex process and that integrating the various components involved requires linguistic and other forms of communication between the parties concerned.

My first move in setting out that case will be to put forward as uncontentious the following proposition: that the task of the historian, as traditionally conceived in Western civilization, would be impossible without certain facilities typically afforded by Greek, Latin and other European languages. We do not need to go into any detailed linguistic analysis in order to establish this general point. If in doubt, we can readily convince ourselves of its validity by considering the following science-fiction scenario.

Imagine that the first manned space ship from Earth to alight on Mars discovered a population whose language had no past tense, no words for 'yesterday' or 'last year', and no expressions for calendrical dates or time measurement of any kind. Into such a language it would be impossible to translate sentences of the kind that occur constantly in European history books, sentences stating that such-and-such an event occurred at such-

and-such a time in the past. In these circumstances it seems clear that, whatever other intellectual enterprises might flourish on Mars, the teaching of history (as we understand it) would not feature among them. There would be no jobs for historians in Martian schools or universities. And if this first expedition to Mars included among its members a missionary historian, whose ambition was to introduce Martians to the academic discipline of history, that terrestrial historian's first task would have to be a reform of the Martian language.

Nothing in this science-fiction story should be taken as implying that the Martians had no conception of history because the limits of their language *prevented* them from having one: that would be quite a different proposition. All the example is intended to demonstrate is that it is not impossible to envisage a people living 'without history'. It has sometimes been claimed that on Earth there have been civilizations 'without history', although never, I think, that there have been civilizations lacking the necessary linguistic apparatus to construct historical accounts. As soon as the elders of the tribe can tell the rest what they think happened 'a long time ago' or even in their youth, they are already verbally equipped to be potential historians.

The further question that this reflection prompts is whether people like my science-fiction Martians, although lacking the language to develop historical accounts, could nevertheless present such accounts, or their equivalents, in some other way. Could some alternative form of communication serve the purpose? Could they, perhaps, articulate history solely in pictures, for example? I think the answer is fairly clearly 'no'. For if Martian artists understood certain pictures as being pictures of what happened in the past, as distinct from depictions of present or future or imaginary happenings, it is hard to see how that understanding could be made explicit in discussion of their art. Questions like 'Did what you have painted really happen?' would be automatically precluded. So the hypothesis of a form of historical presentation entirely divorced from language seems a non-starter. Or rather, if Martians had developed some such form of their own, it seems doubtful whether it would be recognized by terrestrial historians as a form *of history*.

Granted that terrestrial historians need languages with adequate verbal equipment for discussing the past, my next move is to propose that they also need a semantics to go with it. In other words, a statement about the past (like a statement about the present or the future) has to be understood as meaning something. And it will be judged accordingly, i.e. according to how it is construed as meaningful.

A statement like 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' or 'King Harold was killed at the battle of Hastings', if it is to serve the historian's purpose, must be taken to have a meaning. The question is not only *what* meaning the words are taken to have, but *how* they come to have that meaning. And the two are intimately connected in ways that affect the historian's whole enterprise.

There are various possibilities to examine. Let us consider initially just three basic ways of looking at words and meanings. For convenience of reference I will call them (1) 'reocentric semantics', (2) 'psychocentric semantics' and (3) 'contractual semantics'. I will first of all distinguish these three in very broad terms, ignoring the caveats that arise when considering the particular views of individual semantic theorists, who often combine two or all three in complicated ways.

1. *Reocentric semantics.* What I am calling 'reocentric' is an approach which regards the meanings of words as deriving ultimately from things in the external world. To a reocentric way of thinking it seems quite obvious that what fixes the meaning of the word *horse* is that there really are horses. Here 'really are' is to be understood as claiming that these flesh-and-blood animals exist as part of the natural world, and that they exist independently of being recognized as such by human beings, and irrespective of what they might or might not be called in English or any other language. The basic assumption is that the word *horse* has as its primary function that of enabling us to discuss, talk about or refer to animals of just this kind. Thus the best way of explaining to someone what *horse* means is to produce a horse or horses for inspection. The word is regarded as 'standing for' the animal in question. Similarly, words such as *eat, grow, soft* and *near* stand for the corresponding action, process, property or relation; and such actions, processes, properties and relations are likewise conceived of as 'really existing' in the world (as distinct from being figments of our imagination or subjective constructs conjured up by our acquaintance with the words *eat, grow, soft, near*, etc.).

Meanings, according to the reocentric view of the matter, are the links between particular patterns of sounds or letters and specific parts of reality. These correlations between words and reality are treated as so fundamental and indubitable as to render any argument superfluous. Language thus mirrors a world that actually exists. The sentence *Grass is green* mirrors the fact that grass really is green (whereas *Grass is red* mirrors nothing at all, except perhaps a state of affairs that could be imagined, but is manifestly at variance with the facts). These 'real' correlations are what make it possible, for instance, to enlighten someone who does not know what *green* means by saying that green is the colour of

grass (among other things), or by pointing to an appropriate colour sample. Reocentricity is the foundation of dictionary definitions such as 'any ground squirrel of the genus *Tamias* or *Eutamias*, having alternate light and dark stripes running down the body' for the word *chipmunk* (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 8th ed.), where what the lexicographer offers as the meaning of the word turns out to be simply a description of the animal.

Reocentric theorists admit that not *all* words lend themselves to reocentric definitions of this kind, but those words which do are regarded as being in some way basic to our vocabulary, and the meanings of other words as being built upon that foundation. Thus while there is nothing for which the word *although* stands, we could not grasp what *although* means and how to use it unless we had already understood the meaning of words like *grass* and sentences like *Grass is green*. This view of meaning is sometimes also called 'nomenclaturist'. Different languages (English, French, etc.) are seen as providing different nomenclatures, or sets of names, for the same independently given reality. The same animal that English speakers call *horse* is called *cheval* by speakers of French, *Pferd* by speakers of German, and so on.

2. *Psychocentric semantics.* What I am calling 'psychocentric' is a view very similar to the above, except that words are regarded as 'standing for' ideas in the mind rather than things in the external world. Thus, although doubtless horses exist, the meaning of the word *horse* is determined by what people think horses are, rather than by what they actually are. So on this view the meaning of the word *horse* could vary from person to person, depending on each individual's notion of what a horse is. Similarly the meaning of the sentence *Fish swim* could vary according to what creatures different individuals classify as fish and how they regard what counts as swimming. Psychocentric semantics is sometimes regarded as superior to reocentric semantics because it makes it easier to explain why a word like *unicorn* is no less meaningful than *horse*, even though horses 'really exist' whereas unicorns do not. This is held to show that what gives a word its meaning is not the existence of a 'real' correlate, but simply that a certain idea is attached to it.

On this view, our language is not a direct reflection of the world as it actually is, but rather of the world as we perceive or suppose it to be (whether rightly or wrongly). Confusingly, this psychocentric view of meaning is also sometimes called 'nomenclaturist'. I shall try to avoid this confusion by using when necessary the term *surrogational* to cover both reocentric and psychocentric semantics, on the ground that what both have in common is their treatment of words as surrogates for something

else: in one case for things and in the other case for ideas. A widely held surrogational view attempts to combine both reocentric and psychocentric positions, holding that words may simultaneously 'stand for' things in the real world as well as for our subjective ideas about them. But whether these two claims are ultimately reconcilable is questionable.

3. *Contractual semantics.* What I am calling 'contractual' is a view quite distinct from either of the above (although it is often overlaid on both) because the meanings of words are regarded as depending ultimately not on how things stand in the external world, nor on any individual's ideas about the external world, but on a collective agreement or convention which establishes a communal view of how words shall be used and how they are related one to another. Thus for the contractualist the meaning of the word *horse* is independent both of facts about horses in the real world, and of what may happen to be known or believed about horses by particular individuals, but is determined solely by the tacitly agreed way in which, for purposes of public communication in English, it is assumed that the word *horse* relates to – and is to be distinguished from – words such as *cow, sheep, mare, foal, quadruped,* etc. Similarly, for the contract-ualist, the meaning of *Grass is green* depends neither on what colour grass actually is, nor on what colour it is perceived as being, but simply on what colour it is agreed shall be called *green.* This agreement is regarded as being somehow 'built into' the English language, or at least the English language as properly used by its native speakers in their intercourse with one another.

Hence the meanings of words come from nowhere 'outside' but are 'internal' to the particular language in question. Theoretically, therefore, it would be unobjectionable to call green *blue* or horses *sheep,* provided the linguistic community sanctioned that linguistic contract. On this view, the question of whether grass 'really is' green just does not arise – or, alternatively, is meaningless – except within the framework already provided by a linguistic contract. The contractualist will point out that what makes it possible to talk about unicorns in English is the fact that the vocabulary of English includes the word *unicorn,* and the availablity of this word is unaffected by whether there 'really are' unicorns or whether people believe that there are. Thus in contractual semantics the stress is not on identifying what things or ideas words 'stand for', but rather on the collective consensus assumed to underlie communicational exchange within a given linguistic community. Whether this corresponds to the way the world 'really is', or to people's beliefs about reality, makes no difference to meaning: in any case, these are separate and further questions that cannot even be addressed until one can first establish

under what linguistic contract the words in question have any meaning at all.

For the contractualist, therefore, both the reocentric and the psychocentric theorists have got their priorities wrong. The surrogational question 'What does this word stand for?' makes no sense unless the word can first be identified as one specific lexical item in a complex verbal network constitutive of a particular community's language. In contractualist thinking, languages are often compared to currency systems. To ask 'What does word *x* mean?' is seen as rather like asking 'What is a dollar worth?'. There can be no answer unless it is first possible to establish whether this is a question about the American dollar, the Canadian dollar, the Mexican dollar, etc. And even then, since currency values bear a fluctuating relationship to the 'real world' of goods and services, the question makes sense only when related externally to a specific time and market. Nevertheless, *within* the system the dollar will always be worth the same number of cents. That is to say, its internal value in relation to other units in the same system is what is fixed. Analogously, for the contractualist the meanings of words belonging to the same linguistic system do not vary, even though there may be inconsistencies between the ways those words are applied externally to features of the 'real world'.

I should perhaps repeat that in the work of particular theorists reocentric, psychocentric and contractualist strands of thinking are often tangled up, and that is precisely why I have separated them here in a deliberately bald fashion. The aim of the separation is to throw into relief an important general point about the connexion between semantic theory and history. The historian who adopts what I am calling a reocentric semantics will have a different view of historical accounts from one who adopts a psychocentric or a contractual semantics. In other words, reocentric, psychocentric and contractual semantics project interestingly different views of the historian's task.

In reocentric semantics, statements about what happened are answerable directly to what did in fact happen, it being assumed that the historian's language makes available the resources for reporting it. The ultimate reocentric justification for using such expressions as *the Roman empire* and *the battle of Hastings* has to be that the Roman empire actually existed and the battle of Hastings really took place. If not, then these expressions can only mislead and their use undermines any claim that the historian is giving a reliable account of the past.

In psychocentric semantics, statements about what happened are answerable to what is perceived or believed to have happened, it being