Proper English?

READINGS IN LANGUAGE, HISTORY
AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

TONY CROWLEY

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PROPER ENGLISH?

Debates about the state and status of the English language are rarely debates about language alone. Closely linked to the question, what is proper English? is another, more significant social question: who are the proper English?

The texts in this book have been selected to illustrate the process by which particular forms of English usage are erected and validated as correct and standard. At the same time, the texts demonstrate how a certain group of people, and certain sets of cultural practices are privileged as correct, standard and central.

Covering a period of three hundred years, these writers, who include Locke, Swift, Webster, James, Newbolt and Marenbon, wrestle with questions of language change and decay, correct and incorrect usage, what to prescribe and proscribe. Reread in the light of recent debates about cultural identity – how is it constructed and maintained? what are its effects? – these texts clearly demonstrate the formative roles of race, class and gender in the construction of 'proper Englishness'.

Tony Crowley's introductory material breaks new ground in rescuing these texts from the academic backwater of the 'history of the language' and in reasserting the central role of language in history.

Tony Crowley is a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Southampton, and has taught at the universities of Oxford and Rutgers. He has published widely in the area of language and cultural theory, including *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates* (1989).

The Politics of Language series is edited by Tony Crowley and Talbot J. Taylor.

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE SERIES

In the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs.

(Ferdinand de Saussure)

The Politics of Language Series covers the field of language and cultural theory and will publish radical and innovative texts in this area. In recent years the developments and advances in the study of language and cultural criticism have brought to the fore a new set of questions. The shift from purely formal, analytical approaches has created an interest in the role of language in the social, political and ideological realms and the series will seek to address these new problems with a clear and informed approach. The intention is to gain recognition for the central role of language in individual and public life.

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Preface

The texts collected here constitute an attempt to gather together an overview of an enormous body of work stretching back over three hundred years. They do not tell the whole story. In fact it may be one of the merits of the selection to suggest that there are a number of different stories and histories into which these pieces fit. There are texts which have been missed out and others which have been included which may cause surprise to the reader. However, I have chosen major and minor texts with the aim of both demonstrating the diversity and complexity of the field, and indicating its significance.

Any success in fulfilling these intentions is at least partly thanks to the support and help of a number of people. First I offer my belated thanks and love to Micheline Ishay. To the colleagues and students with whom I have worked over recent years I owe a particular debt; in this regard I am of course very grateful to the present and former members of the Department of English at the University of Southampton. But perhaps my greatest debt is to my family. I would particularly like to mention Seán Joseph Cornelius Gannon, Ellen Roisín Gannon and Ruairí Daniel Crowley Linton, my nephews and nieces, and my grandparents to whom this book is dedicated.

Finally I want to offer my special thanks to Ursula for her strength and love: Is ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine.

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Language, history and the formation
of cultural identity

A definition of language is always implicitly or explicitly, a
definition of human beings in the world.
(Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford
University Press, p. 21)

The aim of this collection is to present a selection of texts which
concern themselves with the question of 'proper English'. At first
sight such a collection might seem anachronistic for the theoretical
changes in disciplines as diverse as English studies, linguistics and the
social sciences more generally, might appear to make the question
irrelevant. Have not these disciplines developed in ways such that the
question itself sounds as though it belongs to a former era? An era in
which the answer to such a question took the form of a collection of
exemplary texts by the major English stylists? It will be the conten-
tion of this introduction that not only is the topic not anachronistic,
but that it has become of central importance in debates in many fields
precisely because of the recent theoretical advances. Following from
this, it is argued that the utility of a collection such as this lies in
its provision of the material with which the question can be re-
addressed.

The collection is not a selection of the 'major writers' of 'intrinsic
merit'. The reader will find that many of the writers are not 'major'
and that the worth of their writing is contestable rather than intrinsic.
The significance of the collection, however, lies in the fact that
the texts gathered here enable us to view the process by which a
particularly important theoretical construction is put in place and
consolidated. That theoretical construction, postulated and put into
practice in a number of distinct historical contexts and in a variety of
different discourses, is what is loosely described by the phrase 'proper

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English'. Yet this phrase has to be analysed if we are to see the full potential of the selection of texts which follows. On one level the meaning of the phrase is fairly narrow: 'proper English' refers to a particular form of English linguistic usage which is erected and validated as correct, standard and central. The texts below have been selected in order to illustrate the development of the process by which this takes place. On another level, however, the phrase has a fairly wide meaning: 'proper English' here refers both to a group of people and to certain sets of cultural practices which are also privileged as correct, standard and central. It is intended that the same texts will also demonstrate this process taking place.

To put the point more clearly, the texts do not simply address the problem of delineating what is to count as 'proper English' in the realm of language. They are also linked to what are, although related, more significant social questions such as, 'who are the proper English?', or 'what are the criteria for proper Englishness in a number of different areas of social and cultural life?' It is this stress which gives these texts their relevance since recent developments across a variety of disciplines have addressed themselves precisely to questions of this sort.[1] Questions, that is, which revolve around the problem of cultural identity: how is it constructed, how is it maintained, what are its effects and what are the advantages and disadvantages of any particular form of cultural identity in a given context.

Before turning to the question of cultural identity it seems pertinent to say something more on the difficulties of presenting the texts which follow. There are two critical difficulties, both of which are traceable to different ways in which language studies have developed in the modern period. The first difficulty stems from the fact that many of the texts assembled below would traditionally have belonged to an established sub-branch within the field of language study (particularly in English studies), 'the history of the language'. I have written elsewhere on the origin and historical development of this area of study, in particular its tendency towards a seamless narrative, its deployment for nationalist purposes and its curious division between 'internal' and 'external' history.[2] The interest of this field for present purposes, however, lies in the way in which it has placed such texts firmly within certain parameters and thus has ascribed to them a set of familiar characteristics by which we recognise them and evaluate their significance. That this *is* a difficulty only becomes apparent when we try to do more with these texts, to read them in

different ways, than is allowed for by the limits imposed by the field. For example, it is only when we want to suggest more than that Swift's *Proposal For Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining The English Language* is a prime example of eighteenth-century prescriptivism (of which, the familiar refrain might follow, Johnson's Preface to his *Dictionary* is another example, but Priestley's *Course of Lectures on the Theory of Language and Universal Grammar* is not) that the problem becomes evident. For it is when we read these texts not simply in order to illustrate a linguistic practice whose history might seem familiar but to demonstrate the complex relations which hold between a text which treats of language and the history with which it is enmeshed and in which it is an intervention, that the difficulties arise. To argue that any particular text is an instance of a general practice such as prescriptivism creates a dual problem. On the one hand it reduces the specificity of the text in its context; and on the other hand it brings about a reductive account of the long, varied and historically differentiated set of practices covered by the term prescriptivism.

The first difficulty then is to escape from the familiar boundaries set by 'the history of the language' as we read these texts. Boundaries whose effects can be noted both in academic accounts of *the* English language (in itself already a theoretical construct) and what are termed 'folk-linguistic' versions of the history. The first necessary step away from this difficulty is to acknowledge the intimate relations of these texts with attempts to forge cultural identity in specific historical contexts. That is, to see these texts as belonging not to a continuous tradition but as interventions in debates and historical conjunctures designed to bring about certain effects. The advantage of taking this step is that it frees us from the notion that the texts were all in some sense doing the same thing; and it demands from us that if we are to use the term prescriptivism, we have to recognise that it takes a multiplicity of forms, practices and purposes. Indeed the diversity of the texts gathered here might even force a revision of the call for an examination of the history of prescriptivism, to an appeal for analyses of the histories of prescriptivisms.

There is, however, a more powerful difficulty to be faced when attempting to present these texts for re-consideration, and one which comes from what may appear a strange quarter. 'The history of the language' causes problems by dint of its established and rather conservative limitations (though the field itself is ripe with opportunity for radical analysis). The other field which causes problems,

however, is the discipline of linguistics and its more radical effects across the arts and humanities.

For the purposes of this argument we may for the moment take modern linguistics, and more specifically General Linguistics, to be the discipline which made use of a number of pioneering theoretical distinctions formulated by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. Of course this should not be taken to mean that the *Course* was an originating moment for linguistics since accounts that specify Saussure as the creator of 'the science of language' are at best simplified and at worst misleading. Yet the *Course* did consolidate and give enormous impetus to the tendencies towards abstraction, formalisation and systematisation within the study of language. And the effects of the theoretical developments were explosive, not just within the study of language, but across the whole range of the social sciences. It is certainly the case that as a result of Saussure's thought, the study of language increasingly sought recognition as a pure science: as an abstract, objective study concerned with the rational and all-inclusive rules and relations which govern the system of language.[3]

The problem that Saussure's influence poses is that the revolution in linguistic thought consequent upon it made other approaches appear secondary and in many ways unscientific. Compared with the abstract work of post-Saussurean linguistics, other branches of language study were open to the charge of lacking rigour or theoretical sophistication. Thus given that the texts gathered here do not deal with language in the terms of scientific linguistics, must they be deemed unscientific? Or perhaps to be charitable, pre-scientific? Moreover, in view of the fact that these texts actually talk about language in relation to history, are they not, in the context of Saussure's alleged absolute rejection of history, to be banished as mere un- or pre-scientific chit-chat? The ponderings of benighted minds unfortunate enough not to be able to take advantage of the most important breakthrough in linguistic thought? It would not in fact be surprising to find such texts described in this way and because it is at this point that the difficulty becomes most pressing it will be necessary to explore briefly Saussure's attitude to language and history.

We can begin by considering the following declarations by a twentieth-century linguist on the topic of what he calls 'important matters' which 'demand attention when one approaches the study of language'. First, he claims,

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there are all the respects in which linguistics links up with ethnology. There are all the relations which may exist between the history of a race or a civilisation. The two histories inter-mingle and are related one to another. . . . A nation's way of life has an effect upon its language. At the same time it is in great part the language which makes the nation.

A second important consideration is articulated by this linguist when he argues that,

mention must be made of the relations between languages and political history. Major historical events such as the Roman Conquest are of incalculable linguistic importance in all kinds of ways. Colonisation, which is simply one form of conquest, transports a language into new environments, and this brings changes in the language. A great variety of examples could be cited in this connexion. Norway, for instance, adopted Danish on becoming politically united to Denmark, although today Norwegians are trying to shake off this linguistic influence. The internal politics of a country is of no less importance for the life of a language.

And a third matter:

A language has connexions with institutions of every sort: church, school, etc. These institutions in turn are intimately bound up with the literary development of a language. This is a phenomenon of general importance, since it is inseparable from political history. A literary language is by no means confined to the limits apparently imposed upon it by literature. One has only to think of the influence of salons, of the court, and of academies. In connexion with a literary language, there arises the important question of conflict with local dialects.[4]

Evidently this stress on the historical dimension in the study of language could be read as the record of the dying moments of an outmoded approach (the words were first published in 1916). It may be surprising for some readers, particularly those familiar with the more popular accounts of the history of modern linguistic ideas, to discover that these are the words of Saussure. Moreover, it may be even more of a revelation to find that these words are not tucked away in some obscure manuscripts but in fact appear in chapter five of the 'Introduction' to the *Course in General Linguistics*.

Of course readers conversant with the *Course* will know that Saussure mentions these factors precisely in order to relegate them to the realm of 'external linguistics' rather than to include them within the scientific gaze of his theoretical study ('internal linguistics'). However, it is worth noting for the moment that the founder of General Linguistics viewed the topics outlined above as not only significant for linguists, but important in a more general sense. For Saussure this is the case because, he asserts, 'in practice the study of language is in some degree or other the concern of everyone'. He also makes the forceful contention that,

> In the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs.[5]

Arguing against the prevailing trend in linguistic thought in the twentieth century, and indeed the trend which his own thought engendered, Saussure argues that it should not be a sealed and impenetrable field for specialists alone but a discipline whose significance is general precisely because its object is of singular importance in social life. Already in such declarations we can find a clear recognition that Saussure is aware of the importance of language in history; that is, he recognises the relevance of thinking about language not only in relation to 'political history' but also with regard to the importance of the study of language for its users in the historical present. I have argued elsewhere in detail against the reading of Saussure which takes him to be not only unconcerned with, but positively antagonistic to, the connections which hold between language and history.[6] The essential argument is that the rejection, or better the relegation, of the diachronic viewpoint is not a denial of the historical perspective. Rather, what appears in Saussure's account, though it is hardly developed, is the field of external linguistics which takes as its object of study the role of language in history, or more precisely, of the relations between language and political history. There is no absolute rejection of history then, but a new positioning of the historical viewpoint in the field of linguistic study. There is even evidence that it is a viewpoint which Saussure might have favoured once the arduous task of clearing the ground for the science of language had been completed.[7]

The difficulty mentioned earlier in regard to the presentation of the sort of texts which follow (that is that post-Saussurean linguistics in

its anti-historical stance has made them appear outdated) can now be re-addressed. For if the argument that Saussure does not in fact reject history but merely re-locates it in linguistic study is accurate, then the difficulty becomes less significant. Indeed we can claim that the texts and their presentation below are a contribution to a field which is signalled by Saussure in his work but hardly detailed. It may be called language and history (to differentiate it from historical linguistics), or language and its political history; the name is as yet not so important.[8] The emergence of the field, however, does have enormous implications: first, it brings history back and gives it a long-delayed relevance in linguistic study. And second, it makes us re-consider the stance taken towards language and history in the sub-branch of English studies, 'the history of the language'. For the new attitude to language and history embodied in the field to which Saussure alludes, is not one which takes history to be an empty category, or linguistic history to be a mere succession of facts, but one which sees linguistic history to be a varying, conflictual and power-laden set of relations concerned with the intertwining of language and race, language and nationality, language and colonisation, language and institutions and so on. In its broadest scope it can be taken as the history of the role of language in the construction of forms of cultural identity.

This returns us to the collection below. The texts themselves are documents which may allow the reader to see the myriad ways in which language and political history are interlinked. They are not a gathering of curiosities or obsolete ways of thinking about language, but a guide to the processes by which certain powerful constructions are instituted and take effect in the social order. It was argued earlier that these texts present, in different forms, at different times, for different audiences, the question of what and who is to count as 'proper English'. In that sense they can be taken as one element of a social group's self-understanding, a part of the process in and by which it represents to itself and to others what it considers to be correct and incorrect patterns of belief, value and identity. They set out in various ways patterns of prescription (guidance for those included) and proscription (banishment for the others). At this important level then the texts offer just a glimpse of an enormous, active and still continuing project of self-definition within particular communities.

The texts are varied and span the period 1690 to the present. Three hundred years in which the social orders in which these texts are set – Britain and America – have changed beyond recognition. Yet what

we return to time and again in these texts is the intermingling of language and political history, and the crucial role which language has in determining definitions of the social realm and its constituent limits. The texts range from the attempt made by the major English philosopher John Locke to offer a theory of language which would give it semantic stability and therefore enable it to become 'the common Tye of Society', to a contemporary feminist account which attempts to stabilise signification in order to pinpoint sexism more accurately in language and thus to highlight one of the major conflictual tendencies in contemporary social life. There are evident common themes which run through these texts; but there are also great differences as we note at distinct conjunctures the emergence of language and class, language and the writing of history, language and colonialism and language and gender, among other topics, as major issues to be debated. What these texts demonstrate is just the historically varying attempts to define who is to be included and who excluded, on what grounds, in what forms, within or without the prevailing social order. Among them all, however, we can see the constant theme which gives validity to the claim made by Williams and recalled at the head of this essay: 'a definition of language is always implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world'.

The differing definitions of language which are set out below are markers in the formation of cultural identity. It is of course an identity which shifts historically and which has no essence to it, as we can see evinced in the changing patterns and beliefs recorded here. In moments of particular crisis the criteria change: what counts as 'proper English' in the realm of language is as likely to vary as what counts as 'proper English' behaviour, or who count as 'proper English' people. There is no essential continuity in the detailed forms of cultural identity, only in the constantly shifting reassertions of a need for it. Thus it is the aim of this selection to allow the reader access to these shifts, reversals and occasional continuities. But it is also hoped that such access may warn us against contemporary efforts to pre- or pro- scribe 'proper English' language, behaviour and people. This is unfortunately necessary since such attempts to produce narrow delimitations of cultural identity are not confined to the past but continue to play a role in the present. It is perhaps one of the major advantages of the study of language and political history to put such endeavours in a perspective where they can be seen to be what they are: thinly veiled attempts to legitimate patterns of exclusion and