MARK TWAIN'S LANGUAGES

DISCOURSE, DIALOGUE, AND LINGUISTIC VARIETY

DAVID R. SEWELL

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That no one understands another, that the same words do not arouse the same thought in one man as in another, that a dialogue or a text causes different trains of thought in different individuals, was something I had long realized all too clearly.

—Goethe

Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue.

—Mikhail Bakhtin

now thats also a model of human understanding sort of though it no longer supposes that you can penetrate to anybody elses experience

—David Antin

Preface

"Why, Huck, doan de French people talk de same way we does?"

"*No*, Jim; you couldn't understand a word they said—not a single word." . . .

"Is a Frenchman a man?"

"Yes."

"*Well*, den! Dad blame it, why doan he *talk* like a man?—you answer me *dat!*"

—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

What impressed Mark Twain most about language was its diversity. Moving from the West to the East and on to Europe, living among boatmen, slaves, miners, journalists, and aristocrats, Twain heard the multiplicity of human voices that finds its way into his work. His concern with rendering speech accurately marks both his "Explanatory" note to *Huckleberry Finn* and his oft-repeated criticism of Bret Harte's inept literary dialect. But linguistic variety in Mark Twain's writing is not just an aspect of literary technique: it reflects a belief in the fundamental heterogeneity of human nature. Because this heterogeneity is always potentially threatening, we tend to deny or suppress it. Twain makes Jim, in arguing with Huck over the speech of Frenchmen, represent nostalgia for a single, undifferentiated, language that would immediately identify its speakers as "men." The irony is that the form of Jim's very words belies his argument. "Doan de French people talk de same way we does?" The "we" here begs the question: Huck and Jim speak dialects that unmistakably indicate different so-

cial and racial status. At the same time, there is something powerfully hopeful about Jim's naive "we," for Huck and Jim's friendship and their struggle to understand each other suggest that such differences may not be an insurmountable barrier to dialogue.

Mark Twain's *languages,* then. Each of the chapters that follow deals with one or more aspects of linguistic variety in Mark Twain's work: levels of grammar, the authority of Standard English, foreign languages, dialects, the politics of speech acts, technical jargons, misunderstanding. Although Mark Twain's direct statements about language often seem at best dated and at worst simply wrong, one of my theses is that he understood language more profoundly than is usually thought. A half century of sympathetic criticism has not, I fear, entirely absolved Twain of Van Wyck Brooks's charge of linguistic superficiality. According to Brooks, the largest component of Twain's literary criticism was

> his lifelong preoccupation with grammar. How many essays and speeches, introductions and extravaganzas by Mark Twain turn upon some question whose interest is purely or mainly verbal! . . . It is the letter-perfection of Howells that dazzles him; the want of it he considers a sufficient reason for saying "you're another" to Matthew Arnold and tripping him up over some imaginary verbal gaucherie. . . . Foreign languages never ceased to be ludicrous to him because they were not English. These are all signs of the young schoolboy who has begun to take pride in his compositions and has become suddenly aware of words; and I suggest that Mark Twain never reached the point of being more at home in the language of civilization than that.[1]

During the decades since Brooks published his criticism, many fine celebratory studies of Twain's style and vocabulary have made Brooks's complaints sound strident, but even supportive critics misconceive what it is to have a theory of language. At least since the publication of F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* in 1941 we have tended to champion Emerson and those writers most like him as our homegrown philosophers of language, the American equivalents of Coleridge or Goethe. Unquestionably the sophistication of Henry David Thoreau's etymological investigations, Walt Whitman's

"language experiment," and Emily Dickinson's audacious metaphors was beyond Twain's grasp. But all Transcendentalist thinking about language is radically at odds with Twain's. Whereas the Transcendentalists sought above all a poetics that would explain how language might ideally mediate between individual and object, Twain was interested in language as it arises, functions, and changes as a medium of social relations. Twain's explicit comments on language are often disappointing because the vocabulary to express what he knew simply did not exist in the nineteenth century. A goal of my study, then, is to give a voice and names to ideas that are implicit in Twain's work, especially in his best fiction.

This goal explains why I have felt compelled to revise formulas that are by now almost standard in Twain criticism. The two critics who have written most keenly about language in Mark Twain are Henry Nash Smith (in *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer*) and Richard Bridgman (in *The Colloquial Style in America*). Both stress the fundamental importance to Twain of a literary style based on speech. Smith sees the "vernacular" as a powerful instrument for deflating hypocrisy and pretension; Bridgman finds in Twain's "colloquial" the progenitor of modern American prose style. I find their methodologies limited, however, by the assumption that a single linguistic form corresponds to a single literary function. In the course of this study I seek to demonstrate that the value and significance of linguistic categories vary throughout Twain's work depending on the requirements of a particular context and the evolution of his attitudes.

The voice and names I provide for Mark Twain reflect a number of intellectual debts. A long-standing interest in sociolinguistics and discourse theory, and in literary criticism informed by their concepts and methods, will be evident in specialized vocabulary and unspoken postulates about the way language works. Mikhail Bakhtin has given the most direction to my thinking, for he speaks to Mark Twain's condition as a writer better than any other theorist of the novel we have. "The language of a novel is the system of its 'languages,'" Bakhtin tells us; "the novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages)

and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized."[2] We need such a generic definition if we are to make sense of books like *Huckleberry Finn, A Connecticut Yankee, Pudd'nhead Wilson.* Nevertheless, mine is not an unalloyed "Bakhtinian" reading of Mark Twain, if only because Twain's own troubled investigation of language's shortcomings calls into question Bakhtin's utopian dialectics. If hardly as consistent or sophisticated as Bakhtin's, Mark Twain's understanding of language is ultimately more complex and less sanguine.

I have learned a great deal about language from Mark Twain himself. When I first conceived of this study, I was a graduate student wary of becoming a "Mark Twain scholar," troubled by Twain's lack of both high seriousness and literary "difficulty." Luckily, days on end spent reading Mark Twain teach a distrust of easy categorization and self-serving hierarchies. If Twain wrote, as he told Andrew Lang, for the belly and not the head, it is well to remember that in the belly Epicurus located the soul. Above all, Twain teaches respect for the plain style and clear writing. He could easily wield polysyllabic technical vocabularies, but for his own prose voice he chose the most accessible of styles. His lesson is that since we each bear ultimate responsibility for our language, we should not hide ourselves behind borrowed discourse in the hope that like some Wizard of Oz's screen, it will make us appear greater and more terrible than we are. I have often been aware that my own critical vocabulary confronts Mark Twain's language in a manner embarrassingly reminiscent of the parson's talk with Scotty Briggs. My consolation is that Twain, supremely among our writers, was catholic in appreciating the multiplicity of styles and voices in our verbal universe. Should Mark Twain, in spirit somewhere, be reading this study and stumbling over terminology assimilated from semiotics, sociolinguistics, and literary theory, I trust he will be kind enough to extend to me the indulgence he granted to a stretch of theology that he found rough going: "I do not know that vocabulary, therefore I laugh at the book by the privilege of ignorance, while quite well understanding that men with better heads than mine have learned it and stopped laughing" ("Fragment on Unfamiliar Texts," *WIM*, 517).

. . .

My scholarly career owes much to the influence and support of two teachers. From Craig Williamson's courses in Old English and stylistics at Swarthmore College I learned the *wundor* of words along with analytical linguistic method. Roy Harvey Pearce directed this study in its original form as a dissertation; the less cumbersome title it bears as a book was his idea. Roy taught me to temper my native formalism with a critical appreciation of history. Many members of the community of Mark Twain scholars will find their imprints here, but I wish to offer particular thanks to Everett Emerson, Victor Fischer, Forrest G. Robinson, and Thomas Tenney. Without Alan Gribben's *Mark Twain's Library* as a reference several chapters of this book would have been virtually impossible to write as they now stand. James Cox read the book in manuscript form; for his gracious and incisive comments I am especially grateful. Robert H. Hirst and the staff of the Mark Twain Papers at the University of California, Berkeley, helped me make profitable use of unpublished material in their collections. The Interlibrary Loan staff of Central University Library, University of California, San Diego, made accessible essential research materials from around the country. I wish to thank the Regents of the University of California and the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Rochester for research and travel grants that facilitated my work at several stages. A version of chapter 4 originally appeared as "We Ain't All Trying to Talk Alike: Varieties of Language in *Huckleberry Finn*," in *One Hundred Years of "Huckleberry Finn,"* ed. Robert Sattelmeyer and J. Donald Crowley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985). To Doris Kretschmer and Barbara Ras of the University of California Press go my thanks for their encouragement and patience; to Stephanie Fay, appreciation for her especially thoughtful copy-editing. Elizabeth Bennett and David Ames provided crucial help during the final stages of manuscript preparation. I owe most of all to those whose language has shaped and sustained me: my friends, my parents, my wife and daughter.

Abbreviations

MS	Manuscript
MTP	Mark Twain Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley
TS	Typescript

PUBLISHED WORKS CITED

ATS	*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; Tom Sawyer Abroad; Tom Sawyer, Detective*, ed. John C. Gerber, Paul Baender, and Terry Firkins (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980).
CY	*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, ed. Bernard L. Stein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
CofC	*Clemens of the "Call": Mark Twain in San Francisco*, ed. Edgar M. Branch (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
ETS1	*Early Tales and Sketches*, Vol. 1, 1851–1864, ed. Edgar M. Branch and Robert H. Hirst (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
ETS2	*Early Tales and Sketches*, Vol. 2, 1864–1865, ed. Edgar M. Branch and Robert H. Hirst (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).
FM	*Mark Twain's Fables of Man*, ed. John S. Tuckey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
FW	*The Forgotten Writings of Mark Twain*, ed. Henry Duskis (New York: Philosophical Library, 1961).

HF *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Walter Blair and Victor Fischer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

HHT *Mark Twain's Hannibal, Huck, and Tom*, ed. Walter Blair (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

LE *Letters from the Earth*, ed. Bernard De Voto (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

LSI *Letters from the Sandwich Islands*, ed. G. Ezra Dane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1938).

MSM *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, ed. William M. Gibson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

MTA *Mark Twain's Autobiography*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924).

MTE *Mark Twain in Eruption*, ed. Bernard De Voto (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940).

MTHL *Mark Twain–Howells Letters*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960).

MTL *Mark Twain's Letters*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917).

MTN *Mark Twain's Notebook*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper, 1935).

MTS *Mark Twain Speaking*, ed. Paul Fatout (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1976).

NJ1 *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals*, Vol. 1, 1855–1873, ed. Frederick Anderson, Michael B. Frank, and Kenneth M. Sanderson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

NJ2 *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals*, Vol. 2, 1877–1883, ed. Frederick Anderson, Lin Salamo, and Bernard L. Stein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

NJ3 *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals*, Vol. 3, 1883–1891, ed. Robert Pack Browning, Michael B. Frank, and Lin Salamo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

PP *The Prince and the Pauper*, ed. Victor Fischer and Lin Salamo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

PW *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*, ed. Sidney E. Berger (New York: Norton, 1980).

RI *Roughing It*, ed. Franklin R. Rogers and Paul Baender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

SB *Mark Twain's Satires and Burlesques*, ed. Franklin R. Rogers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

WIM *What Is Man? and Other Philosophical Writings*, ed. Paul Baender (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

WMT *The Writings of Mark Twain*, Definitive Edition, 37 vols. (New York: Gabriel Wells, 1922–1925).

WWD *Mark Twain's Which Was the Dream? and Other Symbolic Writings of the Later Years*, ed. John S. Tuckey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

Contents

Preface ix
Abbreviations xv

1. Introduction: The Problem of Variety in Language 1

2. "A Lot of Rules": Mark Twain and Grammar 15

3. *The Gilded Age* and the Corruption of Language 37

4. "Babel Come Again": Mark Twain and Foreign Languages 51

5. Not All Trying to Talk Alike: Varieties of Language in *Huckleberry Finn* 85

6. Languages of Power and Submission in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* 110

7. Toward a Chaos of Incomprehensibilities 126

Notes 155
Selected Bibliography 179
Index 185

1

Introduction:

The Problem of Variety in Language

> (Shall I confess it?) I have never read Locke nor any other of the many philosophers quoted by you. . . . So all these months I have been thinking the thoughts of illustrious philosophers, and didn't know it.
>
> —Mark Twain, letter to Sir John Adams

"Mark Twain's philosophy of language": surely something seems wrong with the phrase. It is pretentious, it claims too much, it takes itself too seriously. Mark Twain was a novelist, not an academic philosopher. Yet we would not balk if the name were "Melville" or "James," or if "language" were changed to "history" or "religion." Novelists can be philosophical, and Mark Twain wrote at least one book, *What Is Man?*, that claimed to be philosophy; the systematic determinism of his later years is notorious.[1] We readily grant him a thorough amateur knowledge of European history but hesitate to admit his expertise in the very medium of which we claim he was a master. Why?

My question is partly rhetorical; I shall not maintain in this book that Mark Twain had a formal philosophy of language, not even to the extent that he had a philosophy of culture or of morals. Van Wyck Brooks is right to complain that much of his overt commentary on language is trivial or naive. His self-education, wide in other domains, did not, in fact, extend to linguistics (or "philology," the term he would have used): for every book on language that we know he owned or read, we can find dozens of histories, biographies, and memoirs.[2] I *will* claim, however, that Mark Twain's understanding of language,

as evidenced primarily in his fiction, transcended its origin in public-school grammar instruction and moved toward an intuition of principles just beginning to appear in his day and fully enunciated only in our own.[3] Because Twain's principles are largely at odds with those of the Transcendentalists, the nineteenth-century Americans who, we agree by convention, *had* a philosophy of language, Twain himself has been denied title to that phrase. Where the Transcendentalists saw unity, Mark Twain saw variety: this is perhaps the most concise formulation of the opposition. David Simpson has identified exactly this difference between the Transcendentalists and James Fenimore Cooper, and his explication will serve for Twain as well:

> Instead of writing [as Cooper did] of the *kinds* of languages that are effective agents within variously diversified social contracts . . . [the Transcendentalists] write of language (in the singular) as a universal medium shared by all and enabling all to achieve the same access to God and to nature. In a system of doctrines that is, as Transcendentalism is, so completely mediated through the exemplary self and its utterances, the existence of languages as functioning to connect or divide *different* selves becomes so irrelevant as to seem impertinent.[4]

Mark Twain knew his Emerson—or at least what Emerson stood for—well enough to understand the impertinence of forcing the Transcendental voice into dialogue with others. So whereas Emerson, for example, sees quotation as the fundamental stylistic principle for appropriating the language of predecessors and asserting one's continuity with that language, Twain typically quotes parodically to assert radical difference. In his most impudent act of parodic quotation he put lines from poems by Emerson (and by Holmes, Whittier, and Lowell) into the mouths of drunken impostors in his Whittier birthday speech. In the midst of a tall tale, deprived of their original context, the lines become absurd; Twain punctures the poet's implicit claim to unchanging, authoritative meaning. He accomplishes what Mikhail Bakhtin defines as the purpose of parody: to shatter "the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language

that presumes to be completely unified."[5] Mark Twain's philosophy of language can best be characterized as an intuitive rejection of these myths.

Jim's scandalized disbelief that there is more than one language proper to humans (see p. ix) has a long ancestry in Western thought. Before the nineteenth century, variety in language was most often seen as an evil.[6] In his *Cratylus* Plato has Socrates conclude that the Greek dialects are corrupted forms of a primary language whose names corresponded naturally to the essences they represented. The book of Genesis provides our myths of the single namegiver Adam, who creates an original language, and of a confusion of languages to punish sinful presumption. After Babel, to speak with the wrong tongue is to court death:

> Then said they unto him, say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him and slew him.
>
> (Judg. 12:6)

> And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee.
>
> (Matt. 26:73)

Linguistic variety is redeemed at Pentecost, when the Spirit descends to speak through the many tongues of men; but Saint Paul reminds would-be glossolalists that tongues without interpretation are vain: "Except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air" (1 Cor. 14:9). The multiplicity of tongues and the changeability of natural languages is a scandal, for the divine word, or Logos, in both Greek and Judeo-Christian wisdom literature is single and immutable. Nostalgia for an unchanging and primary language—and as late as 1760 Samuel Johnson was complaining of the "mutability" of human speech—partly explains why the major projects of premodern philology were normative grammar and etymology intended to derive European words from their divinely given Hebrew "originals." The Renaissance and early modern

period saw thinkers like Descartes and Leibniz initiate a quest for universal grammars, as well as for philosophical languages, systems in which signs and referents, language and thought, would be maintained in precise and unchanging relationship. Mark Twain knew none of these philosophers of language at first hand, but their doctrines were part of the intellectual inheritance of nineteenth-century public grammar school students. "In the grammar of a *perfect* language," he would read in the first chapter of his schoolboy's grammar text, "no rules should be admitted, but such as are founded on fixed principles, arising out of the genius of that language and the nature of things." Only because language is imperfect must speech be regulated by *"custom"*—that is, the way people actually do talk.[7]

To think seriously about language in the nineteenth century, however, was to confront the problem of the One and the Many in a new and insistent form. By 1860 Continental philology had carried all before it, and speculations about language that ignored Grimm's law or the findings of the Vedic scholars could no longer receive a hearing.[8] Although the derivation of all languages from a single ancestor was still moot, comparative philology had shown that Hebrew could not have been the original tongue of mankind. The hierarchical ranking of speech, with the classical languages of Western Europe at the summit of human culture, was giving way to the relativism of scientific dialectology: philologists testified that rural and other nonstandard dialects were both legitimate objects of research and valuable enrichers of standard speech. The major philosophical shift, however, was a growing tendency to see variety and even discord as essential to language. The post-Kantian reinterpretation of reason as a dialectical process gave rise to a relativistic view of language as a dialogic phenomenon, impossible unless the viewpoints and experiences of the participants are nonidentical. To translate this into Twainian: language is more like Huck talking with Jim than like Adam talking to himself.

For German philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt duality is fundamental to language, and all speaking is founded in dia-