REVIEWS

Tony Crowley,
Language in History. Theories and Texts
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IN *Language in History*, Professor Tony Crowley combines the history of linguistic ideas with cultural history to present a forceful argument for the study of the role played by language and language attitudes in the making of social, cultural and national identity. Part of a new 'Politics of Language Series' published by Routledge, the book follows closely its programmatic sub-title *Theories and Texts*. Dealing first with his theoretical basis – a re-examination of the relevant writings of Ferdinand de Saussure and the Russian linguist and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin – Tony Crowley proposes a model of study where – in the words of Saussure – linguistics is 'not solely the business of a handful of specialists', because 'in the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other'. Following the two theoretical chapters of part 1, the book then gives four case studies (the 'texts' of the book's sub-title) focussing on 'wars of words' in eighteenth-century Britain (ch. 3), linguistic nationalism in nineteenth-century Ireland (ch. 4), nineteenth-century English attitudes to the 'science of language' and the 'standard language' (ch. 5), and finally a study of language matters in present-day Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The proposed 'study of language in history' as defined here by Crowley would aim to investigate a number of related issues: (1) the institutional, political and ideological relations between language and history; (2) the ways in which language is used to divide and unify social groups; (3) the role of language in the making and unmaking of nations, forms of social identity, and patterns of beliefs.

One might be forgiven for thinking that this is in effect sociolinguistics, defined for instance by R.A. Hudson in a book of that name (1980:1) as 'the study of language in relation to society'. But Tony Crowley is adamant that a fully theorised study of 'language in history' is not what sociolinguistics offers, since it is 'extremely empirical in its bias and, again, relatively unsophisticated in terms of social theory' (p. 2). This view is shared at least in part by Hudson, who writes of the 'relatively little discussion' by socio-linguists of 'theoretical issues with less immediate practical consequences' (Hudson 1980:3). The empirical issue is one which may strike some readers of *Language in History*, and I will return to the question briefly below. In general, I think, the introduction (pp. 1-5) is to be avoided on a preliminary reading, except for those already acquainted with the approach taken. Rather odd turns of phrase such as 'why has this lack of theory occurred?' may be off-putting to the unsympathetic first-time reader. Moreover, the case for the usefulness of Bakhtin may – if the book is not read through with an open mind – seem to be overstated in the initial pages of the book. I am reminded of the work of Bernard Huppé in Anglo-Saxon studies, who discovered the usefulness – for the interpretation of Old English texts – of a theoretical framework

based on the exegetical methodology of Augustine of Hippo. This theory was then applied too sweepingly to every aspect of his readings of the texts (see Howe 1997:82-5). While Crowley does not err *too* far in this respect, a note of caution should be sounded; at the same time, however, a potentially hostile reader may be persuaded to read on further, for *Language in History* has much of interest, and it raises a number of pertinent historiographical questions.

The kind of theory which Tony Crowley finds relevant is primarily based, as I have said, on a re-reading of Saussure, and specialists in the modern period of the history of linguistics may well find chapter 1 'For and against Saussure' of particular interest. Here Crowley outlines Saussure's crucial role in the definition of the 'formal, abstract forms of linguistic study which have dominated the twentieth century' (p. 28). Crowley criticises Saussure and his followers for their emphasis on 'scientificity' and for the reification of language, which denies 'its roots in praxis, in practical human labour' (p. 18). He cites a relevant passage from Lukács:

> a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal any trace of its real nature: the relation between people. (Lukács 1971:83)

Despite this, Crowley also finds much of value in Saussure's work, and he argues that while Saussure wished to relegate the diachronic viewpoint, he did not wholly reject the importance of history. Indeed, as Crowley shows (pp. 16, 19-21, 26-28), in the remarks on 'external linguistics' within the *Course in General Linguistics* and in the letter to Antoine Meillet of January 4th 1894, Saussure specifically gives pointers to how such an ethnographic and political approach might be made. It is these pointers which Crowley wishes to develop and take further, and he does this by historicising and politicising a number of key linked terms from the work of Bakhtin, namely the opposition between 'monologism' and 'dialogism', between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' social forces within a particular language community, and between 'monoglossia', 'polyglossia', and 'heteroglossia'. By politicising these terms, Crowley aims to make them more specific and less 'reductively formalist', and hence more useful as tools of analysis in specific contexts.

To assess how these terms are applied to the study of a particular historical period, I turn now to the third of Crowley's case studies, 'Science and silence: Language, class, and nation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain', chapter 5 of *Language in History*. Here Crowley focuses on the 'Science' of linguistics and the 'silence' of the working classes as typical terms found frequently in the discourses on language throughout the nineteenth century. He argues against the views of Stalker (1985) and others that the nineteenth century study of language supposedly became more objective by dropping eighteenth-century linguistic prejudices and adopting a scientific and positivist methodology. Instead, Crowley argues, various biases can be identified which dominated the study of language in the period. These occur within discussions of national identity and the relationship between language and social identity; a particularly important issue for this author, and one on which he has written elsewhere (Crowley 1989) is that of the 'standard language', a term first used in 1858 and a focus of much linguistic and social debate.

Within the first two sections of the chapter – Crowley's discussion of the relationship between language and national identity, and in the discussion of Archbishop Trench's 'Theological etymology', which Crowley calls a 'monologic discourse of moral order' – the present reviewer finds that (though there is much of interest) there is not enough historical data. At the risk of appearing 'extremely empirical', I would like to be given more information about the individual linguists and writers who are cited so frequently, or at the very least references so that I could look this information up for myself (see, for instance Crowley 1989). In the case of Trench, for instance, we learn in *Language in History* very little about the man himself or about his linguistic attitudes other than those given in his major writings; nor do we learn what his political opinions were – he was, at least for a while, a liberal follower of Bentham and Mill (Aarsleff 1983:192). We do not know, from Crowley's account here, whether Trench had any opponents at the time, nor are we referred to any other recent (even if flawed) discussions of Trench which attempt to show him in a different light (e.g. Aarsleff 1983:230-47). We are told that 'what Trench's writings exemplify ... is that the study of language in the nineteenth century was not less rhetorical and socially motivated than that of the eighteenth, but perhaps even more so... the status bestowed upon the science of language is deployed on behalf of a specific social project' (p. 157). The question that arises here is this: where, in his writings, does Trench lay such great claim to scientific objectivity? Does Trench 'exemplify' the study of language in the period, or perhaps only one branch of it? Trench's views on etymology are surely worth comparing with those of Max Müller, for the latter scholar was far more expressly 'scientific' and objective in his methods (even if his findings on the origin of language are now discredited), and he was certainly far less 'monologic' in his linguistic beliefs and pronouncements. It should be added too that Müller is an equally viable exemplification of nineteenth-century attitudes, and in his day was probably more influential.

Similar objections could be made to other parts of this chapter, for instance the section on the standard language, where the pronouncements of writers with very different social backgrounds and very different linguistic views are treated almost as though they shared exactly the same monologic attitude to the spoken standard language. Such widely differing figures cited here include the self-educated Yorkshireman and Joseph Wright, who spoke with a Yorkshire accent and was clearly not an unqualified supporter of standard *spoken* English, and Henry Sweet, politically probably a Socialist supporter, who admittedly favoured what could be called a 'monologic' standard spoken language furthered by phonetics and spelling reform, but who nevertheless included Cockney-coloured diphthongs in the transcriptions of his own spoken English which he used in his language primers (Sweet 1885). Both these figures surely differ from the younger linguist H.C. Wyld, who had more reactionary views on standard speech and other matters. In a study stressing that 'in the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other', such historical information on individuals is not to be ignored.

Despite this lack of differentiation, the author's analysis is also frequently very successful in its technique of juxtaposition of different sources: Crowley reads widely in the field and focusses on the 'key tropes' – typical aspects of the discourse of the linguistic debates, citing and juxtaposing passages by different writers to reveal similarities and divergences. One instance of this is his discussion of the term 'standard

language' which first occurs in the *Proposal for the Publication of a New English Dictionary*:

> As soon as a standard language has been formed, which in England was the case after the Reformation, the lexicographer is bound to deal with that alone. (1858:3)

Crowley interprets the coining of this term as a response to a methodological need by the OED lexicographers to establish a literary canon – a corpus on which they could draw for sample sentences for the dictionary entries. Such an interpretation fits well with Bakhtin's views on the process of 'centripetalisation' within a language:

> Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces in a language. A unitary language is not something given (*dan*) but is always in essence posited (*zadan*) and at every moment of its life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia. (Bakhtin 1981:270)

Crowley regards 'the standard language' as a necessary theoretical invention, which then itself contributed to the processes of standardisation, and produced a form of monoglossia at the level of writing. Using his favourite technique of juxtaposition, Crowley compares the above cited passage from Bakhtin with a report on the effects of the Education Act of 1870:

> The education Act has forced the knowledge of the three Rs upon the population, and thereby an acquaintance in all parts of the country with the same literary form of English, which it has been the aim and object of all elementary teachers to make their pupils consider to be the only correct one. The result is already becoming manifest... There is one written language understood by all, while the inhabitants of distant parts may be quite unintelligible to each other *viva voce*. (Elworthy 1876:xliii)

Here, as the author points out, the forces of centripetalisation produce a socially desirable effect, namely a mass literacy project, a form of monoglossia which Bakhtin characterises as follows:

> it makes its real presence felt as a force for overcoming...heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it, guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystallizing into a real, though still relative unity. (Bakhtin 1981:270)

In his section on nineteenth-century discussions of accent and dialect, Crowley turns to another, more 'reactionary' use of the phrase 'standard English' in the nineteenth century, namely to refer to socially acceptable speech. He makes the valid point that the dialectologists (often philologists anxious to employ scientific methodology) frequently favoured recording the various *rural* dialects (which appeared to be dying out) rather than investigating the new speech varieties of the 'populous cities'. Evidently these dialect investigators were not wholly objective, since social or political attitudes also played a role in their selection of material. Taking this point further, Crowley then juxtaposes the preference by linguists for the study of rural dialects with actual descriptions of the language of urban workers as given by

nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century novelists such as Gissing (1892) and by sociologists and educationalists such as C.F.G. Masterman, who writes that 'the first thing to note is our quantity, the second is our silence' (1902:18). The word 'silence' is used metaphorically here to indicate that urban workers were restricted by social attitudes (by centripetal forces of monoglossia, to use the Bakhtinian terms) so that they 'never attain a language which the world beyond can hear' (Masterman 1902:20). Here the Bakhtinian terminology is employed to give a related yet different reading of the significance of language in nineteenth-century social history.

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