

## The Loss of the Subject: *Keywords*, and the Language of Science Fiction

### Introduction: The Loss of Transitivity

In an episode of *Doctor Who* broadcast by BBC One on 10 September 2011, Matt Smith playing the Doctor uses rather an unusual phrase. After explaining that his companion Amy has been quarantined in a separate time stream, he discovers that as a result of this quarantining there are now two different Amys, with an age difference of 36 years between them. This creates a paradox in the fabric of space and time which if unresolved will have the effect that ‘history will re-write.’<sup>1</sup> The scriptwriters did not use the passive expression ‘history will be re-written’; neither did they assign distinct causality as would have been the case if they had used the alternative expression, ‘we will re-write history.’ On the contrary, ‘history will re-write’ implied that history would actively be responsible for writing itself, with no sense of exterior agency or causal authority.

Something is happening in the language of science fiction that is also happening in the evolution of language more generally. Between ‘we will re-write history’ and ‘history will re-write’ a subtle shift in grammatical nuance has taken place. That shift is more than simply an expansion of meaning in one or two individual words. Rather, it is the gradual development of a new linguistic structure, which can be characterised as the use of transitive verbs in a series of otherwise intransitive senses.

Grammatically, a transitive verb is a verb that connects a subject to an object in the structure: *a* does *b* to *c* – as in the expression *we* (*a*) *will re-write* (*b*) *history* (*c*). An intransitive verb on the other hand is a verb that does not require an object, and conveys meaning in the structure: *a* does *b* – as in the expression *the tree* (*a*) *grows* (*b*).

In the example quoted above, however, neither of these cases obtains and something quite different is happening. In the expression *history will re-write* a normally transitive verb is used in an intransitive case, so that rather than following either the structure *a does b to c* or the structure *a does b*, a new structure emerges: *c does b* (to itself).

The effect of this comparatively new usage is that in sentences where it is employed, the grammatical object of the sentence becomes the subject. Thus where *we will re-write history* would follow the structure *a does b to c* appropriate for a transitive verb, the quoted phrase *history will re-write* follows the new structure *c does b*, so that *history* ceases to be the object of an action carried out by some other agency, and instead becomes its own causative agent. That is, the sentence presents the appearance of a subject without an object.

This shift from the transitive to the intransitive represents more than the evolution of usage in one particular word. In deeper analysis, the shift that is represented in language is also representative of a wider shift in human and social relationships expressed in that language. For this reason, a whole series of words that have started to be used in the new intransitive sense can be considered examples of what Raymond Williams called *keywords*.

Williams used the term *keywords* to refer to words that relate to quite fundamental social structures, political hierarchies and human relationships. Often, the words in question have undergone subtle evolutions in meaning over periods of time, so that as the dominant structures of society change, relationships between people in that society change, and the meanings associated with the words that instantiate those relationships also change. Williams’s practice of identifying the development of certain keywords is a kind of literary archaeology, whereby reading contemporary meanings or nuances associated with particularly emotive words alongside the earlier definitions that have now become obsolete enables us to gain a sense of how contemporary social and political structures have evolved and how the relationships that embody those structures are cemented in language.

For example, in a Channel Four review of current affairs broadcast on 28 December 2011, commentator Jon Snow discussed the revolutions around the middle eastern world that have become referred to as the Arab Spring. For the first time in the region, populist political action was organised and coordinated through use of advanced communications technologies. The pattern Snow identified was one of early rebellion giving way to a re-assertion of authoritarian rule. The precise phrase he used was 'early optimism did not sustain.'<sup>2</sup> He did not use the passive expression, 'early optimism was not sustained.' Neither did he use an active (*a does b to c*) expression: the people did not sustain their early optimism. Rather the 'optimism' itself was re-arranged in the new grammatical expression *c does b* (or in this case, *c did not do b*). The subject, that is, the people sustaining the mood of optimism, are left out of the expression and the optimism itself is transformed into a new grammatical subject. This loss of the human subject says something quite profound about changing human relationships.

Similarly, Walter Isaacson's recent biography of *Einstein* contained the opening claim that many of the technologies and devices that are taken for granted today 'trace back to his theories.'<sup>3</sup> Again, the transitive verb *to trace* is used in an intransitive sense so that rather than suggesting 'we can trace modern technology back to Einstein's theories' Isaacson used the new *c does b* structure: the technologies trace themselves back to Einstein. This relative decline in the use of transitivity creates in language the almost magical impression that the technologies involved are responsible for operating, running, or tracing themselves.

This paper has three main propositions. First, it will argue that the decline in usage of transitive verbs has important implications for how we understand human relationships in the contemporary world and so can be considered in the light of Williams's theory of keywords. Second, it will suggest that one of the major factors in the loss of transitivity in language is the use of high-speed communication capable of reaching millions of people instantaneously via the internet and advanced communications technology more generally. Third, since the use of communications technology is one of the main drivers of the linguistic evolution identified, it will suggest that science fiction, and the fictional portrayal of technological dystopias, is an appropriate space for the contestation of the new social and political relationships that are otherwise ratified by the linguistic loss of the subject. The portrayal of that contestation will be explored in detail in regard to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Before it is possible to analyse their implicit challenge to social and political structures, however, it is necessary to elucidate Williams's archaeology of language in full.

### **Raymond Williams and *Keywords***

Williams was interested in revealing the genealogy of certain dominant terms for describing social and political relationships in capitalist society. In addition, he was concerned with making active the multiplicity of different, overlapping and at times competing nuances of meaning which have been and continue to be attached to the same words over time. He had a dual interest in tracing the evolution of particular terms, in the context of the evolution of the social structures to which they refer:

... [I]n certain words, tones and rhythms, meanings are offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed. In some situations this is a very slow process indeed; it needs the passage of centuries to show itself actively... In other situations the process can be rapid, especially in certain key areas. In a large and active university, and in a period of change as important as a war, the process can seem unusually rapid and conscious.<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, subtle shifts in linguistic practice take place over such long periods as to render any tracing of their evolution difficult and obscure, and this is also true of the power relationships and social structures which language enables. On the other hand, in particular periods of crisis the changes in both language and social structure can occur so rapidly as to

leave little opportunity to interrogate them. Williams refers to the Second World War as such a period. The Industrial Revolution, the onset of the internet age, and a recent worldwide economic recession might all be seen as periods of similarly volatile social and political relationships.

Because of the incremental nature of social change on the one hand, and the apparent rapidity of social transformation in particular instances on the other, Williams felt the need to develop a further interest in exposing, questioning and opposing both the dominant social structures of capitalist society and the process whereby the uncritical use of language to name and identify those structures plays a hegemonic role with regard to them. '[J]ust because "meaning", in any active sense, is more than the general process of "signification", and because "norms" and "rules" are more than the properties of any abstract process or system, other kinds of analysis remain necessary'.<sup>5</sup> To make active a multiplicity of meaning is to oppose acquiescence in the hierarchical structuring of society and the perpetuation of entrenched hierarchies through language. As Williams puts it:

... some important social and historical processes occur *within* language, in ways which indicate how integral the problems of meanings and relationships really are. New kinds of relationship, but also new ways of seeing existing relationships, appear in language in a variety of ways: [...] invention [...] adaptation and alteration [...] extension [...] transfer.<sup>6</sup>

The recent use of verbs in the intransitive creates new ways of seeing relationships in language, by adapting, altering, extending and transferring the meaning of those relationships. The practice detaches the consequences of an action from the person carrying it out, as if the actions or objects somehow carry out themselves, and hence obscures the actions and social relationships to which the words themselves refer. The loss of the subject implicit in the decline in usage of transitive verbs suggests a kind of mystification, creating the impression of knowledge while also frustrating the impulse to know. The simultaneous creation and frustration of knowledge in and through language has an important relationship to the media age, in which sources of information are over-determined and sometimes contradictory, with the effect that knowledge of particular actions or activities is very often presented without a corresponding knowledge of the main causes or agents of those actions.

In the thirty years or more since Raymond Williams published *Keywords*, large advances have been made in the study of social linguistics. We now know much more about the relationship between language and power, or between language and gender or language and social class than was previously the case. Similarly, we have a much more nuanced understanding of how perceived differences in prestige related to the languages of different social groups give rise to distinct forms of linguistic evolution. Just as the study of languages has developed greatly, so language itself has continued to evolve. This is both a natural process in a human world, and a historical development with causes and roots which are, although complex, traceable. However, the continuing evolution of both language and technology has given rise to a challenge that Williams himself could not have foreseen in 1976. Although, as Williams recognised, much sociological analysis has established the primacy of the spoken word over the written, there remains significant confusion over the status of the *virtual* word.

### **The Virtual Word**

Computerised communication via the internet has the capacity to reach millions of people very rapidly, but the internet is not simply a neutral medium for the conveying of messages. On the contrary, it is an active agent for the development of new forms of communication in language and hence for the reification of new forms of relationship. In the internet age, those relationships are based on impersonal (often economic) transaction carried out over a relatively long distance over a relatively short time, and therefore seem to exist, like the language expressing them, in virtual terms. The shift in linguistic usage from transitive to intransitive verbs accompanies a relational shift in which there is no longer an 'I' or 'we' with whom 'you' can communicate, leaving the receiver of such messages instead in a relationship with pure virtual space. The identity of

the person at the other end of the communication, and the technical processes by which that communication occurs, are both outside the knowledge of the individual. This is a great irony of the information age.

One of the more prominent transitive verbs that have started to be used in an intransitive way in web-based communications is the verb *to dispatch*. For example, the online retail company Amazon routinely sends out a message to its customers to advise them of the delivery date for particular items. This message is normally entitled: 'Your Amazon.co.uk order has dispatched' and it is replicated millions of times per day.

The OED defines the verb *to dispatch* as a transitive verb following the traditional *a does b to c* structure: he dispatched messages back to base. In addition, the OED provides related meanings for the word ranging from *deal with* or *address* to *kill* (as in the example phrase, 'the executioner's merciful dispatch of his victims'). All of these are transitive uses of the verb; they require a grammatical subject and a grammatical object. It may be significant that the example sentences provided are of an essentially militaristic nature, referring to the dispatching of messages to an army base, through the euphemistic use of the word to refer to execution and killing, and up to a final use of the word as a noun: the battle dispatch as an official report from a battlefield.

None of the usages listed in the OED are intransitive. Yet the fact that a particular linguistic shift has not yet found its way into the dictionary does not yet mean that it is not starting to occur. Raymond Williams demonstrated his awareness of the difficulty in gathering documented proof of recent linguistic developments when he noted in *Keywords* that 'in some important words the evidence for developed... usage is not really available.'<sup>7</sup> The fact that *dispatch* has started to be used in an intransitive way without the attention of the OED underlines the relatively recent nature of this linguistic evolution. It contrasts with the related word *to deploy*, where the OED does give both a transitive definition and an intransitive one: in the transitive (*a does b to c*) sense, a general deploys his troops for military action; in the intransitive case, the troops simply deploy themselves (*c does b*).

The intransitive use of *to dispatch* in internet-based retail relationships separates the process of dispatching an order from the person carrying it out. We are not told who has dispatched the order and in an almost magical way the linguistic structure in question creates an image of a C.D. or a book parcelling itself up for delivery, because it appears to have dispatched itself. Human contact and human relationships are bleached out of the process through this particular, and particularly recent, grammatical structure.

The clouding of relationships implicit in the new use of the intransitive verb hints at a new kind of relationship between the people involved, that is, between customer and supplier. It is significant that 'Consumer' was one of the important words that Raymond Williams originally analysed in *Keywords*, exploring a gradual transition in how the verb *to consume* was understood across Europe. Williams identified a 'relative decline' in the use of the word 'customer' in favour of 'consumer' to describe 'a buyer or purchaser' from about 1600 onwards. This transition from 'customer' to 'consumer' was significant because, Williams suggests, '*customer* had always implied some degree of regular and continuing relationship to a supplier, whereas *consumer* indicates the more abstract figure in a more abstract market'.<sup>8</sup>

The shift from *customer* to *consumer* seems to be related to a changing social history in which expanding networks of transport, gradual urbanisation, the onset of a market economy and longer trading routes each contributed to a gradual situation in which people gradually ceased to purchase food, clothing and basic materials from one supplier who was individually known to them, and instead found themselves meeting and trading with people with whom they were not directly acquainted more and more often. At the theoretical level, Williams noted in the introduction to *Keywords* that:

the most active problems of meaning are always primarily embedded in actual relationships, and that both the meanings and the relationships are typically diverse and variable, within the structures of particular social orders and the processes of social and historical change.<sup>9</sup>

The social and historical changes implicit in the shift from *customer* to *consumer* are direct changes of human relationship. The abstract figure of the *consumer* can be seen as a correlative of the shift from a situation in which relationships of buying and selling were carried out among people personally acquainted to one where they were not. It replaced the more personable figure of the *customer*, a term much more common in the earlier period where relationships were more settled, narrower in range and less amenable to social diffusion. It is in turn in the process of being replaced by a different historical process, wherein the purchase of consumer goods from large multinational corporations via the internet renders the figure of the retailer not just unknown from the perspective of the consumer, but also fundamentally unknowable.

This new kind of relationship between an entirely unknown retailer and an abstract and impersonal consumer takes to a logical next stage the process of losing human contact that had already begun in the early modern period, when trading took place over greater distances than in the middle ages and when direct acquaintance and solidarity between purchaser and supplier began to decline. The very recent shift in linguistic usage of *dispatch* from transitive to intransitive cuts the trader, linguistically speaking, off from the purchaser and this is a correlative of a period in which market relationships are carried out on unknowable terms. For in a large corporation such as Amazon, it might seem almost impossible to know, at the most basic level, who it is that is responsible for carrying out the act of dispatching individual items perhaps across thousands of miles and also across national boundaries. In other words, the loss of transitivity is not merely a cunning linguistic game for the perpetuation of subtle half-truths by those with something to hide. It also describes a series of much more prevalent relationships, in which information is not only consciously concealed but is also from the outset fundamentally – and generally – unknown. Thus the recent usage of a sentence such as ‘Your order has dispatched’ hints at the latest stage of a much longer and more complicated social history, inscribed within the history of the words themselves.

In practice, Amazon uses *dispatch* in a way that is interchangeable with its use of the word *to ship*. Indeed, it is as likely to use the phrase ‘Your Amazon.co.uk order has shipped’ as ‘Your Amazon.co.uk order has dispatched.’ This time, however, the OED does recognise both a transitive and an intransitive usage for *to ship*. Similarly, just as *to ship* can mean both *to go to sea by ship* and *to send something or someone else to sea in a ship*, so also the verb *to launch* combines usages that sometimes require an object (transitive uses) and sometimes do not require an object (intransitive). A prominent example of both usages was the final mission in 2011 of America’s space shuttle programme. Linguistically speaking, it is possible to say both that the shuttle Atlantis launched on June 28, and that it was launched by NASA. The former (intransitive) example is the more recent of the two usages, detaching the verb from an outside agency as if the shuttle actively launched itself. The older, transitive usage would require, in grammatical terms, that the shuttle be launched by an outside agency – in this case, NASA. The confusion and almost equally common usage that exists between the two constructs possibly refers to a period in which space travel has become globally recognised, but when very few people really understand either the technical processes required nor in truth the political and institutional hierarchies behind those processes. Does the shuttle launch itself or is it launched by someone, and if so, who? The knowledge that it (was) launched exists in parallel with a lack of knowledge about how precisely that launch was caused to take place.

As the examples of *deploy*, *dispatch*, *ship* and *launch* should suggest, one of the difficulties in tracking subtle and recent changes in linguistic usage is the availability of documentation and evidence. The OED lists both transitive and intransitive uses for *deploy* and *ship* but not for

*dispatch* or *launch*. *Install* is a further example of a verb that has come to be used in an intransitive sense, although the OED does not yet recognise that usage. In the case of *install*, the use of the intransitive can seem to describe an almost magical process whereby things happen without anyone making them happen.

A pop-up box on the computer screen announces: 'Your new version of BT Broadband desktop help is now installing.' It does not say, 'BT is now installing your new version of desktop help.' The impression created is one that frustrates understanding. Something is happening, but who is causing it to happen, or how, is within the parameters of the grammatical structure provided less clear. This example is striking because it contains an abstract 'you' at the receiving end of the action (as in 'your new version') without containing a corresponding sense of the 'I' or 'we' carrying it out. Clearly there is nobody inside the machine carrying out the action and this might be one reason why the use of a first person subject appears inappropriate. Possibly this can be related to the more general fact that many more people use home computers than really understand the technical process of their operation so that in the almost magical sense described it really does appear as though computers operate themselves.

*To process, to activate, to renew* and *to upgrade* are all further examples of transitive verbs which, primarily in online or automated communications, are now being used in an intransitive sense and hence creating a situation in which strict causality is not assigned to an action in the structure of the language expressing that action. The important point is not just that these new intransitive structures are used deliberately to create an impression of vagueness or misinformation – in the way that some journalists or politicians use the passive voice. In many cases, the identity of the person or agent causing an action to occur is not only concealed by the use of the intransitive but is also both unknown and unknowable. This could be said to reflect an age of uncertainty; an age in which military action is widely reported but rarely explained; in which political decisions are made without us knowing how or by whom; and in which technology informs our lives without us really necessarily understanding how it works. Or as Raymond Williams puts it in *Keywords*, an age in which 'the problems of information are severe'.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, whereas the passive voice is often used to perpetuate a practice of misinformation on the part of the person using it, the intransitive creates a linguistic relationship between communicator and recipient not based on one withholding information from the other, but in which neither knows who has caused the action to occur. Things happen, but the human agent causing them to happen is rendered invisible by the long-distance and instantaneous nature of advanced communications technology and by the language used to refer to that technology. What we are left with is a language without a human subject in which it appears that technologies of communication run themselves. The fear of a world dominated and controlled entirely by machines has long been one of the deepest phobias expressed by science fiction, and because that fear is instantiated in the relatively new use of transitive verbs in the intransitive, it is perhaps logical to discover the use of that linguistic structure in science fiction texts.

### **Language and Ideology in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?***

It is important to emphasise that the newly evolving nuances in meaning behind the terms discussed here never simply replace earlier or prior definitions in any straightforward sense. Indeed, different definitions often continue to exist alongside each other and compete with each other. Raymond Williams developed *Keywords* as a way of recovering dormant or jettisoned meanings and making those meanings active in the process of building new social relationships based on equality rather than on domination and authority: 'they have often, as variations, to be insisted upon, just because they embody different experiences and readings of experience, and this will continue to be true in active relationships and conflicts'.<sup>11</sup> One area in which different experiences are embodied and different readings of experience provided is that of literature, where Williams claims 'what can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness'.<sup>12</sup> He wrote elsewhere on the value of social realism in literature, claiming that:

the value of literature is precisely that it is one of the areas where the grip of ideology is or can be loosened, because although it cannot escape ideological construction, the point about its literariness is that it is a continual questioning of it internally. So you get readings which are very similar to certain recent semiotic readings, where you construct a text and subtext, where you can say, 'this is what is reproduced from the ideology'; but also, 'this is what is incongruously happening in the text which undermines or questions or in certain cases entirely subverts it.' This method has been used in very detailed and interesting analysis.<sup>13</sup>

Williams suggests that the characteristics of literature specifically enable it to put different meanings, values and nuances of understanding into free play with each other in a way that avoids rigid determinism and hence enables the reader to question the dominance of one meaning or value over another. One of the genres that has persistently sought to loosen the grip of the dominant ideology of the information age is science fiction, a genre which Williams valued precisely because it has the capacity both to reproduce and to question and subvert the dominant social structures and ideological values of a society. Two seminal works of science fiction perform precisely this double movement, at once reproducing and contesting the assumed values of their societies.

Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and Kazuo Ishiguro's more recent work *Never Let Me Go* (2005) both address the challenges of societies based on the increasing dominance of technological elites. Dick and Ishiguro are both aware of the relationship between virtual language and how that language can either cement or contest the reification of power relationships. Moreover, each writer employs the linguistic device discussed here, that is, the shift of usage between transitive and intransitive verbs, in an ironic manner in order to explore what happens when responsibility for political, scientific and technical decision-making becomes divorced from a human agent.

The futuristic world of Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* is one that has been all-but destroyed by perpetual warfare. The majority of human beings have left the planet to start new lives on other colonies in space. Advanced robots or androids are used to carry out the work of servants and labourers, but they are implanted with synthetically generated human memories through the use of computer chips. Humans remaining in small outposts on Earth are legally required to keep a pet, in order to demonstrate their ability to empathise and care for another being and so distinguish themselves from the artificial intelligence of the androids. Emigration to other planets is restricted to certain desirable races and is categorically forbidden to 'specials', that is, adults with learning difficulties, typified in the novel by J.R. Isidore who is referred to as a 'Chickenhead'. Dick portrays a dystopian world that draws to a logical conclusion the ideology of industrial exploitation and a competitive market economy that provides mobility to some and not to others.

Raymond Williams's *Keywords* was not published until 1976, and so at the time *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was published, Williams had not yet drawn attention to the capacity of literature both to reproduce and internally question the dominant ideology of a society. Retrospectively, however, Williams's work in *Keywords* enables us to see that this is precisely what Dick achieved in 1968 through a series of ironies.

For example, the protagonist Deckard is a bounty hunter sent by his commander, Bryant to 'retire', or de-commission, an escaped and malfunctioning Nexus-6 android, Pris. Isidore's emotional behaviour causes him to sympathise with and shelter the escaping android. This excessive display of emotional behaviour is what causes Isidore to be cast as a 'special' and denied the rights of employment and mobility available to other people. Yet the capacity to empathise is also what is supposed to define his humanity in contrast to the simulated emotional experiences of the androids. Meanwhile, Deckard's wife Iran controls her emotions using a

machine (a 'Penfold mood organ') in order to protect herself from feelings of misery and depression in a world of perpetual warfare. She stops using the machine, however, because 'I realised how unhealthy it was, sensing the absence of life' [and not feeling any emotion]... That used to be considered a sign of mental illness; they called it *absence of appropriate affect*'.<sup>14</sup> In other words, she senses that technology has been used in an innovative way among the human population in order to lessen the effects of emotional experience, but this again is what is supposed to define humanity in contrast to the artificial intelligence of the androids.

During his mission, Deckard is seduced by Rachael Rosen, another Nexus-6 android, who hopes that his feelings for *her* will cause him an emotional reaction to her lookalike, Pris, and therefore prevent him from being able to 'retire' her. Rachael tells Deckard, 'You know what I have? Toward this Pris android? Identification; there goes I... No bounty hunter has ever gone on... After being with me' (pp.148-49). In other words, the androids demonstrate a solidarity and empathy with each other, the lack of which is supposed to define their absence of humanity. The humans, by contrast, are assumed to be able to demonstrate sophisticated emotional and empathetic responses to each other, but either fail to do so (Iran) or are judged to be mentally deficient because they do so (Isidore). Through the portrayal of these ironies, Dick is able to raise interesting moral questions about how we define and measure what it means to be human.

A further irony arises when Deckard is imprisoned by another bounty hunter, Phil Resch. The Resch sub-plot enables Dick to elaborate upon his main philosophical theme, what is humanity?, because Resch is another android who nevertheless does not know that this is the case, and who pursues his target as if it were Deckard, not Resch himself, who is a machine to be de-commissioned. This enables Dick ironically to turn the tables on Deckard, whose only solution is to confront Resch with the fact of his lack of humanity. He is reluctant to do this, however, because he does not know how Resch will react to this demonstration. His superior officer tells Deckard, 'It ought, from an abstract, intellectual viewpoint, to be interesting. He may kill me, kill himself; maybe you too. He may kill everyone he can, human and android alike' (p.97). Once again, therefore, the android Resch is judged to be inhuman, but this gives rise to a fear that he will respond to such news with an excess of violent emotion, anger, which ironically is supposed to be the hallmark of humanity.

The important point in this final irony is the blunt use of the word 'kill.' This is used in contrast to Deckard's own instructions which are to 'retire' the malfunctioning Nexus-6, Pris. The assumption interrogated by Dick is that the mechanised slaves have no emotional experience; if this is revealed not to be the case then to anger them will result in a murderous outburst of emotional excess made manifest in violence. It is only permissible to kill the escaped Nexus-6, Pris, because she is deemed to lack the appropriate emotional affects which define humanity. This killing, however, is hidden behind the euphemistic word 'retire,' linguistically concealing and justifying the violence to be inflicted on her and subjugating emotional needs to commercial ones. Writing in 1968, Dick may well have felt that the dominant ideology of his own society was one which prioritised expansion of the military-industrial command economy over the emotional needs of the individual. In his ironic exploration of what it means to be human and of the role of empathy and emotional experience in defining humanity he both repeats the dominant assumptions of the period and renders those assumptions ironic and unstable.

Dick's portrayal of humanised machines enables him to open a critical perspective on humanity itself. In this subtle shift of perspective, the phobia expressed by the text is not a fear that machines will run the world, but that in treating each other as scientific objects without consideration of human subjectivity, emotion or empathy, humans themselves are in danger of becoming a little less humane. This shift in perspective suggests that what is significant about Dick's work is not only its imagined technological dystopia, but also his projection and portrayal of changing human relationships and of the evolution of the language used to embody those relationships. By observing the political relationships that developed as a result of new



technologies of warfare and space travel in the 1960s, Dick was able to document the new kinds of language that made such relationships possible.

The shift in language from transitive to intransitive had not yet started to occur when *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was published in 1968. Nevertheless Dick sensed that the new technologies carried with them a dangerous potential to give rise to feelings of powerlessness and the impossibility of intervention. The loss of human subjectivity expressed by the more recent decline in linguistic transitivity expresses a sense of an unknowable universe with little scope for human intervention. In this sense, Dick's work is highly prescient, foreseeing the decline of linguistic transitivity in advance of the event. He does not so much use the new intransitive case as anticipate its later development, and this anticipation is made possible by an innovative shift between transitive and intransitive verbs. 'Retire' would ordinarily be used in an intransitive sense. It does not need an object; it is something that an individual can simply do for himself or herself: the pilot is retiring this year. Dick, by contrast, converts the term into a transitive verb requiring an object. Deckard does not retire as such; he is sent to 'retire' Pris. In other words, Pris is to have her retirement inflicted on her by Deckard. The relationship between them is one in which she has lost control of her own subjectivity and this relationship is expressed in the ironic use of the intransitive verb in a transitive sense. Because it has the effect of denying Pris's subjectivity, this use of an intransitive verb in a transitive sense anticipates the opposite process – the use of transitive verbs in an impersonal, intransitive sense – which has developed in language more recently and which can be used to inform our reading of a more recent text.

### **Ethics and Responsibility in *Never Let Me Go***

The philosophical questioning of how we define humanity through emotional affect that we find in Dick's work is given further prominence in Kazuo Ishiguro's dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go*. Indeed, *Never Let Me Go* was published in 2005, in a period after the first successful cloning by humans of a mammal, Dolly the sheep, in 1996, and could therefore be described as a novel relating to a world in which the ethics and moral implications of human cloning are even more pressing than they were to Dick in 1968.

*Never Let Me Go* is narrated by Kathy, a graduate of the prestigious Hailsham educational establishment. Since leaving, she has become a 'carer', looking after organ donors during the painful process of their operations and recovery in order to prepare them for the next donation of another organ, and so on until they 'complete', or die. The student donors have been cloned for their organs, which are harvested until the students die, and the brutality of this process is hidden behind a carefully erected barrier of linguistic camouflage. In other words, *Never Let Me Go* provides an ironic use of the intransitive sense of the verb *to complete* in order to portray how the logic of a market and commercial exploitation squeezes human agency out of human relationships.

Ishiguro skilfully hints at the equation of *completion* with *death* in the opening section of the novel, so that as Kathy's retrospective narrative unfolds readers both know and do not know that the edifice on which the Hailsham world is founded is one of syntactic violence. Kathy talks about one of her patients, who had 'just come through his third donation' and who 'must have known he wasn't going to make it.'<sup>15</sup> The patient in question 'knew he was close to completing' (ibid). As with other uses of the noun in the intransitive, the students do not complete a project or an operation; neither is their work or mission completed for them by someone else. They simply complete themselves. Thus Tommy says to Kathy, '[t]he donors will all donate just the same, and then they'll complete' (p.276). Kathy responds to the deaths of her own friends Tommy and Ruth by asking him, 'Tommy, are you glad Ruth completed before finding out everything we did in the end?' (p.278) and then by noting in her story that '[t]he only indulgent thing I did, just once, was a couple of weeks after I heard Tommy had completed, when I drove up to Norfolk [where they had met]' (p.281).

*To complete* is an example of a word like *install*, which primarily through computerised messaging, has only started to be used in the intransitive sense in the very recent past. In general, *complete* remains a verb in need of an object, for example, *the student completed her assignment*. As with *install*, however, there has started to be a specific, intransitive application of the verb relating to the installation of new software updates on computer desktops. During the installation process of new updates, it is common for computer screens to display a pre-programmed message from Microsoft Windows: '2 out of 3 updates have completed successfully'. As with *install*, this linguistically cuts off any sense of who is providing the updates and again creates the magical sense of the computer running itself.

The technical intransitive usage of *complete* relating to updates on a computer appears to be too recent to have been entered in the OED. However, the OED does give a different intransitive definition for the verb, specifically *to conclude the sale of a property*. In this usage, grammatically speaking, *complete* is not something that a person does to an object or process, as in the earlier example of completing an assignment. Rather, the purchase, the transaction itself, which would ordinarily be considered the object of the verb, becomes redeployed as the subject. Hence in the terms and conditions of a law firm dealing with conveyancing is the stipulation, 'we will need payment even if your transaction fails to complete'. This is followed by the assertion of a need for a financial deposit, which will be refunded '28 days after the transaction has been completed'. Within one paragraph the usage switches from intransitive to transitive, hinting at confusion as to who precisely is responsible for completing the transaction, other than the transaction itself.

Ishiguro appears to have chosen the word *complete* as the linguistic fulcrum on which *Never Let Me Go* pivots because it modulates between these transitive and intransitive uses, providing a nexus between transactional relationships and relationships of ownership. The new intransitive usage of *complete* draws attention to a difference between computer systems that are owned and run by a human agent; and those that own and run themselves. In *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro draws attention to a congruent distinction – not the difference between a computer being run by a person and a computer running itself; but the difference between a human body being owned and controlled by another person and that human owning and controlling himself. In other words, Ishiguro makes use of the shift from transitive to intransitive to raise profound moral questions about moral agency, human subjectivity and the extent to which the human subject can be considered owner of his or her own body. The ethical question he invites his readers to ask is: What is the difference between a human being running his own life, and that same human being having his life run for him by a closed system?

The brutality of the relationships portrayed in the novel is conveyed through the agricultural metaphor of the harvesting of organs. In accordance with this controlling metaphor, the interplay Ishiguro mobilises between *complete* as a transitive verb and its intransitive application parallels a further agricultural term that can be used in either a transitive or an intransitive way: *to grow*. In the transitive sense of the verb *to grow*, farmers grow crops that are then harvested for sale on the market. But there is also an intransitive usage of the verb *to grow*, in which a child does not grow a crop or plant, but simply grows herself, as in the common expression, 'she has grown.' Ordinarily, these two uses of *to grow* cannot be mixed and matched, so that whereas a farmer can grow crops, or a child can grow herself, we cannot reasonably say that a farmer grows a child.

In effect, this is the mixing and matching that Ishiguro associates with human cloning in *Never Let Me Go*: the staff at Hailsham are growing children like farmers grow crops – to harvest. But by making unusual use of the euphemistic term *to complete* rather than the more familiar uses of *to grow* he creates a subtle and powerful portrayal of a world in which subjectivity is granted to some people but denied to others. The world he portrays is a world in which ethical responsibility has been abdicated, so that ironically, the donors can be rendered linguistically responsible for their own deaths: they complete. Indeed, the novel never precisely identifies who is responsible for their fate, so that again, the important point is not just that the verb in the intransitive is a tool

of concealment between one person and another, but that it refers to a world in which technologies have taken precedence over human agency so that it is fundamentally impossible to know who is responsible for the action depicted. By raising this question of ethical responsibility without answering it, Ishiguro implicates the entire social structure of the world he portrays in a kind of collective moral guilt. By implication, he challenges his readers not to acquiesce in that guilt precisely by registering the strangeness of the euphemism *to complete*, by associating it with the death of a human subject, and hence by re-reading human empathy back into those relationships which have been denied it.

Ishiguro achieves this necessary re-reading of the relationships depicted by using the words *complete* and *completely* in a more familiar, and indeed rather dull, metaphorical sense alongside his new, savage and ironic use of *complete* in the intransitive. For example, one of Kathy's colleagues is described as 'a complete waste of space' (p.3). The first incident of Kathy's Hailsham narrative describes a nasty joke played on the young Tommy by a group of bullies during a sports lesson. 'He's completely convinced he's going to be the first pick,' they exclaim when selecting teams (p.8). Instead of allowing him to join a team, though, they beat him up and vanish 'completely out of view' (p.9). In other words, the word *complete* is persistently used both in the routine manner of a tired metaphor, and in the new, savage intransitive sense which serves as a euphemism for institutionalised murder.

Raymond Williams wrote in *Keywords* that since the new connotations of a term never entirely eclipse or replace an older or prior application, the effect of their co-existence is 'to make possible the sense of an extended and intricate vocabulary, within which, both the variable words and their varied and variable interrelations are in practice active'.<sup>16</sup> This making active of both senses of a term is precisely what happens in *Never Let Me Go*. The interplay between the older sense of the word *complete* and the very recent and raw usage enables Ishiguro to re-vivify the word itself. It enables him to place the newer meaning in circulation alongside the older and therefore creates a contestation of usage and meaning between the two uses of the term which becomes a wider contest over signifying practices and the relationship between language and social and political control.

In Williams's account of keywords, 'such changes are not always either simple or final. Earlier and later senses coexist, or become actual alternatives in which problems of contemporary belief and affiliation are contested'.<sup>17</sup> The shift from transitive to intransitive verb usage identified here is a practice that not only conceals the processes of decision making that lie behind those same structures, but also renders the processes themselves fundamentally unknowable. Keeping current the alternative, earlier, transitive usage of certain keywords enables writers and speakers of the language to interrogate those structures and look for new kinds of social and political relationship, which are made manifest in and through language. Literature, at its most committed, is able to perform this work. Both Dick and Ishiguro make ironic use of the interplay between transitive and intransitive verb usage, hinting at an ethics of responsibility and contributing, in Raymond Williams's words, just that extra edge of consciousness.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Doctor Who: The Girl Who Waited*. BBC One, 10 September 2011.

<sup>2</sup> *Jon Snow's 2011*, Channel 4, 28 December 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, (New York: Simon & Schuster), p.5.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, rev. ed., (London: Flamingo, 1983), p.12. First published 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.21.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.22.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.18.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.79.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.22.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.18.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.24.

- 
- <sup>12</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.24.
- <sup>13</sup> Williams, *Writing in Society*, (London: Verso, 1984), p.208.
- <sup>14</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, (London: Gollancz, 2010), p.3.
- <sup>15</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go*, (London: Faber, 2005), p.5.
- <sup>16</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.23.
- <sup>17</sup> Williams, *Keywords*, p.22.