

## Claremont Colleges Scholarship @ Claremont

---

Scripps Faculty Publications and Research

Scripps Faculty Scholarship

---

1-1-2000

# Book Chapter: The Politics of Language

Tony Crowley  
*Scripps College*

---

### Recommended Citation

Crowley, Tony. "The Politics of Language," in *The Limits of Textuality*, eds. Lukas Erne and Guillemette Bolens, Gunter Narr Verlag Press, Tübingen, 2000.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Faculty Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Faculty Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu).

## The Politics of Language

Tony Crowley

Writing in 1617, an English adventurer in Ireland, Fynes Moryson, took time in his *Itinerary* to remark on the linguistic situation in that country. Noting with disapproval that many of the Old English colonists now used Irish as their everyday language, he made a general comment: "communion or difference of language, hath always been observed, a special motive to unite or alienate the minds of all nations." He added: "all nations have thought nothing more powerful to unite minds than the Community of language" (Moryson 168). This is a very early expression of the idea of a connection between language, thought and national identity, an idea which was taken up (as Aarsleff has shown) in eighteenth-century France by Condillac and Diderot (Aarsleff 345) as well as in Italy in the work of Vico and Cesarotti (Morpurgo Davies 114). The most familiar account of the connection between language, mind and identity, however, comes to us in the work of the post-Kantian idealists such as Fichte and Humboldt. And it is with the legacy of their thought that I will be concerned here.

In *Perpetual Peace* (1795), one of the greatest works of modern political philosophy, Kant gave, almost as an aside, a definition of the nation which was to play a significant role in the development of nineteenth and twentieth-century European history. Nations, Kant commented, are peoples separated by "differences of language and religion," and that definition offers a key to understanding one crucial aspect of post-Reformation European nationalism (Kant 31). Of course the political thrust of Kant's philosophical work was directly opposed to the nationalist ideal, since where nationalists stressed crucial differences between groups of human beings, what his thought emphasised instead was precisely that which they had in common. For the faculty of reason separated human beings from the animal world in a constitutive manner, imposing on humanity not simply the capacity for, but the necessity of, engagement in rational debate and judgment.

Yet one tenet of Kant's philosophy was altered and adapted by his followers in the German idealist tradition in a way which was to allow for a

coalition of rationalism and nationalism, and which in turn was to become influential in twentieth-century social thought. It arose from Kant's attempt to explain the very nature of understanding itself. Against the dominant, Lockean, empirical account of the mind, which held that it is a *tabula rasa* upon which our experience inscribes itself, Kant asked how, if this explanation were true, the mind would be able to function. How would we be able, for example, to think in general terms rather than wholly in terms of particulars? How would we be able to consider relations, modes of identity, difference, causality? His thesis was that though empiricism could account for some of the contents of the mind, it could not explain how the mind understands experience, how it produces order from the myriad of sense-impressions. To account for that process, something else must be postulated; the answer was found by way of Kant's transcendental deduction.

It is a familiar argument and runs as follows: sense-impressions are chaotic, disorderly, random, individual; yet despite this we engage in mental acts involving, for example, judgments of quantity, quality, relation and modality. There must therefore be some instrument, or mechanism, by means of which sense-impressions are made to make sense. The solution lay with the theoretical stipulation of what Kant called the categories of the understanding. These lie within the human mind and are not derived from experience; they are in-built properties of the understanding, *a priori* concepts, which enable us to do things such as to connect perceptions, to see them as singular, to grasp them as causative. In short, the categories are the inherent mental devices for the making of sense. Without the categories we may hear a noise, but we could not identify it as the sound of a person opening a door; lacking the categories we perceive chaos, with them we can think.

The categories then were taken to form the basic and universal structure of the mind. One of the striking things about a number of Kant's idealist followers, however, is the way in which they departed from his universalist thesis. For although they agreed with Kant's general description of the structure of the faculty of reason, that is, that it consisted of *a priori* concepts, they disagreed crucially with his thesis in stressing that the constitution of the structure was variable. And, they argued, that variation was most clearly evident in the medium by which reason was articulated: language. In the work of Humboldt, for example, the "inseparable connection between languages and the mental capacity of nations" was proposed (Humboldt 151). Indeed in the title of his work *On the Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (1836), we can note already both the stress on variation and the inverted relationship

between language and thought which was central to the philosophical justification for nationalism. In this adaptation of Kant's argument, language was taken to be the instrument which determined the limits of the mind, a thesis which was to have consequences long into the twentieth century. Kant rationalised universally the mind, his philosophical successors nationalised the modes, embedded in language, by which reason worked.

It is necessary to see this shift in an historical context, for a key to its emergence lies with imperialism both within and beyond the boundaries of Europe. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in its most influential version in 1787, which meant that it coincided with a period of major colonial expansion, particularly into the Asian sub-continent. This turn to the East had specific consequences for the study of both philosophy and language. The "discovery" of Sanskrit was, culturally, enormously important in that it overturned various chronologies and hierarchies. Jones famously pronounced it to be:

of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to either of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident. (Jones 3.15)

Here, by way of colonialism, a language had come to critical attention which was evidently related to the classical languages, but which appeared to be both older than them, and structurally superior to them. The disruption to established orders of historical and cultural lineage caused by the discovery of Sanskrit is not easily over-stated. It led to what Schlegel, in *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* (1808), called the study of "the structure or comparative grammar" of language, later to become of course "comparative philology" (Schlegel 439). Schlegel's essay presaged the interest in different languages: he refers to Mexican, Chinese, Arabic, Basque, Coptic, Celtic, and the "American dialects" to name but a few. Significantly, he divides languages into two groups, the agglutinative and the inflectional, and constructs a hierarchy on the basis of their structural properties. Such a division was important for a number of reasons. First, it pointed to an end to the search for universal reason, embodied in universal grammar, in the structure of any and all languages, a quest which had been articulated most clearly in the *Port Royal Grammar* (1660). Second, it challenged the notion of universal linguistic structure. And third, following from the first two, it posited the idea that distinct groups of language users, by dint of the fact that they shared different linguistic structures, also shared specific forms of the fac-

ulty of reason. Kant universalised reason, colonialism, by default, discovered the specificity of its embodiment in particular languages.

One of the effects of the colonial project then was to bring to the centre of metropolitan power the awareness of undeniably “other” ways of understanding the world. However, imperialism, both beyond *and within* Europe, influenced the debates around language and thought which followed Kant’s work. Within the boundaries of Europe imperialism had significant cultural effects, specifically in this regard Napoleonic imperialism within central Europe; here too Kant’s philosophical insights were tempered by political issues. In the same year that Schlegel directed attention to the implications of the turn to the East, Fichte published his *Addresses to the German Nation* (1808), a text central to an understanding of nineteenth-century European nationalism. In it he remarks:

What an immeasurable influence on the whole human development of a people the character of its language may have – its language, which accompanies the individual into the most secret depths of his mind in thought and will and either hinders him or gives him wings, which unites within its whole domain the whole mass of men who speak it into one single and common understanding, which is the true point for meaning and mingling for the world of the senses and the world of the spirits. (Fichte 59)

The postulated relationship here between language, mind and nationality was to become part of the philosophical justification for cultural nationalism across Europe. In this case the invocation of an ideal (“the German nation”) was supported by the argument that the German language was sufficient proof of the existence of a coherent, unified political group. In a wider context, what linguistic relativism facilitated was German (and later, Irish, Hungarian, Czech, Italian . . .) cultural nationalism. Fichte made the case succinctly: “it is beyond doubt that, wherever a separate language is found, there a separate nation exists, which has the right to take charge of its independent affairs and to govern itself” (Fichte 184). Moryson’s insight into the relation between languages and communities had been theorised and politicised.

The legacy of linguistic and cultural relativism in European political life was, and remains, profound. Paradoxically, however, having exerted such a direct influence in the political sphere in the nineteenth century, in the early twentieth century it returned to its philosophical home and again became significant. The re-appearance of this doctrine was brought about by another linguistic, cultural and political encounter: that engendered by the meeting of

the colonisers and the native peoples of North America. The key figure here was Benjamin Lee Whorf, the amateur who took a keen interest in recording and describing the rapidly disappearing languages of the “Amerindians.” In the posthumously edited collection *Language, Thought and Reality*, Whorf articulates the neo-Kantian considerations which he derived from his study of the Amerindian languages. It is a classic statement:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. (Whorf 213)

What Whorf ordains here is a relativising of cultural viewpoints, an undermining of the notion of any language or culture as wholly dominant, a stress on specificity, a denial of claims to universality. And of course there is much to be said for this. But the message was not all one of gain, and the rest of this paper will attempt to consider the implications of the way in which Kant’s doctrine of universal reason, including that of the categories, was adapted by those who inherited his legacy in the twentieth century. It will be argued that relativising can become a way of suggesting that linguistic, cultural and political borders are not crossable, that specificity can become dangerous enclosedness, that though the postulation of the relationship between language and thought is an important one, it can become harmful if it is considered to be determinist. Once Kant’s categories had moved from the universal to belonging to specific groups of people, as well as many benefits there came too a number of disturbing and far-reaching possibilities. Orwell’s *1984* offers the opportunity to study them.

Whorf’s statement of the relationship between language, thought and reality is neatly put:

We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way – an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, BUT ITS TERMS ARE ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees. (Whorf 213-14)

There is a curious shift here between the language of consensus, and the notion of tacit agreement, and that of restriction in relation to the absoluteness of our obligation to our language. And it is this latter claim that will be examined with regard to *1984*. For Orwell's text gives a particularly clear depiction of one of the twentieth century's commonest political beliefs which is based on neo-Kantian thought: the doctrine that control of language is possible and that it will engender political power by way of the control of people's minds. For if, as Whorf postulates, a language embodies the implicit agreement in accordance with which our minds work, then given that our minds can only operate with the terms of such agreement, it follows that control over language will render power over the mind. We cannot dispute the terms of the agreement since they are absolutely obligatory; thus the key to power lies with linguistic control. It is on the basis of this very doctrine that the "Newspeak" used in *1984* was invented. What began as an adaptation of Kant's description of the universality of human reason for radical political causes (respect for alterity), became in the twentieth century a dogma which allowed for a political fantasy of totalitarian control.

In Oceania, the future state dated as existing in 1984, a new language had been created, Newspeak, with its own dictionary. The language had been invented for explicit political purposes:

not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other thoughts impossible. . . . This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever (Orwell 257-58)

Here the doctrine that thought depended on language was pushed to its logical extreme, which allowed for Orwell's fantasy of non-resistible power. "Newspeak was designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought" (Orwell 258); its ultimate end was this:

Newspeak, indeed, differed from most all other languages in that its vocabulary grew smaller instead of larger every year. Each reduction was a gain, since the smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought. Ultimately it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all (Orwell 265).

The inhabitants of Oceania then would cease to be human in the way in which Kant described (as rational beings) and would instead be reduced to

animalistic status: they would end up using "duckspeak," meaning nothing but quacking like a duck.

Where does Orwell's account of "Newspeak" come from? Part of an answer to this question lies with the influence of the post-Kantian idealist tradition. To complete the answer we have to turn again to the history in which Orwell's work was set. For Orwell's work needs to be understood in relation to a tradition of cultural conservatism which centred upon the idea of linguistic decline as a cipher of more general cultural decay. In fact this tradition has a long lineage in relation to the English language, but Orwell's version of it was deeply influenced by early twentieth-century Anglo-American writings. Prompted by the work on semantics in Ogden and Richards' *The Meaning of Meaning*, American thinkers and cultural commentators such as Korzybski, Chase, Hayakawa, and the group around the journal *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, had already begun to trace the "dangerous" and "corrupt" ways in which language was being used to deprave the thought of those who used it. As with Orwell, this set of commentators took it as almost axiomatic that the technology of mass communication meant nothing but the opportunity to control the minds of those who were on its receiving end. Like Orwell too, they viewed the most dangerous use of language to be that coming from the Soviet Union and communist parties in the West. It was in that perverted language, Orwell claimed, that the real damage to the human mind was being carried out. What was the purpose of such linguistic damage? Precisely that aimed for by Newspeak:

a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting – three hundred million people all with the same face (Orwell 265).

*1984* is often taken to be an instructive warning against the misuse of language. It will be argued here, however, that this text embodies a radical misunderstanding and that this derives not least in its acceptance of both the version of neo-Kantian thought on language which we traced above, and a profound cultural conservatism. To take the latter point first, one example will, for reasons of space, need to suffice. Here is one of Winston's dreams, in which a "girl" runs towards him over a field, throwing her clothes off as she approached:

What overwhelmed him in that instant was admiration for the gesture with which she had thrown her clothes aside. With its grace and carelessness it seemed to an-

nihilate a whole culture, a whole system of thought, as though Big Brother and the Party and the Thought Police could all be swept into nothingness by a single splendid movement of the arm. That too was a gesture belonging to the ancient time. Winston woke up with the word "Shakespeare" on his lips (Orwell 31).

Creative activity appears to be demonstrated here by the woman's freedom from sexual puritanism and repression; yet in reality, on waking, full creativity lies with a cultural icon of the "ancient time," great literature. Here it is Shakespeare; the text informs us later, however, that his texts, along with those of Milton, Swift, Byron, and Dickens, are in the process of translation into Newspeak. At the end of this process such writing will be destroyed, along with "all else that survived of the literature of the past." In its place, published by the Ministry of Truth and created on "the novel-writing machines," were the "sensational five-cent novelettes," along with the "rubbishy newspapers containing almost nothing except sport, crime and astrology," "films oozing with sex, and sentimental songs which were composed entirely by mechanical means" (Orwell 41). The criticism is well-made. What makes this cultural conservatism rather than a radical attack is the sense that modern technology can in no sense produce anything *but* these corrupt forms.

The other charge to be levelled against Orwell's vision in *1984* is not that it is culturally conservative, but that its representation of the way in which language works, and the way in which its users relate to it, is wrong and dangerous. For what *1984* is premised upon is Whorf's doctrine that the relationship between the patterns of language which we inherit, and the thoughts which these permit, is an absolute given which is beyond challenge. Again this can be seen to stem from Kant's necessity of grounding reason as a universal human fact, but its adapted use in the work of his followers can lead to perilous conclusions. It can for example lead to forms of extreme cultural nationalism which argue that not only is the nation determined by the language in a quasi-spiritual manner, but that any who do not speak the specific language in question are therefore not counted as belonging to the nation. Or such thinking can result in the type of linguistic determinism which is found in Orwell's *1984*. For the dangerous notion which dominates this text is that the Party's control over language, and therefore meaning, through its imposition of Newspeak, enables it to control the mental universe of the subjects of Oceania. Ultimately with the purpose of achieving "three hundred million people with the same face" (265).

There are of course a number of difficulties with Orwell's notion. First, a problem which arises with the work of Whorf, there is the difficulty of how,

if Orwell's account of totalitarian control in Oceania were true, Winston's narrative could be articulated? Would not he too be captivated within the prison-house of language? The text's answer to this is that the time described is still one of transition, or translation, and thus the control of Newspeak is not yet finalised (this is the period of the tenth edition of the dictionary of Newspeak, the eleventh edition is to be the definitive one). Criticism can still be made, just, despite the fact that all the odds are stacked against the critic (a common complaint amongst cultural conservatives). The second and more important problem lies with linguistic determinism itself. For the claims of linguistic determinism are based upon a number of presuppositions about language and its use which are open to challenge. Is it for example the case that a language can be as rigidly static as *1984* asserts? Do not languages change in their everyday use, in terms of both vocabulary and signification? Can meaning be transmitted as effectively as Orwell wishes to suggest, or is the difficulty with meaning precisely that it is not controllable? As Cavell once pointed out, perhaps the problem with words is not getting them to mean, but stopping them from meaning too much. Can linguistic patterns be imposed on the mind, or is subjectivity more complex and less open to direct control? A simple way of putting several of these questions is to ask: is it really the case that when the Party's slogans are repeated, "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength," the human subjects who hear them and use them are duped by them in an uncritical and passive manner? Were all who read *Pravda* fooled because the title meant "truth"? Who would wish to be the first to say that about their own mind?

As noted earlier, Orwell's interest in the use of language, specifically the way in which words are "twisted" in order to produce a determinate political effect, was foreshadowed by earlier but related work in the United States of America. Hayakawa's *Language in Thought and Action* (1939) and Stuart Chase's revealingly entitled *The Tyranny of Words* (1938) were central texts in the field. Chase, to give a light example, notes that during the first World War, an American physician protested against the use of the medical term "German measles" as unpatriotic; he suggested instead the use of "victory measles" or "liberty measles." More serious attention, however, was addressed to the use of terms of political debate: "freedom," "democracy," "society" and so on. What these writers were analysing and propagating in fact is what we know today as "political correctness" – a term invented scornfully by political commentators on the right, though one which has now slipped into the mainstream of political discourse, to the extent that accusing someone of being "politically correct" is now something of an insult (it may

be worth asking who precisely *wants* to be politically incorrect). And the major critic of the “political” use of language was Orwell himself, not least in the famous essay “Politics and the English Language.”

The theory of language which lies behind that essay, and indeed *1984*, is I think traceable to the neo-Kantian theorisation of Moryson’s insight with which this paper began. That is to say, the doctrine that a language structures in a determinate manner the mental universe of its speakers. For cultural nationalists it was this which gave language pride of place among the criteria for nationhood; for Orwell and later thinkers it was this which made language the key to power. Power consists in controlling language by dint of the fact that language itself controls the mind: give people “newspeak” and they will think in newthink, unable to resist the determinate meanings of the terms of the language.

Now there is an important insight here that we need to preserve, which is that there is undoubtedly a link between language and thought. It is not without reason, for example, that the period of Thatcherism in Britain witnessed a struggle over the meaning of the term “community” (and others like it). There is no doubt that the Thatcherist project depended at least in part in an attempt to shift such meanings. But what is often missed here is the fact that this process is one of struggle, of conflict, of attempts to dominate and of modes of resistance. It should be said too that the Blair government engages in precisely the same process. In fact any political movement which attempts to gain power or hegemony does precisely this; and they have always done so. The appearance of “spin doctors” in politics today is often bemoaned, but at least it is now out in the open that such “spinning” and “doctoring” of terms is taking place; it is at least clear that language is a site of contestation and battle rather than stativity and fixity. Orwell’s achievement was to take the neo-Kantian insight and to show how the attempt was being made to give words such as “democracy” a determinate meaning in order to achieve political ends. His great weakness was to be blind to the fact that that process was precisely what he was involved in too. His mistake was to think that some meanings are political while others aren’t, which in the end is a misunderstanding about language itself.

The sort of questions referred to just now – the multiaccentual properties of words, the ways in which words are used as political tools, but tools which are always open to further use and re-appropriation, the ever-mobile nature of language – were in fact explicitly addressed in the early twentieth-century. Moreover these questions were investigated by means of a critical attack on both the German idealist tradition, and the evolving Saussurean

school. Such questions were addressed but, ironically, the answers given to them could not be discussed and challenged since they were produced in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. They can be found in the neglected work of one of the Vitebsk school, V.N. Volosinov, in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, first published in 1930. It is a text which deals centrally with the difficulties posed by accounts of language which see it simply as a neutral tool for communication, or a given and unalterable set of linguistic patterns and meanings which control the thought of an individual, or which reflect the mind of a group. It is also a text which sits oddly alongside the contemporary work of American cultural critics, and of course *1984* itself. Volosinov’s work is much neglected but undeservedly so, since it posits helpful answers to questions set in debates which have caused a great deal of harm.

I want to finish with a quote from Joyce. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, there is a linguistic and cultural conflict between a young Irishman, Stephen Dedalus, and an English Dean of Studies. They quibble over the meaning of a word – “tundish” – and Stephen falls into silence and reflects:

The language which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (Joyce 189)

What we have here is an affirmation of the relationship between language and politics. The young Dedalus is made to feel uncomfortable because he feels, perhaps recognises, his own strained relation to the colonial language. But how could such a feeling of discomfort arise if the colonial language, as linguistic determinism holds, carried with it control over the mind of the colonised? How would the lack of ease appear? How could the meaning of the word “tundish” be disputed? How, to extend the question, could *post-colonial* literature ever be written?

Joyce wrote the paragraph cited above, and post-colonial writing does take place. And we all fret, in one way or another, in the shadow of all sorts of alien languages, master discourses, forms of cultural distance, modes of power. But it is important not to put ourselves in advance, by way of a theoretical doctrine, in a position of total lack of resistance or control. The fret comes precisely because language and meaning are open, contestable and always to be achieved. It would not appear if language and the thought

which it facilitates were closed, beyond dispute and simply received. The odds against creativity and exploration in both language and thought are stacked high enough. There is no need for us to disable ourselves in advance with limiting accounts of the politics of language.

### References

- Aarsleff, Hans. *From Locke to Saussure*. London: Athlone, 1992.
- Fichte, H.G. *Addresses to the German Nation*. (1808). Ed. George Armstrong Kelly. New York: Harper, 1968.
- Humboldt, W. von. *On Language: The Diversity of Human Language Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*. (1836). Trans. P. Heath. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Jones, Sir William. *The Works of Sir William Jones*. London, 1807.
- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*. (1916). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Perpetual Peace*. (1795). New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957.
- Morpurgo Davies, Anna. *Nineteenth Century Linguistics*. London: Longman, 1998.
- Moryson, Fynes. *Shakespeare's Europe: Unpublished Chapters of Fynes Moryson's Itinerary*. (1617). London: Sherrat and Hughes, 1903.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. (1949). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.
- Schlegel, F. von. "On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians." (1808). In *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Friedrich von Schlegel*. Trans. E.J. Millington. London: Bohn, 1849.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. *Language, Thought and Reality*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956.