

1-1-1990

Book Chapter: That Obscure Object of Desire: A Science of Language

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Recommended Citation

Crowley, Tony. "That Obscure Object of Desire: A Science of Language," *The Ideologies of Language*, eds. J. Joseph and T. J. Taylor, London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

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That obscure object of desire: a science of language

Tony Crowley

Ancient or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from 'the nature of things'.

(Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)

1 THE OBJECT OF STUDY

The first theoretical question addressed in Saussure's *Course* (1916) is that of ascertaining what precisely will constitute the object of linguistics. What is it, Saussure asks, that linguistics sets out to analyse, what is the 'actual object of study in its entirety'? The answer would appear to be almost tautological: the object of study for the science of linguistics is to be language. Yet as Saussure points out, this response is problematical since it presupposes that the object – language – is already given, a datum which is easily found. He insists, against this account, that in this respect linguistics is distinct from other sciences:

other sciences are provided with objects of study in advance, which are then examined from different points of view. Nothing like that is the case in linguistics. . . . The object is not given in advance of the viewpoint: far from it. Rather, one might say that it is the viewpoint adopted which creates the object. Furthermore, there is nothing to tell us in advance whether one of these ways of looking at it is prior or superior to any of the others.

(Saussure 1983: 8)

The distinction between linguistics and other sciences posited here is in fact highly dubious since they too find their object only by means of 'viewpoints' or theories. And the revolutions in the history of particular

sciences attest to the similar theory – laden constitutions of their objects. Yet it is true that the science of linguistics has particular problems with its object and it would not be too much to claim that it is the principal aim of the *Course* to resolve such problems. The stated desire is to clear away false hindrances in order that the object can be seen in clear light. And the reason for this project is Saussure's impatience with what he saw as the pre-scientific complacency in the branch of the study of language in which he served his apprenticeship. To work in that tradition, he complained, is inevitably to face 'the general difficulty of writing any ten lines of a common sense nature in connection with linguistic facts'. Hence the necessity of demonstrating 'the utter ineptness of current terminology, the need for reform, and to show what kind of an object language is in general' (Saussure 1964: 93).

Such an antipathetic rejection of his own earlier work and the tradition in which it was conceived is perhaps attributable to the fact that this tradition had been the first to claim for itself the mantle of the science of language. For in fact one of the peculiarities of the study of language in the post-Enlightenment period has been that not one but two sciences have arisen. The first, appearing in the early to mid-nineteenth century, was to become known as comparative philology and was based on the axiom that 'language, like every other production of human culture, falls under the general cognizance of history' (Paul 1888: xxi). The second, appearing in the early modern period and christened by its foremost theoretician as general linguistics, reversed this tenet and relegated history in favour of a synchronic study of language:

Diachronic and synchronic studies contrast in every way. For example, to begin with the most obvious fact, they are not of equal importance. It is clear that the synchronic point of view takes precedence over the diachronic, since for the community of language users that is the one and only reality. The same is true for the linguist. If he takes the diachronic point of view, he is no longer examining the language but a series of events which modify it.

(Saussure 1983: 89)

The theoretical and methodological viewpoints of these two competing sciences were set against each other, and a moment's reflection on modern intellectual history will show which came to be the victor in the battle for the status of the true science of language. The naive

manner in which so many introductory textbooks (and some not so introductory) parrot the beliefs that Saussure was the first to conceive of the sign's arbitrariness, or to be interested in the systematic nature of signs, or to see the study of signs as a potential field of knowledge *per se*, is weighty testimony to the victory of the second of the two discourses upon language.

However, it will be one of the aims of this chapter to challenge this victory by exposing the discursive violence with which it was brought about, and by returning to the problem of language and history. The task will be to bring to light the repressions necessary to sustain the new science of language and its newly found object and to examine its alleged scientific neutrality. The return to the problem of language and its relation to history will not, however, be a turning back to the formal historical stress typified by the comparativists, but to a conception of the essential relatedness of language and history which is in fact noted, but theoretically relegated, by Saussure. However, before examining the basic opposition by which history is excluded, it will be important to examine the other processes of opposition and exclusion by which Saussure uncovers the elusive object. Thereby demonstrating the practical ordering of discourse which enables him to end the *Course* on the confident and optimistic assertion that 'the only true object of study in linguistics is the language concerned in itself and for its own sake'.

2 LANGUAGE: THE OBJECT OF MYTHOLOGY

It is a paradox, in view of the importance accorded by Saussure to the science which studies the role of signs as part of social life and to the study of language as its paradigm, that he begins his division of discourse with an apparently extraordinary claim about language. After beginning to articulate the 'place of language in the facts of speech', and thus to disarticulate *langue* and *parole*, he continues by asserting:

It should be noted that we have defined things, not words. Consequently the distinctions established are not affected by the fact that certain ambiguous terms have no exact equivalents in other languages. . . . No word corresponds precisely to any one of the notions we have tried to specify above. It is an error of method to proceed from words in order to give definitions of things.

(Saussure 1983: 14)

This is a remarkable, and crucial, epistemological claim since it places Saussure firmly in the camp of those who betray a distrust towards language, a fear about the potential confusion brought about by words, and a preference for the reliable solidity of things. This is a tradition whose followers have been firmly committed to an empiricist view of science and so it is at first all the more peculiar that Saussure should fall in with them. Yet his assertion is clearly related to the worries of the major empiricists as embodied in Bacon's complaint that 'words plainly force and overrule the understanding, and throw all into confusion', and to his aim of exposing 'the false appearances that are imposed upon us by words, which are framed and applied according to the conceit and capacities of the vulgar sort' (Bacon 1857: 164; 1861: 134). Saussure's note evidently replicates the desire to avoid words and rely upon things, and is a warning to avoid one of Locke's imperfections of words – 'where the signification of the Word and the real essence of the Thing are not the same', and the consequent problems for those who 'set their Thoughts more on Words than things' and thus '... speak several words, no otherwise than Parrots do, only because they have learned them, and have been accustomed to those sounds' (Locke 1690: Bk III, ch.9, para.5; Bk III, ch.2, para.7).

However, although Saussure's claim is at first sight rather odd it is in fact perfectly compatible with the project of the *Course*. Another of his assertions will serve to show why. He insists that the claim that language is a nomenclature, 'a list of terms corresponding to a list of things', is incorrect. For Saussure language is a systematic structure of sound patterns and concepts, and rather than being the means by which we name the things of the world it is in fact, following Locke, a system of representation which does not necessarily, if at all, involve the world. Now the crucial epistemological significance of this distinction, and its centrality to an understanding of Saussure's project, lies in the rejection of the commonly postulated duality of language and world. As already noted, Saussure rejected the former accounts of language which saw it as the medium by which consciousness could name the pre-linguistic objects of the world. But his radical break went further than this in claiming that the world and language are not distinct orders of being but belong to the same ontological order. The break amounts to this: that Saussure conceived of language as a thing to be found in the world of other real things. As such, of course, and like other worldly things, it became open to the methods of objective scientific study. Once liberated from its status as but a pale shadow of

the world of things into one of those things, then language could join those things in the privileged status of scientific object. Hence the perfect sense of Saussure's claim, cited earlier, to have 'defined things not words' in the early part of the *Course*. For once we are clear that we are no longer dealing with words, with which it is impossible to give definitions of things since they are not necessarily related to the world of things, then we can be certain that we have shifted our attention to one of those more reliable things – language itself – and thus that we are in the realm of science rather than that of words, words, words.

The transformation of language from its position as a poor (or even perfect) speculum of the world to a place within the world has important consequences. Not the least is the denial of the centrality of human activity in the study of language, for once language has become reified as a thing it loses its roots in praxis, in practical human labour. As Lukács, following Marx, pointed out, the basis of such reification is that,

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 every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.

(Lukács 1971: 83)

Once language has become a thing, its role as a constitutive factor of human social being is banished in favour of objectivity, autonomy and rationality. It becomes what Volosinov described as an 'abstract-objective' entity whose governing characteristics are that it is immutable, self enclosed, determinedly rule-governed and self-identical. It should be clear from this account that once Saussure had delineated language 'in itself and for its own sake' as a thing, once he had found the object of linguistics, then the crucial ontological distinction between *langue* and *parole*, the thing itself and the uses to which it is put, follows logically. Moreover the hierarchical ordering of *langue* over *parole* is also a logical step since for the scientist engaged in studying the things of the world the necessary condition of their theorization and study is a certain stability and staticity rather than a constant flux of activity.

For this reason too the synchronic study of language is privileged over its diachronic partner since stability and immutability have to be the orders of the day. But just as the *langue-parole* distinction and its necessary condition, the reification of language, were based upon the formal repression of human activity, likewise this other Saussurean

distinction has its basis in a process of rigid exclusion. The dimension necessarily excluded in this distinction is of course history since it too is viewed as a distorting and problematic force which prevents the stability necessary for scientific method. Synchronic study logically demands staticity and thus 'although each language constitutes a closed system all presuppose certain constant principles'. However, although history is apparently excluded here it lies in fact at the constitutive heart of any attempt at synchronic linguistics. This is revealed in examining Saussure's claim that 'the aim of general synchronic linguistics is to establish the fundamental principles of any idiosynchronic system, the facts which constitute any linguistic state'. There is a distinct shift of emphasis here into this curious entity the idiosynchronic system. This is evidently a system whose time is its own and whose historical limits appear to emerge from within. Again it seems as if this is a refusal of history since it is claimed that the idiosynchronic system, the linguistic state, 'occupies not a point in time, but a period of time of varying length, during which the sum total of changes occurring is minimal. It may be ten years, a generation, a century, or even longer' (Saussure 1983: 99). However this is not a rejection of history which can have any logical force since as Saussure continues to specify, it is history, the processes of historical change and differentiation, which lies at the heart of all language:

An absolute state is defined by lack of change. But since languages are always changing, however minimally, studying a linguistic state amounts in practice to ignoring unimportant changes. Mathematicians do likewise when they ignore very small fractions for certain purposes, such as logarithmic calculations.
(*ibid.*: 100)

History, though markedly acknowledged as central, 'since languages are always changing', has to be forcibly excluded, 'ignored', in order that the mathematical precision required of a science be gained. To engage in this process of deliberate blindness, however, is to admit that the allegedly all-encompassing scientific study of language is based on a myth: 'the notion of a linguistic state can only be an approximation. In static linguistics, as in most sciences, no demonstration is possible without a conventional simplification of the data' (*ibid.*: 100). The presence of historical change and differentiation then is not denied by Saussure but ignored or relegated to a secondary position. Rather than admitting the force of historical becoming in a language he makes any particular language state – its particular being – the

measure by which history is to be calibrated. The constant flux of history is relegated in favour of static systems whose alteration alone can allow history to appear as momentarily important. Yet such a discursive hierarchy *can* only be bought at the price of deliberate exclusion and its recognition, which slips out here, displaces the straight face of scientificity with the jovial mask of mythology.

The demands of scientificity then force the imposition of mythology upon language. For the raw material with which linguists worked had to be disciplined in order to make it stable enough for investigation. And the plaintive task of the linguist when faced with the heterogeneity of patterns of linguistic difference and similarity demonstrates how the sort of material with which the scientist works determines at least in part the methods – or perhaps mythods – which are to be employed. A good example of the mythical disciplining of the linguist's material is Saussure's own coinage of the term 'idiosynchronic' to refer not only to a particular language, but also to dialects and sub-dialectal forms. For the term 'idiosynchronic' was intended to be a theoretical – or mythical – response to the point that it was not simply national languages which could be thought of as synchronic systems, but *any* system of language which achieved the required stability. Once it was perceived that it was not simply national languages that retained the stability and determinancy required for the status of *langue* to be thrust upon them, then it became clear that dialects and sub-dialectal forms would also have to be recognized as idiosynchronic systems in order to reassert some order of stability at the sub-national level of heteroglossic difference.

That linguistic differences had produced practical difficulties for linguists is undoubted. For example one Victorian linguist, struggling with the problem of dialectal differences asserted: 'If the question is asked, what is a dialect? No scientific or adequate definition can be given. For all practical purposes this will suffice. A language is a big dialect, and a dialect is a little language' (Meiklejohn 1891: 7). Although this definition is in fact quite close to that given by Saussure it does not have any of the scientific air of his foundation of the 'idiosynchronic system'. None the less linguistic heterogeneity caused difficulties since as Whitney commented, 'in a true and defensible sense, every individual speaks a language different from every other'. All speakers have their own particular forms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, since: 'The forms of each one's conceptions, represented by his use of words is different from any other person's; all his individuality of character, of knowledge, education, feeling, enters

into this difference.' (Whitney 1800 : 154). British linguists of the early twentieth century, still working in a non-Saussurean tradition, were also to note such differences:

'No two persons pronounce exactly alike. The difference may arise from a variety of causes, such as locality, early influences, social surroundings, individual peculiarities and the like'

(Jones 1909: 1).

Another attributed linguistic differences to 'differences of interest and occupation', 'differences of class', 'difference of place and abode', 'difference of age', and 'differences of fashion . . . and even sex' (Wyld 1907: 42). Thus in the face of this mass of heterogeneity the only possibility that linguists saw as being available to them was to systematize: to homogenize differences by assigning particular clusters of them to the 'idiosynchronic systems' theorized by Saussure and thus to introduce a natural order into an aggregation 'which lends itself to no other classification' (Saussure 1983: 10). And, of course, the implications of such a methodology were not restricted to the study of language alone and were to be extended to the users of language. The striving for order, stability and homogeneity which had produced such marked effects on the differences of language also led to the positing of determinate groups of speakers, bound to a particular 'idiosynchronic system', and recognizable as distinct sociological groups. A good example of the effects of such methodology is evinced in Wyld's important work in British linguistics, formulated without reference to Saussure's text, on the process of the 'differentiation of dialect' and the role of 'speech communities' in it. He argued that,

If we define *Speech Community* as a group of human beings between whom social intercourse is so intimate that their speech is practically homogeneous, then whenever we find appreciable speech differences we must assume as many communities, and it will follow that there will be as many Dialects as communities.

(Wyld 1927: 47)

Not only does this set out the rationale for much of the modern study of sociolinguistics, it also sets the stage for the appearance of that modern linguistic hero, the Ideal Speaker-Hearer:

Linguistic theory is conceived primarily with an ideal speaker-listener in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammat-

ically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in performance.

(Chomsky 1965: 14)

It is possible to perceive in this Chomskyan premise the familiar pattern of exclusion and reduction which also occurred in Saussure. But is it not the case that Jones and Wyld, along with later formal sociolinguistic theorists, were aware of the problems of linguistic differences and attempted to incorporate them within their studies? It might at first sight appear that this is the case but a closer examination will reveal the familiar processes of reductive systematization. For rather than noting such linguistic differentiation and the difficulties it poses for any attempts to systematize language, both Jones and Wyld, and their later descendants, simply incorporate them by expanding the set of 'idiosynchronic systems'. Along with national language and dialect the linguists formulated other systems: the sociolect, the idiolect, register and contextual style. In this way nothing was to fall outside the all-encompassing systematic web of linguistics. Nothing could be so heterogeneous as not to have a place in some homogeneous system or other. And nothing could be allowed to disrupt the myth of staticity in language which was the prerequisite for the scientificity of its study.

The main concern of the first part of this essay, however, is not with the familiar Saussurean distinctions between *langue* and *parole*, nor synchrony and diachrony. The main concern will be with the less familiar, but certainly as crucial, distinction and privileged ordering of 'internal' and 'external' linguistics. It is this privileged Saussurean hierarchy which it is the aim of this essay to disturb by a process of inversion and reordering. The effect will be to return history to its central position in the study of language and to cast further doubt on the possibilities of a 'science of language'.

The hierarchical privileging of 'internal' over 'external' linguistics is clearly necessary to the task of delimiting the object of linguistics. Saussure argues that,

linguistic questions interest all who work with texts – historians, philologists, etc. Still more obvious is the importance of linguistics to general culture: in the lives of individuals and societies, speech is more important than anything else. That linguistics should continue to be the prerogative of a few specialists would

be unthinkable – everyone is concerned with it in one way or another.

(Saussure 1983: 7)

Given the importance of language, then, along with the Baconian warning that ‘no other subject has fostered more absurd notions, more prejudices, more illusions, or more fantasies’ (ibid.) it follows that it is necessary to rule out all extraneous factors in its study. Hence arises the distinction between ‘internal’ linguistics (the proper, scientific study of language) and ‘external’ linguistics (dealing with factors that have an influence upon, but are not essential to, language). It is, as Saussure argues, a question of precise delimitation and exclusion: ‘My definition of language presupposes the exclusion of everything that is outside its organisation or system – in a word of everything known as external linguistics’ (ibid.: 20). It is, however, as he also points out, a delimitation which appears to be counter-intuitive since ‘external linguistics is none the less concerned with important matters, and these demand attention when one approaches the study of language’. Yet the process of exclusion and deliberate refusal of such ‘important matters’ is required before the object of the new science can be allowed to appear in its full glory.

It is important to specify exactly what is excluded in the relegation of ‘external linguistics’, and what ‘important matters’ are held to have no place in the study of language. First ‘there are all the respects in which linguistics links up with ethnology. These are all the relations which may exist between the history of a language and the history of a race or civilisation.’ Second in the process of the ordering of the topics to be silenced are ‘the relations between languages and political history’. Examples are ‘major historical events such as the Roman Conquest’, ‘colonization’, the internal politics of a country’ and the claim that ‘advanced states of civilisation favour the developments of certain special languages (legal language, scientific terminology, etc.)’. The third important matter ruled out is the fact that ‘a language has connections with institutions of every sort: church, school, etc’. And finally the true scientist of language has to ignore ‘everything which relates to the geographical extension of languages and to their fragmentation into dialects’ (ibid.: 21–2).

That such a process of exclusion was necessary to the Saussurean project should be evident, as is the fact that he did not reject the whole area of ‘external linguistics’ as useless or uninteresting. What will be contested here, however, is the validity of this particular process of

exclusion. This will take the form of challenging Saussure by taking him at his word and attempting to demonstrate that the significance of language ‘in the lives of individuals and societies’ may well be ‘a factor of greater importance than anything else’. It will be a claim that the ‘important matters’ of ‘external linguistics’, which ‘demand attention when one approaches the study of language’, such as language and its relation to the history of a race or civilization, to political history, to institutions and to human geography, are the very questions with which we should remain in the study of language. The point will not be that we should concentrate on ‘external’ aspects rather than those ‘internal’ factors outlined by Saussure, but that we should see those ‘external’ factors – so brutally excluded – as constituting the object of the study of language. Rather than being additional or supplementary factors, they are precisely what give us something to study in the first place. Not optional extras, then, to be taken up by linguists in search of a break from formal scientificity, but the very features which enable us to see and hear the bare outlines of what might tentatively be called ‘the object of linguistics’. For once we have removed, as Saussure’s scientific project demands that we do, the ‘external’ factors from the study of language, we are left with very little to talk about. If the difficulties of approaching the full historical becoming of language are methodologically ruled out in advance, then we are left with nothing but ‘scientific’, reductive, formalism.

3 DUMB HISTORY, ARTICULATE LANGUAGE AND OTHER MYTHS OF DESIRE

It has been argued so far that Saussure’s ‘science of language’ was facilitated only by a series of demarcations and prohibitions which brought about the manageable myths required by linguists. Yet it is also the case that the historical study of language – at least in so far as it was practised in Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – was mythological. Therefore the aim of this section will be to demonstrate the mythological concerns of the other ‘science of language’ in this period. And again the limit of permissible discourse in the new science will be of central importance: its silence and articulation, its denials and involuntary expressions.

The ‘Science of Language’, Max Müller argued in 1861, ‘is a science of very modern date’. He was referring of course to comparative philology and its late entrance to British intellectual life:

Its very name is still unsettled, and the various titles that have been given to it in England, France and Germany are so vague and varying that they have led to the most confused ideas among the public at large as to the real object of the new science. We hear it spoken of as Comparative Philology, Scientific Etymology, Phonology and Glossology. In France it has received the convenient but somewhat barbarous name of *linguistique*. If we must have a name for our science, we might derive it either from *mythos*, word, or from *logos*, speech. But the title of Mythology is already occupied.

(Müller 1862: 27)

Despite Müller's reluctance to name the new 'science', 'mythology' was regarded as a possibility and only the fact that it had been appropriated to another discourse prevented it from becoming accepted ('mythology', referring to a field of knowledge dealing with myths, was a coinage of the 1830s). In fact 'mythology' would have been an interesting name for the new 'science of language' and not simply for etymological reasons. The study of language was indeed to be a study of *mythos* in the Greek sense of 'anything delivered by word of mouth'; but it was also a study of *myths* in the sense of powerful discourses which achieve particular effects in the social realm. Thus 'mythology' in the sense that I am using it here is not the later Greek sense of the poetic or legendary tale which is opposed to the historical account, an opposition veering towards that between falsity and truth, but related to Barthes' use of it in the sense of 'a type of speech chosen by history'. Müller was to be proved correct: 'mythology' would have been a better term than the convenient 'linguistique' on the grounds that the latter suggests a study solely concerned with language whereas the former suggest a study of language in relation to other discourses whose effects are felt within social life.

One of the most important mythical legacies of the Romantic period was that which posited language as a site of history. This, combined with the formal historical stress of the comparativists, gave language major significance in nineteenth-century British cultural debates. On the one hand was the notion that a proper historical account could give language its own order, coherence and continuity; and on the other the sense that language itself could resolve the problems of history. Davies, writing in the *Transactions of The Philological Society* in 1855, declared that 'a good philology is one of our best media for determining obscure questions of history' (1855: 283). His words were echoed in J. W. Donaldson's argument that,

It may seem strange that anything so vague and arbitrary as language should survive all other testimonies, and speak with more definiteness, even in its changed and modern state, than all other monuments however grand and durable.

(Donaldson 1839: 12)

The importance of this legacy was that it meant that language seemed to offer a direct link to the past since it was through language that history spoke most effectively. For the nation of course such a conversation with the past was crucial since it lent a sense of continuity and coherence to the national history. Donaldson illustrates the point when he argues in the same text that:

Though we had lost all other history of our country we should be able to tell from our language, composed as it is of a sub-stratum of Low German with deposits of Norman French and Latin . . . that the bulk of our population was Saxon and that they were overcome and permanently subjected to a body of Norman invaders.

(ibid.)

Now although this is a powerful claim it is in fact deceptive since linguistic evidence on its own could not reveal historical knowledge quite as directly as is desired here. Even such terms as 'sub-stratum' and 'deposits' indicate that there is already a chronology at work which would have to be gained from other sources. To put the problem more bluntly, a historian approaching such evidence with no corroborating facts would have an impossible task in deciding which is the substratum and which the deposits: came first – the Low German or the Norman French and Latin? The linguistic evidence alone would not show and would need to be interpreted from within an already extant ordering of discourse and history. Yet this problem was ignored in the theoretical contention that even if all other historical sources were to be destroyed, our own synchronic *etat de langue* would still offer us history lessons.

The reason for the strength of this belief was that history was held to reside *in* language and thus, 'often where history is utterly dumb concerning the past, language speaks' (Mathews 1880: 226). The study of language offers the best hope for the historian since it moves beyond the narratives of history to a closer and more reliable examination of their materials. Thus the hermeneut could trust the history *in* words rather than the historical narratives constructed *with* words since

although it is possible to create false historical narratives, language itself cannot lie about history since its very being is historical. As Latham put it succinctly, language is 'a material history' (Latham 1862: 750).

This powerful myth then was a legacy from an earlier period and was one that was to be deployed in various significant ways in the nineteenth century. The tempting idea that language is the ground in which the signs of history are simply and directly displayed had not yet struck the problem of discovering that what one digs out of 'material history' depends at least in part on what one is looking to find. The objection that language does not simply reveal history as one digs into it, but offers materials which can be ordered and arranged according to various patterns and structures in order to gain particular purposes and effects had not yet been made. It was that freedom which presented the study of language with its enormous mythological power.

One area in which the study of language was made to exercise this power was the set of discourses around the British nation-state. It was in this field that one of the most powerful of myths was to be consolidated: language as the political unconscious of the nation. The conception that a language reflected the national character was a firmly held belief which had been inherited from 'romantics' such as Diderot and Von Humboldt. Formulating it in the mid-nineteenth century, however, the British linguist Graham defined a language as:

The outward expression of the tendencies, turn of mind, and habits of thought of some one nation, and the best criterion of their intellect and feelings. If this explanation be admitted, it will naturally follow that the connexion between a people and their language is so close, that the one may be judged of by the other; and that the language is a lasting monument of the nature and character of the people.

(Graham 1869:ix)

The belief that language and national character are inextricably intertwined is another example of the processes of homogenization and identification in the study of language. So much so that the homogenized unity of the language of any particular national community was taken to be the criterion of its cultural safety and purity:

It is evident therefore that unity of speech is essential to the unity of a people. Community of language is a stronger bond

than identity of religion or government, and contemporaneous nations of one speech, however formally separated by differences of creed or of political organisation, are essentially one in culture, one in tendency, one in influence.

(Marsh 1860:221)

Given these beliefs it is predictable that much of the nineteenth-century historical work on language in Britain should have been directed towards tracing a 'unity of speech' in the English language. This project of 'the history of the language' (a project whose very title gives away its aim in advance by the double use of the definite article), and that of its historical progeny the *New/Oxford English Dictionary* and the field of English literary studies, was precisely to trace a continuity in 'the English language' which could then be matched with that of 'the English nation'. Its central concepts – 'standard English' and 'good literature' – were concepts, much like Saussure's own necessary starting points, based on delimitation and rejection. However, the point of the centralizing tendency of such work can be postponed for the moment since it will be necessary first to present an account of the powerful myth of language and nationality.

If it is true that in this period and field of linguistic research it was history that was viewed as having fallen silent, to be rescued from oblivion by the expressive nature of language, it is important to see precisely what language was saying on history's behalf and thus to specify the secrets of history which the language articulated. The answer is that the language was telling the secrets of the English nation: its unity, coherence, greatness and permanence. For when the English language revealed its secrets it did so only in order to cement the national identity:

It is of course our English tongue, out of which mainly we should seek to draw some of the hid treasure which it contains . . . we cannot employ ourselves better. There is nothing that will more help to form an English heart in ourselves and others.

(Trench 1851:24)

It told the history of a 'modern nation which is fit to lead the world, especially in the very matter of language' (Skcat 1895–8:415). And it articulated this history by drawing parallels between the strengths of the language and those of its speakers, since as one linguist put it, there is 'a certain conformity between the genius of our institutions and that of our language' (Trench 1855:43). Or as another confirmed,

the language 'carries with it the cherished and sanctified institutions of its native soil' (Harrison 1848:378). The main strength of the language, mirrored in the national self-image, was its liberalism: 'The English language, like the English people, is always ready to offer hospitality to all peaceful foreigners – words or human beings – that will land and settle within her coasts' (Meiklejohn 1886:279). The imperial language and nation then will not only welcome peaceful foreigners but will also not omit to shoulder its share of the white man's linguistic burden. Thus: 'To make amends for all this borrowing, England supplies foreigners (too long enslaved) with her own staple – namely the dictions of free political life' (Kington-Oliphant 1873:339). The language, like the nation, was not to be ashamed of its 'borrowings' but to put them on display as the markers of superiority:

We do not wish to discard the rich furniture of words which we have inherited from our French and classic eras; but we wish to wear them as trophies, as the historic blazon of a great career, for the demarcation and amplification of an imperial language whose thews and sinews and vital energies are essentially English.

(Earle 1901:63)

It was a language which embodied in its spread the fortunes of the nation and its future:

That language too is rapidly becoming the great medium of civilization, the language of law and literature to the Hindoo, of commerce to the African, of religion to the scattered islanders of the Pacific. The range of its influence, even at the present day, is greater than ever was that of the Greek, the Latin, or the Arabic; and the circle widens daily.

(Guest 1882:703)

'The language', that constructed ideal with its magical properties, is precisely mythological in the sense of belonging to a discourse, or number of discourses, which exercise powerful effects in the social realm. 'The language' here becomes the site of dissemination for desired, and in this sense therefore mythical, solutions to particular historical problems. In the face of conflict 'the language' offered unity, in times which threatened a break with the past it preached continuity, in times of political struggle it extolled the virtues of liberalism, and in times of doubt it offered boundless optimism. It was in fact the perfect myth, in two of the senses of the word: it was a type

of speech chosen by history and its form was that of a poetic, legendary tale. For as one of the foremost linguistic mythologers of nineteenth-century Britain recognized, words 'are not merely arbitrary signs, but living powers' (Trench 1851:3).

4 THE IMPOSSIBLE SCIENCE

This essay has presented an account of two differing fields of knowledge both of which claimed the title of the 'science of language'. It has been argued that in both cases the basis of their interest in language has been mythical: on the one hand requiring mythical entities in order to guarantee 'scientificity', and on the other dealing with the articulate forms by which history is represented to itself and to others. In this concluding section there will again be a stress on these two sciences in order to stress their common links and perceptions and to indicate the problems of attaining to a science of language. In this the texts of Bakhtin will be of central importance.

One of Bakhtin's central tenets is that 'verbal discourse is a social phenomenon social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning' (Bakhtin 1981:259). At first sight such a belief might appear to be in line with Saussure's own distinction between the language itself (*langue*) and speech (*parole*) since in making this distinction, Saussure argues, 'we distinguish at the same time: (1) what is social from what is individual and (2) what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less accidental' (Saussure 1983:14). However, there is a major difference between Bakhtin's central tenet and that of Saussure since although they may both express apparently similar beliefs about the social nature of what it is which is to be addressed in their investigations (praxis for Bakhtin, an 'object' for Saussure), they are at odds when it comes to the problem of how to interpret the term 'social'. For Saussure the question of social being reduces to one of common factors, of sameness and collective and identical self-reproduction. When he posits language as a social phenomenon Saussure means precisely this:

A language, as a collective phenomenon, takes the form of a totality of imprints in everyone's brain, rather like a dictionary of which each individual has an identical copy. Thus it is something which is in each individual, but is none the less

common to all This mode of existence of a language may be represented by the following formula:

$$1 + 1 + 1 + 1 \dots = I \text{ (collective model).}$$

(ibid.:19)

Thus in any given 'speech community', all its individuals 'will establish amongst themselves a kind of mean; all of them will reproduce – doubtless not exactly, but approximately – the same signs linked to the same concepts'. For Saussure it is the case that both language and society are aggregations of sameness; to use Marx's metaphor, society for Saussure is like a sack of potatoes in which all the potatoes are of the same size and shape. Moreover in this view of society a form of crude egalitarianism is held to exist since given that the language is a 'social fact', to use Durkheim's terminology, it must mean that it operates equally as a constraint (the essence of Durkheim's theory in regard to this concept) for all members of society. Thus a language is an imposition on all the members of a community which they are powerless to resist since, in Saussure's words, 'no society has ever known its language to be anything other than something inherited from previous generations which it has no choice but to accept'; 'the continuous efforts required in order to learn one's native language point to the impossibility of radical change'; 'linguistic facts are rarely the object of criticism, every society being usually content with the language it has intended'; and a language 'is part and parcel of the life of the whole community, and the community's natural inertia exercises a conservative influence upon it'. For these reasons any language is radically egalitarian since: 'at any moment of time, a language belongs to all its users. It is a facility unrestrictedly available throughout a whole community' (ibid.: 72–4).

For Saussure then the social nature of a language amounts to this: it is inextricably tied to a particular social group (ideally a nation) whose own unified and homogeneous form mirrors that of the language. In Bakhtin's account, however, Saussure's view of a language starts off on the wrong step by banishing precisely its social features. The exclusion of any concern with language and race, language and political history, language and institutions, language and human geography – along with all the other areas banished to the realm of 'external linguistics', means that the field of enquiry is already heading in the wrong direction. For Bakhtin, language is constantly under the influence of many social forces pulling in different directions and this means that rather than seeking to identify the unit of a

language and its speakers, the linguist must pay attention to the heteroglossic differences of language and languages. Such differences arise out of the interests of distinct social groups and stem from Bakhtin's view of any social formation as constructed by a conflictual struggle between such interest groups. Rather than viewing society as a unified mass of individuals, Bakhtin sees it as the site, and object, of conflict. An example of the opposed methodology of these two theorists is given when Saussure comments on the 'literary development of a language':

This is a phenomenon of general importance, since it is inseparable from political history. A literary language is by no means confined to the limits apparently imposed on it by literature. One has only to think of the influence of the salons, of the court, and of academics.

(ibid.:22)

In a sense this is a typically Bakhtinian perspective in its stress on the social extension of literary language and its propagation in particular institutions. However, the flaw in Saussure's work, that which allows him to perceive only the unities of language, is that he excludes precisely such viewpoints from his investigations. For Bakhtin on the other hand it is precisely such perceptions which allow him to see the diversity amongst apparent unity, the 'internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence'. It presents him with his material for study:

The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour.

(Bakhtin 1981:263)

If Bakhtin and Saussure disagree on the question of the social nature of language what of the position of the first scientists of language, in particular the British historical linguists? Again, at first sight there appear to be promising links between such historical work on language and that of Bakhtin, for Trench's comment that words are 'not merely arbitrary signs, but living powers' seems related to the Bakhtinian belief in the power-laden nature of verbal discourse. Yet the promise turns out again to be a disappointment and for familiar

reasons. The principal reason is that the British linguists also saw language and society as unified. As was pointed out earlier in the essay they argued for an essential unity between the greatness, liberality and coherence of the language and nation. They saw the present, in the linguistic and the social realms, as forming a seamless continuity with the past, and it was for this reason that they insisted that

eyes should be opened to the Unity of English, that in English literature there is an unbroken succession of authors, from the reign of Alfred to that of Victoria, and that the English which we speak *now* is absolutely *one* in its essence, with the language that was spoken in the days when the English first invaded the island and defeated and overwhelmed its British inhabitants.

(Skeat 1873:xii)

The epic past, 'the absolute past of national beginnings and peak times' in Bakhtin's phrase, is conjoined with an epic present in this view of history. It is an easy continuity of achieved greatness and permanence.

However this is not to argue that these linguists were not interested in the differing forms of language since their work did in fact often mark the exciting beginnings of an investigation of heteroglossia. Max Müller, for example, warned that

as political history ought to be more than a chronicle of royal dynasties, so the historian of language ought never to lose sight of those lower and popular strata of speech from which those original dynasties spring and by which alone they are supported.

(Müller 1862:51-2)

And much of the work carried out by such linguists did indeed concentrate upon the dialects of English, as evinced in the texts published by the English Dialect society and principally its *English Dialect Dictionary*. However, despite such attention to heteroglossia, it is none the less the case that their work, like Saussure's was based on the quest for unity in a language. For the work on dialects was posited upon the fundamental premise that they were deviations from the central form of the language. Skeat, one of the foremost dialectologists, defined 'dialect' in this way: 'In relation to a language such as English, it is used in a special sense to signify "a local variety of speech differing from the standard or literary language"' (Skeat 1912:1). The phrase 'standard language' was in fact a coinage of these linguists

in the 1850s and was a necessary methodological concept for their work. It was invented – in precisely the same way that *langue* served for Saussure – in order to introduce stability and unity into an apparently heterogeneous mass.

Their view of the language and its unity with the society to which it belonged was to become an illustration of Bakhtin's theoretical stance. For Bakhtin the idea that a language could be a unity was a construction which served particular interests. And in their work on the 'standard language' the British historical linguists exemplified this view. For the 'standard language' which was their object of study soon shifted from its status as the literary language to a particular form of the language restricted to a specific class. Again this process of exclusion and restriction was carried out under the banner of scientificity, as Ellis's comments on the concept of a received form of pronunciation demonstrate:

there will be a kind of mean, the general utterance of the more thoughtful or more respected persons of mature age, around which the other words seemed to hover, and which, like the averages of the mathematician, not agreeing precisely with any, may for the purposes of science be assured to represent all.

(Ellis 1869-89:Pt 1, 13)

Like Saussure's 'linguistic state' Ellis's object can only be brought about by the denial of difference and the writing of a mythical, 'representative', mean. The development of the concept of the 'standard Language', as illustrated in *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition, reveals the continuation of this process:

a variety of the speech of a country which by reason of its cultural status and currency, is held to represent the best form of that speech

Standard English: that form of the English language which is spoken (with modifications, individual or local) by the generality of the cultured people of Great Britain.

Thus the language, as presented in its standard form, became united not with the whole of society but with the dominant class. It is once more a unity which is based on exclusion: the language, as opposed to its dialects, is that spoken by the cultured generality and not any other speakers. As Bakhtin's work would suggest, this hierarchical exclusion has specific group interests at heart and they are often expressed by the linguists in moralistic terms:

By 'good English' we mean those words and those meanings of them and those ways of putting them together, which are used by the best speakers, the people of best education; everything which such people do not use, or use in another way, is bad English.

(Whitney 1877:3)

For Bakhtin such historical work would indeed have been alive to words as 'living powers' in the social realm. But from his perspective the flaws which had characterized such historical work as yet were two: first, to think that the language could be identified solely with one group, and, second, to posit an impossible unity between language and nation. Both Saussure and the historical linguists made the same mistake from a Bakhtinian perspective since rather than registering a unitary language, which is how they saw their different sciences of language, they were helping to form one. Thus the positing of both *langue* and the 'standard language' as static unities, possible only by an act of deliberative blindness to difference, is an engagement in the politics of language rather than its scientific study.

In his essay 'Discourse in the novel' Bakhtin presents a historical critique of the type of linguistic research discussed in this article. Its salient point, he argues, is that

linguistics, stylistics and the philosophy of language – as forces in the service of the great centralizing tendencies of European verbal-ideological life – have sought first and foremost for *unity* in diversity. This exclusive 'orientation toward unity' in the present and past life of languages has concentrated the attention of philosophical and linguistic thought on the firmest, most stable, least changeable and most mono-semantic aspects of discourse.

(Bakhtin 1981:274)

In Bakhtin's view, however, this 'orientation toward unity' has diverted this form of thought away from the nature of language. It has led it to posit a form of *monoglossia* as the usual state of a language, a staticity of being rather than historical becoming. And it thus becomes the theoretical expression of certain political tendencies which have particular interests in view – for, as Bakhtin argues:

Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given [*dan*] but is always in essence

posited [*zadan*] – and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia.

(*ibid.*:270)

The conflicts present within any particular language are banished by *monoglossia*. Or at least appear to be, for the struggle between centripetal forces which seek unity and centrifugal forces which reflect differing social interests, can never be absolutely resolved. At differing times, in different political contexts, the forces acting in language will have differing effects: sometimes *monoglossia* will triumph, sometimes *heteroglossia* will appear with all its contradictory elements. If, however, it is the case that *monoglossia* can triumph on occasions – as I have attempted to show in this essay – then it is also the case that this must be a temporary victory. For the nature of language remains in the last instance heteroglossic and dialogical – despite all the best efforts of monoglossic, centralizing tendencies. Any instance of language, any utterance in Bakhtin's view, 'cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads' and thus register the heteroglot struggle between differing viewpoints and contradictory forces. As Bakhtin puts it,

at any given moment of its historical existence language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form.

(*ibid.*:291)

The social life and historical becoming of language make it impossible that *monoglossia* could triumph over *heteroglossia* in any absolute sense. Though of course even a non-absolute victory can give the winner certain rights and possibilities. And thus in a real sense language never can be unitary though it can be constituted as such by the sorts of discursive practices that Saussure and the historical linguists undertook. But then such a unitary language as that engendered by both science and myth is unitary, according to Bakhtin, 'only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualisations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is characteristic of all living language' (*ibid.*: 288). The repression of history, its absence in any other than a distorted and distorting form,

has led to a crucial inability in the 'science of language'. It has produced a science which has not yet become aware of its proper field since the dialogic aspect of discourse and the forces linked with it have not yet been brought within its scope. It is a science, ironically enough, still without an object.

The science of language then is an impossible and self-contradictory science. For although Bakhtin argues that 'only a single and unitary language, one that does not acknowledge other languages alongside itself, can be subject to reifications', which appears to open up the possibility of finding such a language to be the object of scientific knowledge, it has been the purpose of this paper to argue that such a unitary language is already a construction, a product of the practices of linguistics (amongst other practices). The object of linguistics which Saussure discovered was in fact twice removed from the reality of language: it had been united by the repression of *heteroglossia*, and it had then been reified as a stable 'thing' of the world. As regards the historical science of language, it is likewise an impossibility since it too banishes *heteroglossia*, produces a unitary language, and gives that unitary language a single ideological task. It is a clear example of the firm linkage of ideological meaning to language which is the defining factor of 'mythological and magical thought' according to Bakhtin.

With the failure of these two sciences, then, there arises the necessity of a new task – that of allowing history and language to speak: to tell of their differences, their forces, the institutions which support them, the groups which struggle for them. And much more besides. As one of the historical linguists put it: 'Each language has a history of its own, and it may be made to tell us its own *life*, so to speak, if we set the right way to work about it' (Craik 1861: 1).

The task remains to be performed.