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Book Chapter: The Return of the Repressed: Saussure and Swift on Language and History

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13 The Return of the Repressed: Saussure and Swift on Language and History

Tony Crowley

Departures in linguistics are nothing new of course. Ideas come and go, "facts" appear and disappear along with the theories which first brought them to light, trends shift and alter. The language used to describe the history of the field, a field which once constituted a new departure in its own right, is replete with the language of innovation: "breakthrough," "advance," "progress," and even "revolution" are familiar enough epithets. In the face of all this novelty then the question must be, how to do something new? The answer which is proposed here might appear somewhat odd for the intention is to make a new departure by going back rather than advancing. The return will be to the work of Saussure and the aim will be to take one of his claims and to re-read it. By doing so it is hoped not only to offer an alternative view of Saussure's work and its influence, but also to obtain an important insight which will open up new possibilities in linguistic study.¹ To that end the second half of the paper will be dedicated to an application of this insight in an examination of Swift's *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), which treats of the politics and processes of the standardisation of the English language.

We can begin by considering these declarations by Saussure on the topic of what he calls "important matters" which "demand attention when one approaches the study of language." First, he claims,

¹ The work of Saussure in relation to language and history, and the difference between his approach and that of Bakhtin, is also examined in my article "That Obscure Object of Desire: A Science of Language," in J.E. Joseph and T.J. Taylor (eds.) *Ideologies of Language*, London: Routledge, 1990.

there are all the respects in which linguistics links up with ethnology. There are all the relations which may exist between the history of a race or a civilisation. The two histories intermingle and are related one to another... A nation's way of life has an effect upon its language. At the same time it is in great part the language which makes the nation.

A second important consideration is articulated when he argues that mention must be made of the relations between languages and political history. Major historical events such as the Roman Conquest are of incalculable linguistic importance in all kinds of ways. Colonisation, which is simply one form of conquest, transports a language into new environments, and this brings changes in the language. A great variety of examples could be cited in this connexion. Norway, for instance, adopted Danish on becoming politically united to Denmark, although today Norwegians are trying to shake off this linguistic influence. The internal politics of a country is of no less importance for the life of a language...

And a third matter:

A language has connexions with institutions of every sort: church, school, etc. These institutions in turn are intimately bound up with 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 upon it by literature. One has only to think of the influence of salons, of the court, and of academies. In connexion with a literary language, there arises the important question of conflict with local dialects...²

It may be surprising for some readers, particularly those familiar with the more popular accounts of the history of modern linguistic ideas, to discover that these are the words of Saussure since it is almost one of the axiomatic reflexes of such accounts to stress his anti-historical stance. Moreover, it may be even more of a revelation to find that these words are not tucked away in some obscure manuscripts but in fact appear in chapter five of the "Introduction" to the *Course in General Linguistics*.

Of course readers conversant with the *Course* will know that Saussure mentions these factors precisely in order to relegate them to the realm of "external linguistics" rather than to include them within the scientific gaze of his theoretical study ("internal linguistics"). It

² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. R. Harris, London: Duckworth, 1983, pp. 21-22. There is also a fourth point mentioned by Saussure which is concerned with "everything which relates to the geographical extension of languages and to their fragmentation into dialects..."

is just this sort of distinction which has led to the claim that Saussure rejected history and it is to this claim that we shall return shortly. However, it is worth noting for the moment that the founder of General Linguistics viewed the topics outlined above as not only significant for linguists, but important in a more general sense. For Saussure this is the case because, he asserts, "in practice the study of language is in some degree or other the concern of everyone." He also makes the forceful contention that

In the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other. For the study of language to remain solely the business of a handful of specialists would be a quite unacceptable state of affairs.³

Arguing against the prevailing trend in linguistic thought in the twentieth century, and indeed the trend which his own work at least in part engendered, Saussure argues that the study of language should not be a sealed and impenetrable field for specialists alone but a discipline whose significance is general precisely because its object is of singular importance in social life. Already in such declarations we can find a clear recognition that Saussure is aware of the importance of language in history; that is, he recognises the relevance of thinking about language not only in relation to "political history" but also with regard to the importance of the study of language for its users in the historical present.

It is a commonplace that Saussure regarded history as at best an irrelevance in the study of language and one for which there is evidence in the *Course*:

The first thing which strikes one on studying linguistic facts is that the language user is unaware of their succession in time: he is dealing with a state. Hence the linguist who wishes to understand this state must rule out of consideration everything which brought that state about, and pay no attention to diachrony. Only by suppressing the past can he enter into the state of mind of the language user. The intervention of history can only distort his judgment.⁴

It is disputable whether the language user *is* so totally unaware of the succession in time of linguistic facts, or of the fact that languages have histories. Indeed it may be claimed that on occasion, the knowledge

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

of diachronic facts, or of the facts belonging to the realm of external linguistics, may be more important than knowledge of the synchronic system. Yet at this point it is necessary to be clear about the assertion which Saussure is making since it is central. What he argues here is the cardinal point that General Linguistics concerns itself only with the system of language which exists at a particular abstract moment (the duration of which is determined not by time but by the requirement that any changes within the system be minimal and not significant). That is, it attempts to describe the state of a language from the language-user's point of view, in the form of a system in the present, the nature of which is, by definition, static. Despite this, it is clear from the *Course* that Saussure is not arguing against work on the relations between language and history *per se*. Rather, he is arguing against the confusion of the synchronic and diachronic viewpoints. That which is constantly affirmed is the need to keep these viewpoints separate and, in the interests of scientificity, to render a hierarchical ordering in which the synchronic takes precedence over the diachronic. The question to be addressed is why Saussure deems this necessary to his project and, more importantly, why this is taken to be a rejection of history.

Before embarking upon an attempt to answer this question it is necessary to clarify one point. That is that Saussure did not evince a lack of interest in diachronic linguistics. Not only was his training and only self-penned publication in this field, he also devoted by far the longest section of the *Course* to the problems of diachronic study.⁵ However, be that as it may, it is certainly clear that in the theoretical model, synchrony is privileged over diachrony. The reason for this hierarchy is quite simply that diachronic facts are not systematic in the same way that synchronic facts appear to be. "Diachronic linguistics," Saussure claims, "can accumulate detail after detail, without ever being forced to conform to the constraints of a system." The diachronic evolution of language does not offer a closed, logical order of relations but a series of "facts" which can be interpreted in a number of different ways. The synchronic system of "facts," on the other hand, "admits no order other than its own."⁶ Briefly put, the

⁵ The Introduction to the *Course* takes up 38 pages; the Appendix on "The Principles of Physiological Phonetics" 26; "Part One, General Principles" 34; "Part Two, Synchronic Linguistics" 40; "Part Three, Diachronic Linguistics" 50; "Part Four, Geographical Linguistics 22"; "Part Five, Questions of Retrospective Linguistics, Conclusion" 19.

⁶ *Course*, op. cit., p. 23.

problem with diachronic linguistics is that it deals with units which "replace one another without themselves constituting a system."

The privileging of the synchronic view then stems from the requirement for systematicity in language study, and this in turn derives from the drive towards scientificity. In contradistinction to the sequences of diachronic units which need to have an order and regularity imposed upon them, the relations of synchronic units already exist and merely await discovery by the scientist of language. Yet even given this distinction—and its validity in the context of the more self-reflexive developments in the modern sciences is open to question—it is still not the case that Saussure can be said to have rejected history. For what he has argued is the rejection of the privileging of the diachronic over the synchronic, on the basis that systematicity demands synchronicity. This cannot in any meaningful sense be described as a rejection of history since the diachronic perspective for Saussure means simply the "evolution" or succession of units through time. And it is a reductive and poor view of history (and a view, moreover, which cannot be ascribed to Saussure) which sees it simply in terms of events succeeding each other in what Benjamin called "homogenous, empty time." To summarise then, Saussure argues against the diachronic point of view in language study; he does not rule out the importance of the relations between language and history, nor does he dismiss the significance of the study of such links. It can be argued reasonably that the *Course* permits this confusion to take place by dint of its lack of distinction between time and history; but that for present purposes is a distinct point.

It is important to establish this point in that it returns us to Saussure's assertions cited above. For what is evident in those extracts is that Saussure does not conflate external linguistics with diachronic linguistics, nor internal linguistics with synchronic study. And this is crucial. The set of distinctions, external/internal—diachronic/synchronic, are not to be seen as two sets of terms in correspondence (in which external and diachronic are paired as inadmissible and internal-synchronic paired as the allowed terms), but as a series of terms in which each has its own significance. For although in the overall model it is the synchronic and internal perspectives which are privileged, it does not therefore follow that the diachronic and external are relegated in the same way, for the same reasons, and with the same stress. To put it simply, in order for the science of General Linguistics to get off the ground in the first place both the stress on the internal system

and the synchronic viewpoint have to be given precedence. But it is not a necessary consequence of this methodological step that we are to consider external linguistics and diachronic study to deal with the same material, to be united in perspective, nor indeed in any important way to be related.

In fact Saussure makes it clear that the areas of external linguistics and the diachronic study of language deal with very distinct material and that they must not be confused. We have seen above how he specified the "important matters" with which external linguistics concerns itself. We can now remind ourselves of the definition of diachronic study:

Diachronic linguistics studies the relations which hold not between the coexisting terms of a linguistic state, but between successive terms substituted one for another over a period of time.⁷

The object of study for these two approaches is very different. In external linguistics it is the relation between language and political history construed in its broadest sense; in the diachronic study of language it is the relation between units which come to replace each other in time. Moreover, not only are these two fields to be distinguished, Saussure argues that they cannot lend each other support. For in the last few pages of the *Course*, in which he considers "linguistic evidence in Anthropology and Prehistory," including such topics as "languages and races," "ethnicity," "linguistic palaeontology," and "linguistic types and group mentality," Saussure explicitly warns against using the diachronic method in order to give accounts of the relations between language and political history. For example, he discusses the reconstruction of former languages which have long disappeared, this being a central concern in diachronic study. Of this he asks,

Can these reconstructions tell us anything about the peoples themselves, their race, their social structure, their customs, their institutions, etc.? In other words, can the language throw light on questions of anthropology, ethnography and prehistory? It is generally held that it can. But in our view that is largely illusory.⁸

Again, later, when discussing "linguistic types and group mentality," he reconsiders the nature of diachronic evidence:

It is always interesting to determine the grammatical typology of

⁷ Ibid., p. 139.

⁸ Ibid., p. 221.

languages (whether they are historically attested or reconstructed) and to classify them according to the procedures they adopt for the expression of thought. But from these analyses and classifications no conclusions can be drawn with any certainty outside the linguistic domain proper.⁹

The point is that diachronic studies never leave "the linguistic domain proper," by which Saussure means that they never quite manage to escape the task of detailing the successive units with which they are concerned. The significance of external linguistics, on the other hand, is left untouched by such studies for the two fields are distinct and take different objects for analysis.

The argument then is that the rejection, or better, the relegation of the diachronic viewpoint is not a rejection of history. Rather, what appears obliquely in Saussure's account, though it is hardly developed, is the field of external linguistics which takes as its object of study the role of language in history, or more precisely of the relations between language and political history. There is no absolute rejection of history then, but a new positioning of the historical viewpoint in the field of linguistic study. There is even evidence that it is a viewpoint which Saussure might have favoured once the arduous task of clearing the ground for the science of language had been completed.¹⁰

The importance of this re-reading of Saussure's attitude to the study of language and history is that it suggests a possible new departure in linguistic study. For if the argument that he did not reject the historical viewpoint but relocated it is accurate, then we can begin work in a field which, though hinted at, has not yet been embarked upon to any great extent.¹¹ Perhaps the best way of exemplifying the interest and importance of such work will be by a necessarily brief case study. A study of Swift's *Proposal*, concerning itself with the relations between language and political history in the eighteenth century, with

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

¹⁰ In a now famous letter to Meillet, Saussure claimed "In the last analysis, only the picturesque side of a language still holds my interest, what makes it different from all others insofar as it belongs to a particular people with a particular origin, the almost ethnographic side of language... The utter ineptness of current terminology, the need for reform, and to show what kind of an object language is in general—these things over and over again spoil whatever pleasure I can take in historical studies, even though I have no greater wish than not to have to bother myself with these general linguistic considerations." *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, Vol. XXI (1964), p. 93.

¹¹ A recent collection of work in this field is P. Burke and R. Porter (eds.), *The Social History of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. The introduction to this text offers a useful overview of developments in this area.

particular regard to the standardisation of the English language, will serve the purpose.¹²

It is important to remind ourselves of some of the main headings mentioned by Saussure as falling under the brief of "external linguistics." They are: the national way of life and its effect upon its language, along with the role of the language in the making of the nation. The relations between languages and political history, with particular regard to external political events (such as colonialism) and internal political events (such as the unification of disparate regions). And finally, the relations between language and institutions; specific attention is drawn here to the literary development of a language ("inseparable from political history"), and the conflict between a literary language and local dialects. What is of most interest here is that such topics are precisely those dealt with by Swift in his *Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), and it is by a careful reading of this text that we can gain an insight into the utility of an approach which takes an historical perspective.

That Swift saw his *Proposal* as a document of major importance is undoubted; it is, for example, the only prose piece which he signed. Yet it is not its significance within his own oeuvre which need detain us, for it has claims—and articulates them clearly—to a more elevated status. The *Proposal* begins with what on reflection may seem to be an exaggerated claim: that although not of such immediate benefit as resolving the National Debt or expanding trade, in the future the project embodied in the *Proposal* will be as advantageous and worthy as both. It is indeed a remarkable assertion: that a tract on the defects (and their remedies) of the English language could be as important as economic development. However, it is a claim which, when viewed contextually, does merit the status accorded it. For Swift's essay is not merely an attempt to reform language, but to make the reform of language the vehicle for social and political change. When read in this way, it becomes clear how the study of language can be construed, in Saussure's words, as being "in some degree or other the concern of everyone."

The concern demonstrated by Swift's pamphlet for its own political importance is signalled by his use of a significant analogy: the linking

¹² For a study of the cultural significance of the standard language question in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, see Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates*, London: Macmillan, 1989 (U.S.ed.: *Standard English and the Politics of Language*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press).

together of the language and the civil and religious constitution.¹³ For just as Swift attacks those "who would not have us by any means think of preserving our Civil or Religious Constitution, because we are engaged in a war abroad," likewise he dismisses those who would postpone any reform of the language to a time of peace. Simply by mentioning the two projects in this way Swift appoints enormous significance to linguistic reform. Moreover, the *Proposal* is also linked to the constitution in that its aim is to deliver peace and thus the fact that it is written in a time of war enhances rather than diminishes its importance. The *Proposal* then is eirenic and sets out to find ways of avoiding the language of the Civil War which had beset the English seventy years earlier. As with the Académie Française (established in 1635), one of whose aims was "to remedy those disorders which the Civil Wars...have brought into [the language]," the *Proposal* sought to engender peace by stabilising the language and thus facilitating what Swift calls "knowledge and politeness" in the social order.¹⁴ Echoing Locke's attempt to determine language in *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), and in particular its aim of finding the way to "knowledge, truth and peace," Swift's work intends to reform the language in order to create a proper vehicle of communication. Once stabilised, the language can then become the medium of social conversation, the untroubled area in which opinions, beliefs and ideas can be exchanged freely and openly in the bourgeois public sphere without the danger of "enthusiastic jargon" and sentiment. The process of stabilisation, later to be called standardisation, would thus be a remedy to that war-like state of language and society in which polite conversation, "so useful and innocent a pleasure, so fitted for every period, and condition of life, and so much in all men's power," had become "so much neglected and abused."

Language reform for Swift is an attempt to influence the direction of historical development. And it is this concern with the relations between language and history, in a number of different guises, which serves as the link between Swift and Saussure's account of "external

¹³ The significance of this analogy, along with an acute discussion of the linguistic and political debates of the eighteenth century, can be found in J. Barrell's "The Language Properly So-Called," in *English Literature in History 1730-80: An Equal Wide Survey*, London: Hutchinson, 1983.

¹⁴ Ann Cline Kelly, *Swift and the English Language*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, p. 60.

linguistics." One clear similarity in their approaches is the common recognition of not only the possibility for language to forge history, but of the fact that historical events bring about change in language itself. For example, although not the first to do so (like many others in the eighteenth century his linguistic history is deeply indebted to Wallis's *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*, 1653), Swift is an important figure in the process by which the history of the language is traced in conjunction with the history of the group that used it. Thus he uses an important early part of the essay to establish the fact that linguistic history can only be explained by reference to political history. And he does this in order to be able to draw lessons from both fields of historical knowledge. Regarding the decay of Latin, for example, he claims that there were many reasons for it:

As the Change of their Government into a Tyranny, which ruined the Study of Eloquence; there being no further Use or Encouragement for popular Orators: Their giving not only the Freedom of the City, but Capacity for Employments, to several Towns in *Gaul, Spain, and Germany*, and other distant Parts, as far as *Asia*; which brought a great Number of foreign Pretenders into *Rome*: The slavish Disposition of the Senate and People...Not to mention those Invasions from the *Goths and Vandals*, which are too obvious to insist on.¹⁵

What Swift does here is to use the historical vicissitudes of the life of a language as a way of reading the moral and political fortunes of its speakers. Or in other words he uses the language as a means to facilitate the reading of history. This is significant in that it allows a number of evaluations to take place under the guise of a critique of language. For not only is the language to be evaluated—richness and eloquence set against corruption and decay—it is also the case that both the nation and history itself are to be understood from this perspective. Thus, when Swift turns his attention to the English language, his reading of its history becomes automatically a construction of the history of the English nation and people. In fact his account is an early example of Tory literary history in which the high points of the language correspond perfectly to the highpoints of the literary tradition and thus, by corollary, to the major political achievements of the English nation itself. It is worth quoting at length:

¹⁵ Swift, "Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue" in H. Davis (ed.) *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1957, p. 8.

The Period wherein the *English* tongue received most Improvement, I take to commence with the Beginning of Queen *Elizabeth's* reign, and to conclude with the great Rebellion in Forty-two. It is true, there was a very ill Taste both of Style and Wit, which prevailed under King *James* the First; but that seems to have been corrected in the first Years of his Successor; who among many other Qualifications of an excellent Prince, was a great Patron of learning. From that Great Rebellion to this present Time, I am apt to doubt whether the Corruptions in our Language have not, at least, equalled the Refinements of it; and these Corruptions very few of our best Authours in our Age have wholly escaped. During the usurpation, such an Infusion of Enthusiastick jargon prevailed in every writing, as was not shaken off in many years after. To this succeeded that Licentiousness which entered with the *Restoration*; and from infecting our Religion and Morals, fell to corrupt our Language.¹⁶

A perfect match is achieved: as the political state of the nation declines (signalled in this account by regicide and the English Revolution), likewise the language suffers corruption and decay. At one level this can be taken as a fairly crude attempt to intervene in history as it rapidly becomes an account of the golden age, "the period wherein the English tongue received most improvement" and in which those political and moral standards were set up from which we have been falling ever since. At another level, however, and ignoring for a moment the specifics of this reading, this is a more sophisticated attempt to intervene historically since it sets up an ideological framework, at a fairly abstract level, whose effect has continued to be felt. For at this other level what Swift's *Proposal* does is to set up a powerful and enduring web of forces which have been so crucial to the English historical experience. Put simply, what the essay does is to articulate what Joyce was later to call the "triple net" of language, nationality and religion. The ideological significance of this triple net in the English national consciousness cannot be underestimated.

A distinct way in which Swift treats significant worries about language and history in the period appears in the *Proposal's* long treatment of the dangers and problems caused by linguistic mutability. This was a common complaint at the time and became one of the factors in the campaign for language standardisation. It was a problem for writers, many of whom saw the fact that the language changes historically as a positive threat to their fame and reputation. Edmund Waller, for example, had written in "Of English Verse":

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

But who should hope his lines should long
Last, in a daily changing tongue?

Poets that lasting Marble seek
Must write in Latin or in Greek;
We write in Sand...¹⁷

Yet the problem was not one which was restricted to literary authors, for as Swift pointed out, it was a problem which beset all writing and therefore, importantly, called into question the very writing of history itself. In fact it is this concern which forms the core of the *Proposal*; for the aim is to stabilise the language by standardising it, thereby preventing change and ensuring that it could be reliably fixed for ever. Swift's recommendation of the essay to his patron, the Prime Minister, makes this point clear:

Your Lordship must allow, that such a Work as this, brought to Perfection, would very much contribute to the Glory of Her Majesty's Reign, which ought to be recorded in Words more durable than Brass, and such as Posterity may read a thousand Years hence, with Pleasure as well as Admiration.¹⁸

The intention then is to fix the language in order that history can be recorded faithfully for once and for all and thus ensure that Queen Anne's reign should be available to readers of history at all future points. To stress the significance of the point to his patron, Swift adds:

But at the same Time, I must be so plain as to tell your Lordship, that if you will not take some Care to settle our Language, and put it into a State of Continuance, I cannot promise that your Memory shall be preserved above an Hundred Years, further than by imperfect Tradition.¹⁹

This is the ultimate threat: unless the language is settled and fixed, not even the historical record of the Prime Minister's achievements can be guaranteed. The clear concern here is that linguistic mutability brought about by the passage of time will undermine the transmission of history; the narratives of history, the "memories" of the past, will not be under any guarantee of successful communication to the future. However, it was not simply Swift's desire to be historiographer royal which led him to voice this concern about the problematic

¹⁷ Rev. G. Gilfillan (ed.) *The Poetical Works of Edmund Waller and Sir John Denham*, Edinburgh, 1857, p. 92.

¹⁸ Swift, op. cit, pp. 16-17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

relationship between language and history. Since as an acute political activist he was aware of the importance of ensuring that language and historiography played a central role in the formation of "tradition." He saw the need to make sure that the values of the present were encased in a language which would guarantee their successful transmission. At this level then the essay can be read as an attempt not merely to fix the language for future users, but to try and ensure that particular values, forms of social life, preferences and exclusions, traditions in the most general sense, could also be fixed for the future. As such it is another clear example of the way in which language is used to intervene in history in order to bring about specific ends. And in fact all attempts at standardisation of the language, whether that of Swift or the more successful undertakings of the nineteenth century, have at least a dual programme: to bring about change in the social as well as the purely linguistic realms.²⁰

It has been argued that Saussure acknowledged the importance of language in history, as opposed to the study of language from a temporal, diachronic perspective. And a brief analysis of Swift's *Proposal* has been given in order to trace some of the different ways in which language and history were perceived as related at a particularly significant historical conjuncture. In order to conclude this piece then it will be useful to think on the general relevance of this re-reading of Saussure and the possibilities of a new departure in the study of language.²¹ For if we are to take seriously Saussure's claim about the importance of the study of language to everyone, then this will have repercussions for our ways of thinking about linguistic study: about its objects, its methods and its aims.

It is possible to begin by saying that the study of language and its relation to history poses a threat to the formal, abstract forms of linguistic study which have dominated the twentieth century. Whether these be in the post-Saussurean or Chomskyan schools (surely the dominant branches in the last seventy five years), it is clear that the decontextualised, ahistorical approach to language must be put into question by a method which does not seek for an abstract structure but looks instead for the uses, and their significance, to which language is put at the micro and macrosocial levels. And this is not just a question of turning away from langue to parole, or from competence to

²⁰ See Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse*, op. cit.

²¹ See Burke and Porter (eds.), op. cit. Also, "Language and History: Special Feature," in *History Workshop*, 27, 1989, pp. 1-65.

performance, since that would be to accept the misleading alternatives on offer in the established models. The new approach would seek and analyse precisely neither abstract linguistic structure nor individual use, but the institutional, political, and ideological relationships between language and history. It would take as its object, for example, the ways in which language has been used to divide some groups, to unify others, to convince some of their superiority, to make others feel outsiders. It would look to the role of language in the making and unmaking of nations, of forms of social identity, of ways and patterns of ideological and cultural beliefs. In short it would consider the modes in which language becomes important for its users not as a faculty which they all share at an abstract level, but as a practice in which they all participate in very different ways, to very different effects, under very different pressures, in their everyday lives. It would seek neither the abstract linguistic structure fixed in a static present, nor the evolutionary unfolding of linguistic elements in empty time. It would take as its focus the complex, changing, often contradictory and difficult relations between forms of language and history. And it would attempt to have as its basis the belief that "in the lives of individuals and societies, language is a factor of greater importance than any other." It might even change the unacceptable state of affairs in which the study of language is "solely the business of a handful of specialists."