

Dictionary Words and Living Language: Radical Challenges to Language Theory in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

*This paper is part of a larger project which offers new perspectives on the politics of nineteenth-century language theory by using contemporaneous literary texts to interrogate a range of writings on language. Here, the focus is on the period 1830 to the early 1850s, characterized by Tony Crowley in *The Politics of Discourse* (1989) as the moment when a new discursive formation first emerged that led to a project to construct a New (later Oxford) English Dictionary as a monument to the nation's language. Using Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov's distinction between the dead dictionary word of the philologists and the living word that is an arena of class struggle, the paper revisits Crowley's claim that the discourse of 'the history of the language' arose as a response to radical politics and Chartism. Having illustrated the new discourse in practice, through the example of Richard Chenevix Trench's *On the Study of Words*, I use the writings on language of William Hill (once editor of *The Northern Star*) and John Goodwyn Barmby (an early communist writer) to assess whether radical politics challenged the new philology on its own territory – the conceptualization of language. I go on to suggest that, in the absence of successors to Hill or Barmby as radical writers of language theory, Chartist literary writings are a significant textual resource. With reference to two works by the Chartist leader Ernest Jones – the poem 'The New World' and the novel *De Brassier, A Democratic Romance*, published in his journal *Notes to the People* (1851-2) – I show how literary texts raised important questions about language, power and national identity. Jones's poem and novel are examples of how aesthetic writings foreground words as arenas of ideological conflict, promoting issues of language and identity formation that were increasingly obscured in the shadow of the philological monument constructed by Trench and others.*

In 1989, Tony Crowley's *The Politics of Discourse* questioned the widely held historical understanding of nineteenth-century language theory in England.¹ For instance, in Hans

¹ Tony Crowley, *The Politics of Discourse: The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

Aarsleff's *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* writings on language in the 1840s and 50s were praised as preparing the way for the *New* (later *Oxford*) *English Dictionary* to be the crowning triumph of a new Victorian objective philology.² Crowley, like Aarsleff, also focuses on 'the texts of one of the most popular linguists of mid-nineteenth-century Britain, Archbishop Richard Chenevix Trench',³ but does so 'to demonstrate the highly political concerns of much of the mid-nineteenth-century work on language',⁴ and proposes reading language theory as part of a much wider cultural and ideological projection of Englishness. This leads him to identify a new discursive formation, arguing that 'in the 1840s and 1850s a number of texts were published that signalled the appearance and rise to rapid hegemony of the new discourse: "the history of the language"'.⁵ The aim of this paper is to focus upon Crowley's claim that the 'appearance of "the history of the language" and much of the work produced within that discourse were specific counter-developments to the discursive shifts produced by the crisis of Chartism and earlier radical movements'.⁶ The objective is to use *On the Study of Words* (1851) by Trench as a testing ground to consider whether the new discursive constructions of language, nation and identity were themselves contested by politically radical understandings of language, ideology and power.

For Crowley, *Study of Words* is the earliest example of how Trench's 'texts were produced from within the new discourse of "the history of the language"',⁷ founding work on language in which 'Trench pre-empted Mathew Arnold in his call for a new cultural programme in the latter half of the mid-Victorian period'.⁸ Indeed, there is evidence of this from early on in *Study of Words* when Trench proclaims that:

Language then is fossil poetry; in other words, we are not to look for the poetry which a people may possess only in its poems, or its poetical customs, traditions, and beliefs. Many a single word also is itself a concentrated poem.⁹

Building on the premise that individual words are constitutive of a people's poetry, Trench makes stronger claims for links between language, culture, history and national identity:

² Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860* (London: The Athlone Press, 1983).

³ Crowley, pp. 51-52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁹ Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words* 1851, ed. by Roy Harris (London: Routledge / Thoemmes, 1994), p. 5.

Seeing then that language contains so faithful a record of the good and of the evil which in time past have been working in the minds and hearts of men, we shall not err, regarding it as a moral barometer, which indicates and permanently marks the rise or fall of a nation's life. To study a people's language will be to study *them*, and to study them at best advantage; there, where they present themselves to us under fewest disguises, most nearly as they are. Too many have had a hand in it, and in causing it to arrive at its present shape, it is too entirely the collective work of the whole nation, the result of the united contributions of all, it obeys too immutable laws, to allow any successful tampering with it, any making of it to witness other than the actual facts of the case.¹⁰

In this formulation, words not only provide material evidence of the formation of a nation but, in a precursor to Arnold's definition of culture, are also posited as the best historical evidence of the collective practices and thoughts of the nation's citizens. However, the ideological imperative driving this conceptualization of language is clearer in the contradiction between Trench's claim that the national language can only give 'actual facts', and his later statement that:

Far beyond all written records in a language, the language itself stretches back and offers itself for our investigation – 'the pedigree of nations,' as Johnson calls it – itself a far more ancient monument and document than any writing which employs it. These records, moreover, may have been falsified by carelessness, by vanity, by fraud, by a multitude of causes; but *it* is never false, never deceives us, if we know how to question it aright.¹¹

Questioning language 'aright' for Trench is an ideological project. Bearing in mind the decade of political unrest and agitation that immediately precedes *Study of Words*, for Trench all words testify to the history of one nation, effectively asserting a unitary identity for all of its citizens no matter what language they employ to express class difference.

¹⁰ Trench, p. 53 (emphasis in original).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60 (emphasis in original).

Trench's statements bring to mind Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov's claim that 'dead, written, alien language is the true description of the language with which linguistic thought has been concerned', and that this is because 'guided by philological need, linguistics has always taken as its point of departure the finished monologic utterance – the ancient written monument'.¹² The correlation with Trench's definition of the true language of a nation as an 'ancient monument and document' is all the more striking in relation to certain understandings of the project that grew out of *Study of Words*. In Aarsleff's opinion the *OED* 'is unquestionably one of the chief philological monuments of the century', a view which prefigures his later citation of Trench's own comment that the new dictionary would be 'an historical monument, the history of a nation contemplated from one point of view'.¹³ But Voloshinov sets the creation of a 'dictionary word' against an alternative understanding of language, in which 'it is precisely a word's multiaccentuality that makes it a living thing',¹⁴ insisting that:

Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle.¹⁵

The remainder of this paper draws on the distinction between a dead dictionary word and a politically charged multi-accentuated living word to consider whether radical writers offered a challenge to the discourse on language that Crowley identifies as emerging in the 1840s and 1850s. This takes up Crowley's own use of Voloshinov and Bakhtin to focus on the 'social nature of discourse' and emphasize the 'dialectical relationship between language and history',¹⁶ but adds an extra dimension. Whereas Crowley very rarely turns to the field of literature where Voloshinov and Bakhtin honed their theories of language, this paper points to the importance of literary texts, indicating how they can be read as raising political and ideological questions about language, power and national identity. As such, this exploration of new ways of identifying politically radical challenges to the dominant language theory of

¹² V. N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 73 and p. 72 (emphasis in original).

¹³ Aarsleff, p. 4 and p. 261.

¹⁴ Voloshinov, p. 81.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Crowley, p. 10.

the mid-nineteenth century also extends another key work in the field. In *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819*, Olivia Smith offers her own riposte to Aarsleff by unearthing an alternative radical tradition of writings on language by Thomas Paine, John Horne Tooke, Thomas Spence and William Cobbett.¹⁷ Her demonstration of how language theory was itself a political arena at the start of the century can provide purchase on two candidates in the running to inherit Cobbett's crown in the 1830s and 40s: William Hill and John Goodwyn Barmby.

Hill was the author of several works on language, including *The Rational School Grammar* and *Fifteen Lessons on the Analogy and Syntax of the English Language, for the use of Adult Persons who have neglected the Study of Grammar*, by 1839 in their second and third editions respectively. In 1839, Joshua Hobson also published Hill's *The Grammatical Text Book, for the Use of Schools*, with the printer's address noted as 'Northern Star Office, Market Street, Briggate, Leeds'. Hill himself was once editor of *The Northern Star*, and given those Chartist allegiances it is unsurprising that in the 'Preface' to *The Grammatical Text Book* he argues that there 'is probably no other branch of science which is so generally neglected, or so inefficiently taught, as Grammar'.¹⁸ Further comments echo some of the politically motivated criticism by radical predecessors such as Cobbett and Horne Tooke, for example denouncing the content of existing grammars as skewed by the classical training of their authors and concealing the meaning of language from working-class readers. However, when defining the 'Parts of Speech' Hill's approach does not deviate from principles set out in the books he criticizes, and despite the declamatory 'Preface', *The Grammatical Text Book* is notable for its lack of controversy. By contrast, Barmby appears to provide an uncompromising challenge to the new discourse on language emerging in the 1830s and 1840s.

Barmby's clearest statements of his radical ideas about language are in the journal *The New Moral World*. In April 1841, in 'An Essay Towards Philanthropic Philology; or, Ideas on Language, in Reference to the Future, of Transition and Community', he references the lesson of the Tower of Babel to argue that it 'teacheth us that to the greatest designs of humanity, the various idioms and tongues of language, have hitherto been an insurmountable barrier, and implicatively that this barrier must be removed to facilitate the establishment of the grand

¹⁷ Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791-1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

¹⁸ William Hill, *The Grammatical Text Book, for the Use of Schools* (Leeds: Hobson, 1839), p. v.

designs of Socialism'.¹⁹ Claiming that 'a general language has become now pre-eminently essential to progress', he states:

Progress is gradational, and the barbaric state preceded the civil, as civilization is the herald of socialization; there still being a transitional state between the barbaric and the civil, and between the civil and the social: so must there be a general transitional tongue, chosen from among those now in existence, which shall precede, and pioneer the way for that universal language, which shall grow out of it, under the parental eye of established communism.²⁰

For Barmby, 'the English language is [...] best adapted for facilitating the transition of humanity from the present state of society to a better one'.²¹ This claim grows out of a nascent socialist politics that shapes an understanding of language for ideological purposes diametrically opposed to those of Trench. Indeed, in 1847 he uses John Milton in a way that pre-empts later conservative appropriations of English literature and language, pronouncing: 'They are England and the English, and not France and the French, which are then the country and the language of political progress'.²² He even calls for an entirely new kind of language theory in 1841, claiming 'We must no longer have only learned philology; we must have philanthropic philology',²³ and yet there is no evidence of a direct successor to Barmby as radical language theorist. This is possibly because his call for a single language across nations refers back to the Universal Grammarians of the eighteenth century. However, the remainder of this paper suggests that another key element of mid-century radical political challenges to the emergent language theory can be found in literary pieces written by the Chartist leader Ernest Jones for *Notes to the People*. Published between 1851 and 1852, this journal is exactly contemporaneous with Trench's *Study of Words*, and provides an example of the use of English as 'the language of political progress' called for by Barmby's socialist vision. Taking into account Armstrong's claim that 'literary texts often problematize more deeply,

¹⁹ John Goodwyn Barmby, 'An Essay Towards Philanthropic Philology; or, Ideas on Language, in Reference to the Future, of Transition and Community', *The New Moral World: or the Gazette of the Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists* 2 (1841), p. 205.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 206.

²² John Goodwyn Barmby, 'Universal Language and Phonography', *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress* 1, February 13 (1847), p. 96.

²³ Barmby, 'An Essay Towards Philanthropic Philology', p. 207.

complexly and richly than other documents',²⁴ a poem and a novel from *Notes* will be used as indicative of how Chartist literary writings challenge the ideological imperative of a theory of language that would eventually appropriate literature for conservative constructions of the nation.

John Saville writes that:

The *Notes to the People* contain much of the best of Jones's writing. The early fifties was the period when his personal relationship with Marx and Engels, and especially the former, was closest, and Jones's discussion of Chartist principles and of the means by which their realisation could be achieved has a liveliness and directness that is in the best tradition of socialist writing in this country.²⁵

The position assigned to Jones by Saville is endorsed by Armstrong when she considers the poetic development that ran in conjunction with his political career, placing him amongst a group of poets committed to the working-class cause who 'evolved a powerful oppositional political rhetoric'.²⁶ Indeed, Jones's entry into Chartist politics is coterminous with an entry in his diary in 1846 where he wrote: 'I am pouring the tide of my songs over England, forming the tone of the mighty mind of the people, Wonderful! [...] I am prepared to rush, fresh and strong, into the strife or struggle of a nation'.²⁷ If Trench was shortly to proclaim that an individual word was like a poem that could provide the key to understanding both a nation and its citizens, then Jones already had a keen sense of how to use the words of poetry to form the identity of working-class citizens in a national struggle for political representation. Of principle significance to this paper is the poem which Jones reprinted to open his new journal. Janowitz writes that '*The New World* authorises Jones to take up fully his place as the new Laureate of Labour' and terms it an 'epic [which] surveys the whole of human history as the history of oppression and tyranny'.²⁸ In his 'Foreword' Jones explains that 'England and America now hold the balance of the future - the great neutral powers of the East and West -

²⁴ Isobel Armstrong, 'Victorian Studies and Cultural Studies: A False Dichotomy', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), p. 516.

²⁵ *Ernest Jones: Chartist. Selections from the Writings and Speeches of Ernest Jones*, ed. by John Saville (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1952), p. 46.

²⁶ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 170.

²⁷ Ernest Jones, *Diaries* (unpublished, Manchester Central Library), 8 October, 1846.

²⁸ Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 186.

and France is the fulcrum on which they turn'.²⁹ These are the only three countries where the realization of democracy is possible, but to recognize this the poem's readers have to learn lessons from the history of Europe. Crucially, those lessons also concern the history of how language has been used politically and ideologically to subordinate people:

Swords carve out titles; but, their seal to set,
The last fine touch of empire's wanting yet:
One speech, one law, one God, alone efface
From conquered lands the frontier's lingering trace
Thus Hellas bound the east, 'mid war's alarms,
More with her army's language than her arms.³⁰

Language is power, as the monoglot imperialist code exerts control more effectively than physical force. However, in Jones's poem the re-presentation of history leads ultimately to a moment of triumph reminiscent of Barmby's claims for a socialist universal language:

One language then endearingly extends:
Shall tongues be strangers still, when hearts are friends?
With Babel's curse war, wrong, and slavery came -
Their end was shadowed in the cloven flame.³¹

Furthermore, the first issue of Jones's journal also included the opening instalment of a literary text which gives even sharper lessons about language, national identity and political power.

There can be little doubt that the novel which Jones wrote in order to entice a readership for *Notes* demonstrates a good awareness of the significance of language to radical politics. The original subtitle of *De Brassier, A Democratic Romance* is *The History of a Democratic Movement, Compiled from the Journal of a Demagogue, the Confessions of a Democrat, and the Minutes of a Spy*, foregrounding the interdiscursive constitution of a text which manifestly probes questions of language whilst dealing with demagoguery and radical leadership. For example, in Chapter IV, directly following an official 'royal pageant', another

²⁹ Ernest Jones, *Notes to the People, May 1851-May 1852*, reprinted (London: Merlin Press, 1967), p. 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

unofficial event takes place as ‘the people now held *their* pageant’.³² The people come carrying flags, and: ‘Every banner was a sermon, not couched in long rhetoric, but with those lightning dashes of the popular pen, by which a stern truth is dropped upon the page of history, transmitted down through ages – words, that record a past, and point a future – and direct the hopes and energies of nations’.³³ Trench’s championing of a new dictionary stemmed from his theorization of language as composed of words which testify to a particular history of a particular idea of nation. In Jones’s novel, the words that compose the ‘page of history’ articulate alternative meanings of the nation: ‘Sinister flags floated over the heads of the advancing bands. Their terrible mottoes told in few short words the history of a people’s degradation’.³⁴ Most importantly, *De Brassier* shows how insistence upon language as a marker of communal identity brings with it questions of political power, issues that Trench’s work obscures in the shadow of the monumental national language it constructs.

The politics of language – the ability to use or monitor words – is at the forefront of the text. The novel alerts readers to how the language of Chartists is reified by those who oppose their political aims, as spies record words used by radical leaders and these are reproduced selectively for the government’s use: ‘The press now made a collection of every inconsiderate and violent passage out of the speeches of every obnoxious individual, and turning round to the middle-classes, painted in vivid but imaginary colours the scenes of rapine, bloodshed, and violence that, according to their version, would have accrued if these men had gained the day’.³⁵ But the novel also includes an *internal* critique of the radical movement and the language of its leader. De Brassier himself is skilled in language. For instance, in a legal defence of Chartists he exhibits a sophisticated understanding of its power, but exerted at the expense of the accused in order to favour himself. The representation of De Brassier as a demagogue offers a dramatic warning, that those who wish to profit from working-class struggle can do so by manipulating language as something monoglot. Moreover, by the end of ‘The New World’ it is apparent that the ‘one language’ of the socialist cause is not reduced to such a form of monoglossia. This is a poem in which ‘the people’ overthrow those who hold power, and significantly their final and successful attempt is couched in terms of language:

None gave the word! - they came, together brought

³² Jones, p. 51 (emphasis in original).

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 484.

By full maturity of ripened thought.
Truth sought expression: - there the masses stood,
In living characters of flesh and blood!³⁶

Here language is embodied, not reified, since the people themselves become materially significant as living ‘characters’, or letters. In that aesthetic image Jones gives his readers language not as an inert thing, but as composed of living words.

Jones’s novel and poem explored here are examples of how turning to literary writings of the mid-nineteenth century allows us to read challenges to language theory such as that written by Trench. This is not in the form of politically radical texts on language of the kind produced by Horne Tooke and Cobbett. However, following on from the important work of Smith on the period up to 1820, and extending Crowley’s use of Voloshinov and Bakhtin to identify the emergence of an ideologically charged discourse on language, it is possible to see how Chartist literary writings are of historical and political significance to how we understand the discursive construction of a unitary English language. The warning in Jones’s novel *De Brassier* against the imposition of a monoglot language by those within, or opposed to, the Chartist movement fits Bakhtin’s claim for ‘the utterly distinctive orientation of discourse in the novel – an orientation that is contested, contestable and contesting’.³⁷ As a novel, *De Brassier* provides a sophisticated critique of how monoglot language is pernicious to the representation of working-class politics. However, it is Jones’s major poem in *Notes* which gives a glimpse of the alternative theorized by Voloshinov. In foregrounding the image of ‘living characters of flesh and blood’, ‘The New World’ offers its readers the people and their thoughts as living language, energized by the dynamic of discourse as ‘contested, contestable and contesting’. As such, pieces gathered together in *Notes* can be read as contesting contemporaneous attempts by Trench, and others, to conceptualize a national language made of dead dictionary words constructed as a monument to conservative ideas of nationhood.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

³⁷ M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 332.