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Orwell and Williams: language and socialism.

Tony Crowley

1. Introduction.

George Orwell and Raymond Williams were central figures in the twentieth-century British Left and their careers overlapped slightly (Orwell's 'Writer and Leviathan' was published in the journal *Politics and Letters*, of which Williams was a co-editor). Williams's critical stance towards Orwell's work is mapped out in a set of increasingly hostile engagements in *Culture and Society* (1958), *Orwell* (1971), and *Politics and Letters* (1979).¹ In this essay, however, I will not be concerned directly with the details of Williams's critique of Orwell. I will aim rather to give an account of the ways in which both writers took language to be central to the understanding of social and political life and therefore important for socialists. Towards the end of the essay, I will present an evaluation of the ideological effects of Orwell's representation of the relations between language and politics which will lead to a reflection on Williams's ultimate rejection of his political predecessor.

2. Orwell's concern with language.

The influence of Orwell's concern for language and its political effects is such that the term 'Orwellian' is often used to mean linguistic usage that is in some sense sinister or perilous. His interest in the issue was expressed directly, in the essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1946), and indirectly, in the much more widely-read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and its appendix, 'The Principles of Newspeak' (1949).² Orwell's core message is that language can be used to dangerous effect and therefore that communicative clarity is politically important. His worry about the deleterious use of language is hardly surprising given that he witnessed the early use of mass media for the purposes of propaganda (a term that only acquired its pejorative

connotations from the 1920s) during the early 1930s, the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War, and the very start of the Cold War. As he famously noted,

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of the political parties.

For this reason, political discourse consists,

largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called transfer of population or rectification of frontiers. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called elimination of unreliable elements (Orwell 'Politics' 373-4).

It is worth remarking how Orwell's analytical approach to language pre-empts what became, and remains, one of the central methods of media studies. His point was that the type of obfuscatory language that he identifies serves a very specific purpose: the elision of the use of violence to achieve political ends. There are two aspects to this process: the denial of violence itself, and the eradication of political agency in the decision to use it. The result, as David Bromwich commented in an essay on the Iraq war, 'Euphemism and American Violence', is 'a history falsified by language'. As Bromwich noted, this was not a new insight; in Tacitus's

Agricola, a Caledonian rebel observed of Roman imperialists: ‘to robbery, butchery, and rapine, they give the lying name of “government”; they create a desolation and call it peace’.³

The point is surely well-made and significant: language in these examples is used to obscure and delude with regard to the use of violence by the State. But it is worth noting that Orwell’s account, like many that have followed his lead, is effectively one that concerns itself with style. This is undoubtedly an important method, although it ought to be noted that it fails to address those many examples of political discourse in which language is simply used to lie (there is after all a difference between a euphemistic half-truth and a factually incorrect statement). Nevertheless, Orwell’s attempt to articulate a link between clarity and political integrity is one that socialists would do well to bear in mind. This is not to say that arguments have to be made simplistically using Anglo-Saxon words of not more than one syllable (there will be more to say of Orwell’s stylistic strictures later). But it must be central to any radical political project to insist that however complicated the process, the world is knowable, facts can be established, persuasive arguments can be made clearly, and agreement can be reached in and through language. Complexity does not necessarily entail unintelligibility, but unintelligibility is in and of itself a bad thing because it prevents understanding. In this sense, Orwell is right when he argues that language and thought are dialectically intertwined and that language ‘becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts’ (Orwell ‘Politics’ 365). Indeed precisely because misleading uses of language (‘habits’ as Orwell calls them) cause problems, it follows that,

if one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers (365).

Such 'habits' take many forms. Euphemism, as Orwell indicates, or the familiar but always reductive tendency to make undue extrapolation from particular instances to general observations - a 'habit' that lies at the root of many, if not all, forms of social prejudice.

There is then much to attend to in Orwell's strictures on language, although there are many ways in which Orwell's account of 'bad English' in 'Politics' is also deeply flawed. At times it is simply uninformed, as in his attack on 'bad writers' who labour under 'the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones', with the consequence that 'unnecessary words like expedite, ameliorate, predict, extraneous, deracinated, clandestine, subaqueous, and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon opposite numbers' (369). This linguistic Little Englanderism is based on an ignorant misunderstanding of the history of the English language and amounts to not much more than personal stylistic prejudice. As does the notion that 'the defence of the English language' necessarily implies 'using the fewest and shortest words that will cover one's meaning' (376). At other points in the essay too Orwell's word choice is poor, as when he claims that 'the great enemy of clear language is insincerity' (when it is clear from context that he means 'dishonesty') (374). Or when he asserts that 'the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language' – as though English had fallen from some previous superior state (377). There are also times when Orwell's writing seems like a perfect example of the type of weak style against which he rails: 'as soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed' (367). And his theory of knowledge is both naïve – 'probably it is best to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations' (376) - and deceptive in its attack on abstract thinking (as though empiricism itself is not a profoundly abstract doctrine). And yet in spite of these problems, there can be no doubt that Orwell's emphasis on the significance of language is important. For as he argues, consider what happens if you do not think critically and fail to think about the

language you use, and indulge instead in ‘throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in’:

[Such phrases] will construct your sentences for you - even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent - and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear (372-3).

In its way, this is an intelligent if partial understanding of the role of language in the formation of ideology and subjectivity.

3. The centrality of language in Williams’s work.

The introduction to *Culture and Society* begins with these words:

In the last decades of the eighteenth century, and in the first half of the nineteenth century, a number of words, which are now of capital importance, came for the first time into common English use, or, where they had already been generally used in the language, acquired new and important meanings. There is in fact a general pattern of change in these words, and this can be used as a special kind of map by which it is possible to look again at those wider changes in life and thought to which the changes in language evidently refer (Williams *Culture* xiii).

The introduction ends with this:

I am enquiring into our common language, on matters of common interest, and when we consider how matters now stand, our continuing interest and language could hardly be too lively (xx).

Elsewhere in the introduction, Williams declares that he feels himself ‘committed to the study of actual language: that is to say, to the words and sequences of words which particular men

and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience' as well as 'the general developments of meaning in language' (xix). In considering words, he says, he takes their 'original meanings', their 'development', and 'the relations between them' as not 'accidental, but general and deeply significant'. His ambitious 'terms of reference', as he puts it, 'are not only to distinguish the meanings, but to relate them to their sources and effects' (xviii).

Culture and Society was to be at least in part an investigation of words from 'actual language', our 'common language', as a form of social and cultural mapping. The words themselves were ordinary, common words, but they carry historical significance nonetheless. These are the examples with which he started: 'five words are the key points from which this map can be drawn. They are industry, democracy, class, art and culture. The importance of these words, in our modern structure of meanings, is obvious' (xiii). But these were simply the starting points of the work and he continues to cite,

a number of other words which are either new, or acquired new meanings, in this decisive period [1780-1850]. Among the new words, for example, there are ideology, intellectual, rationalism, scientist, humanitarian, utilitarian, romanticism, atomistic; bureaucracy, capitalism, collectivism, commercialism, communism, doctrinaire, equalitarian, liberalism, masses, mediaeval and mediaevalism, operative (noun), primitivism, proletariat (a new word for 'mob'), socialism, unemployment; cranks, highbrow, isms and pretentious. Among words which then acquired their now normal modern meanings are business (=trade), common (=vulgar), earnest (derisive), Education and educational, getting-on, handmade, idealist (=visionary), Progress, rank-and-file (other than military), reformer and reformism, revolutionary and revolutionize, salary (as opposed to 'wages'), Science (= natural and physical sciences), speculator (financial), solidarity, strike and suburban (as a description of attitudes) (xvii).

Given the explicit focus on language, specifically on the histories of words and the social significance of their changing meanings, readers might be forgiven for thinking that these quotations are taken from Williams's seminal linguistic study *Keywords* (1976), rather than *Culture and Society* (1958), his earliest and perhaps most influential work. But in fact Williams tells us that a concern with language was the starting point for the entire *Culture and Society* project since in discussions in his Workers' Educational Association classes in the 1950s, one of the most important topics was precisely the meanings of words, not least the five 'keywords' - 'culture', 'class', 'art', 'industry' and 'democracy'. Reflecting on that early phase of his work, Williams uses a phrase that indicates the genesis of his important theoretical concept, the 'structure of feeling': 'I could feel these five words as a kind of structure'. But they were more than that, as he discovered when he looked up the word 'culture', 'almost casually', in the Oxford English Dictionary in the public library at Seaford and saw 'in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape'.⁴ This was a transformative moment (Williams describes it as 'like a shock of recognition') and one that points to the initiation of two of Williams's lasting achievements. First, as noted above, it marks the turn to popular culture (here in the form of the everyday, common language) as an object of study. And second, it signifies the starting point of the field of historical semiotics (rather than the established historical semantics): the investigation of the historical and intellectual shape of words - the study of the ways they change in and through history, together with the ways in which they are held together at particular moments, including of course the present.

It is clear then that a concern for and with language, a specific understanding of language, underpins Williams's work from the start and becomes increasingly important for him. It is there in the introduction to *Culture and Society*; it forms the basis of *Keywords*, which is an expanded version of an appendix that he could not put in to *Culture and Society* for reasons of length; and it lies at the heart of *Marxism and Literature* (1976), Williams's most sustained

theoretical work. Indeed, reflecting on *Marxism and Literature in Politics and Letters* (1979), Williams describes it as an important departure since he ‘hadn’t written anything theoretical, apart from two articles, since the first part of *The Long Revolution*’ (Williams *Politics* 324). The work started as a series of lectures in Cambridge in about 1970, but, he notes,

It’s very significant that in those lectures there was nothing on the theory of language, whereas now it is the longest section of the book, and I would say the most pivotal. I don’t think any of the rest can be sustained unless that position is seen as its basis... I could have written a whole book on that subject alone (324).

It is significant that Williams identifies the language chapter of *Marxism and Literature* as ‘the most pivotal’, for two reasons. First, it contains a theorisation of language which enables him to understand retrospectively the method that underpins not just *Culture and Society*, but cultural materialism in general. Second, it reveals the centrality of language to Williams’s entire oeuvre.

4. Orwell: meaning and political control.

Though ‘*Politics and the English Language*’ is Orwell’s most explicit treatment of the topic, it is clear that an account of language, and a specific theory of meaning, underpins his most influential work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Set in Oceania, the totalitarian future state, a new language had been created – ‘Newspeak’ - with its own dictionary (in the tenth edition by 1984). It had been invented for explicit political purposes, as the appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – ‘*The Principles of Newspeak*’ - makes clear. Its function was,

not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other thoughts impossible...This was done partly by the invention of new words, but chiefly by eliminating undesirable words and by

stripping such words as remained of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever (Orwell 'Newspeak' 343-4).

Based on a specific view of the relationship between language and mind, Orwell's sense of the potential dangers of language enabled him to imagine a form of non-resistible power. Newspeak, 'designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought' (344), had one ultimate aim:

Newspeak, indeed, differed from most all other languages in that its vocabulary grew smaller instead of larger every year. Each reduction was a gain, since the smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought. Ultimately it was hoped to make articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all (352).

Once this goal had been achieved, the inhabitants of Oceania would cease to be rational human beings, and would instead be reduced to animalistic status. They would end up using 'duckspeak' (meaning nothing but quacking like a duck).

It is worth noting that the origins of the language-thought articulation that underpins Orwell's text lie in the work of Wilhelm Von Humboldt, a scholar whose research underpins what later became known as linguistic relativism. Von Humboldt's *On Language. The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind* (1836), based in part on a study of the Javan language of Kawi, argued for the creative role of language in relation to the human mind: 'language is the formative organ of thought'.⁵ It also asserted the inseparable connection between languages and ways of thinking: 'the diversity of languages rests on their form, and the latter is most intimately connected with the mental aptitudes of nations... Thought and language are therefore one and inseparable from each other' (54). The effect of this important new conception of the relation between language and thought was to

pose a challenge to both universalism (the idea that whatever their differences, all languages embody the categories of Reason), and the traditional understanding of the function of language (simply to represent the world). It was also to have serious significance beyond philosophy in that it served as the basis of linguistic nationalism, the core doctrine that underpinned cultural nationalism, the belief-system used repeatedly by national liberation movements against imperial power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The emphasis on the formative role of language in relation to consciousness was taken up influentially in the early twentieth century in the work of two American anthropologists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. Just as von Humboldt's research had focused on languages outside the European mainstream (Basque, Kavi), that of Sapir and Whorf involved the study of the rapidly disappearing Native American ('Amerindian') languages. Based on research into the lexis and grammar of languages such as Hopi, Whorf concluded that,

we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds.⁶

Like the earlier formulation of the link between language and mind, this hypothesis had a radical edge to it and what became known as linguistic relativism (thought being relative to a specific language), served as a way of de-centering European languages and Western Reason. For as Whorf put it, if accepted, the principle meant that,

we shall no longer be able to see a few recent dialects of the Indo-European family, and the rationalising techniques elaborated from their patterns, as the apex of the evolution of the human mind, nor their present wide spread as due to any survival from fitness or to

anything but a few events of history, events that could be called fortunate only from the point of view of the favoured parties (279).

Yet if this aspect of Whorf's work was politically progressive, the move from linguistic relativism (language shapes thought) to linguistic determinism (language determines thought) was more problematic. For Whorf, linguistic determinism entailed that,

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

Needless to say, the idea of 'tacit consensus' is always dubious, and the notion of the language of a speech community being subject to an unstated agreement whose terms are 'ABSOLUTELY OBLIGATORY' is highly problematic. As will be argued, such an account of language can underpin a political outlook that socialists can ill afford to espouse.

The account of a fixed relationship between language, mind and meaning – in either its relativist or determinist modes - clearly formed part of a structure of feeling in an important area of early twentieth-century Anglo-American thought. Allied to a form of cultural conservatism which focussed on the idea of linguistic decline as a cipher of more general cultural decay (a long-standing tradition in relation to the English language), it was articulated in the work of a number of American thinkers and cultural commentators such as Alfred Korzybski (*Science and Sanity* 1933), Stuart Chase (*The Tyranny of Words* 1938), S.L. Hayakawa (*Language in Action* 1941), and the group around the journal *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*. Orwell knew at least some of this work (he mentions 'Stuart Chase and others' at the end of 'Politics and the English

Language'), and he would have been familiar with one of its central tenets: the emphasis on the dangerous and corrupt ways in which language was deployed to deprave the thought of those who used it for nefarious political purposes.

If *Nineteen Eighty-Four* functioned as nothing more than an allegory of the undoubted dangers of language, then it would be possible both to read it against its historical intellectual context and to hail it as a salutary warning. But it will be argued here that in its concern for the political perils to which language can lead, Orwell's text slips from a form of linguistic relativism into linguistic determinism. For rather than language shaping thought, Orwell's satire shares the Whorfian premise that the relationship between the language which we inherit, and the thoughts which that language permits, can be subject to an 'absolutely obligatory' 'agreement' that is beyond challenge. For this reason then, rather than serving as a caution against the hazards of language, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might perhaps be better understood as an exemplum of a misconceived notion of language and meaning whose consequences are highly problematic. For the perilous conception which dominates *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that the Party's command of language, through the imposition of Newspeak, can and will enable it to control the mental universe of the subjects of Oceania. The effect of which would be to create,

a nation of warriors and fanatics, marching forward in perfect unity, all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans, perpetually working, fighting, triumphing, persecuting - three hundred million people all with the same face (Orwell *Nineteen Eighty-Four* 85).

In other words, based on the belief that a hegemonic group can delimit words and their meanings, and thus thought, Orwell's text embodies one of the twentieth century's most enduring political fantasies: that the ordering of language will engender political supremacy by way of the control of people's minds.

Understood historically, it is ironic that the prioritisation of language as a way of understanding consciousness, which began with the radically-inflected investigation of non-European languages and cultures, should inform a reactionary vision of political control. And as noted earlier, the shift from relativism to determinism is crucial in this regard. But it should be noted that linguistic determinism suffers from a simple logical flaw: if it were true, how could we know it was true? In other words, if we cannot think outside the static, fixed terms and meanings available to us, then how exactly do we come to know that we are in a prison house of language? To put the matter simply, how could Whorf know that the words of the Hopi language are ‘incommensurable’ with those of English? This is a problem that causes difficulties for any account (and there are a number of examples, ranging from science fiction to linguistic and political theory), that attempts to represent the supposedly determinate effects of language.⁷ In Orwell’s text, the difficulty is side-stepped by the textual trope of locating the story at a transitional point. This is necessary because if totalitarian linguistic control had already been realised in Oceania, then Winston's resistance could not have been possible since he would have been captivated within the linguistic prison of Newspeak. In this sense the violence enacted upon Winston indicates that the Party’s control over language was relative rather than absolute. But this simply means that nineteen eighty-four (the historical moment) was a point of transition and thus translation; ‘Newspeak’ had not yet been finalised – only the next (eleventh) edition of the dictionary would be the definitive version that would allow for complete hegemony (Orwell ‘Newspeak’ 343).

Despite the laudable achievement of pointing to language as a political issue, then, Orwell’s text is ultimately pessimistic and defeatist in its propagation of the possibility that language can be static and fixed, that meaning can be imposed absolutely, and that subjectivity is open to direct control. Indeed *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is based on the premise that when the Party's slogans are repeated - 'War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength' - the human

subjects who hear them will be duped in an uncritical and passive manner. But who would say that about their own minds and the minds of others? Who would think of themselves or others as one amongst millions of automata ‘with the same face’ uttering nothing but ‘duckspeak’? This is not an account that makes historical or political sense for socialist thinkers. For if its central claim were true, it would herald nothing less than the end to any possibility of social struggle and change.

5. Williams: towards a socialist account of language.

Williams’s comment that he could have written a whole book on language alone is tantalising in view of the fact that there is no fully developed socialist account of language. This curious omission within socialist thought is puzzling, given the centrality of language to social being, and problematic, since the lack of such an account causes difficulties in a number of different areas, not least in the understanding of ideology and hegemony. This is not to say that there isn’t a Marxist tradition of thinking about language, but it is evidently partial and undeveloped.⁸ There is, however, one exception to that statement, which is the work that came out of Vitebsk and Leningrad in the late 1920s and 30s and which became available in the West in the 1970s and 80s. Namely the texts of P.N.Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928), V.N.Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* (1929) and the essays collected in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), and L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (1934).⁹ Of these thinkers, the most influential was Bakhtin, at least amongst Western cultural critics, but for a socialist account of language, the work that really matters is that of Vološinov, whose influence on Williams was deep.

Marx and Engels made only a few references to language per se, but there is one important passage in *The German Ideology*, as part of the refutation of philosophical idealism, in which

they provide a sketch of a materialist conception of history. In it they reflect on the nature and function of language:

From the start the “spirit” [consciousness] is afflicted with the curse of being “burdened” with matter, which here makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language. Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.¹⁰

The stress on language as central to human activity indicates the important function which Marx and Engels gave it in their account of the distinctiveness of human species-being. For it is clear that they held that language plays an essential role in the evolving process by which human beings in social relationships create historical reality through the satisfaction of both material needs and the requirement for self-reproduction. But it is important to note that Marx and Engels did not see language as either a primary or derivative activity that could be abstracted from human life. In other words, language was not the faculty that enabled human beings to become social in the first place, nor was it the medium by which they could express themselves once they had been socialised. Instead, language was a crucial, active component of the social, material practice – labour in its general, technical sense - by which human beings were constituted as human beings, and by which they acted with and upon nature, and with and upon other human beings, in order to make history.

It is this emphasis on the creative, practical nature of language that forms the basis of Vološinov’s critique of two key tendencies that he identified in modern linguistic thought: ‘individualistic subjectivism’ and ‘abstract objectivism’ (Vološinov 45-64). ‘Individualistic

subjectivism', traced by Vološinov to German Idealism, regards the individual human mind as the most important site of language and takes language itself to be a type of aesthetic creativity, with the corollary that all speech acts are individual, creative, and unreproducible. 'Abstract objectivism', on the other hand, is best typified by Saussure's model of language and the classical structuralism that developed from it. In this approach, the static linguistic system is divorced from history, separated off from practical use, and composed of nothing other than normatively identical signs (realised in practice as fixed forms of lexis, grammar and phonetics). If the first tendency focuses on the unceasing process of individual linguistic creativity, then the second treats language as a finished product, open to the objective gaze of the science of linguistics.

For Vološinov both of these accounts are flawed. The focus on individual consciousness as the explanation of linguistic signification is mistaken because individual consciousness is itself in need of explication from a social point of view. This is because consciousness itself only 'takes shape and being in the material of signs created by an organized group in the process of its social intercourse... nurtured on signs, it derives its growth from them; it reflects their logic and laws' (13). In other words, the individual human mind is formed through an already social language; if there were no language, there would be no developed consciousness. To adapt Marx, it is linguistic (and therefore social) being that determines consciousness, and not the other way around.

But this does not mean that the individual consciousness is formed by and in the normatively identical signs of the abstract objectivist system. On the contrary, signs, as dynamic complexes of form and meaning, are not simply presented as given, fixed elements of a system, but are open products of the activity – the material practice – of language-making between socially organised individuals. Indeed it is precisely because language, like any other form of social life, is the site of all sorts of contestation between conflicting interests, that signs change historically.

As a corollary, it follows that the signs of any particular language will necessarily embody ‘the contradictory and conflict-ridden social history of the people who speak [it]’ (Williams Politics 176).

Vološinov’s attention to language as creative social activity, as practical consciousness, and his insistence on the openness of the sign, its ‘multiaccentuality’, was of dual importance to Williams. First, it allowed him to make theoretical sense of his perception, there from that early recognition of the complexity of the term ‘culture’, that signs are both shaped by past use, but also deployed in the creative making of the present and the future. That in turn permitted him to reflect on the method that he had forged in the development of his work, and in that regard, it is interesting to note his claim, in the reflective essay ‘Crisis in English Studies’ (1981), that ‘a fully historical semiotics would be very much the same thing as cultural materialism’.¹¹ But the second reason why ‘multiaccentuality’ was significant for Williams, is that it afforded the possibility of thinking through the relations between language and ideology as social practice.

If it is a function of ideology to pass off what is social as natural, and to present the historical as eternal, then it is clear that the doctrine of ‘multiaccentuality’, with its emphasis on the necessary historicity and openness of signs, allows us to debunk various ideological forms by revealing their social constructedness, their variability, the ways in which they play specific historical roles in formations of power. Indeed in this sense, the historical critique of political economy that Marx produced (for example, in the section of the *Grundrisse* in which he deconstructs how specific economists understand theories of surplus value), is a sort of precursor to the work of Williams in *Culture and Society* and *Keywords*. For what both Marx and Williams showed, is how apparently ‘timeless’ notions were produced out of a very specific history, by particular interests, for particular ends.

For Williams, the key insight is that language is a socially creative practice. The sign is not a pre-existing unit that belongs to some abstract system of language, but the product of speech activity between real individuals who are in some continuing social relationship. This means that ‘usable signs’ are ‘living evidence of a continuing social process, into which individuals are born and within which they are shaped, but to which they then also actively contribute, in a continuing process’ (emphasis added) (Williams *Marxism* 37). The same important point is made when Williams refers to the historical character of language as ‘the result, the always changing result, of the activities of real people in social relationships, including individuals not simply as products of the society, but in a precise dialectical relation both producing and being produced by it’ (emphasis added) (Williams *Politics* 330). For Williams, the social creativity of language is significant because it allows for both the force of ideological interpellation, but also the possibility of resisting it. And therein lies the crucial difference between Orwell and Williams. For although Williams would have joined Orwell in acknowledging the dangers of language (and Orwell surely deserves credit for drawing serious attention to the issue), Orwell’s postulation of the possibility of a totalitarian political order in which the hegemony of one group can be ensured by its ability to fix meaning is one with which Williams could not have agreed. Ultimately, Orwell’s representation of a form of linguistic determinism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* embodies not so much a rebuke, as a mode of pessimistic defeatism that makes a journey of hope all the more difficult.

6. Conclusion. Williams’s challenge.

If Williams’s account of language is correct, then it poses a challenge: how to use the creative, open, multiaccentual nature of language, our practical consciousness, to counteract, at an everyday level, the mundane words, phrases, labels, designations, habits of speech, and ways of talking that interpellate us ideologically in the interests of the dominant order. Evidently, that is easier said than done, because as Orwell’s work properly showed, the forces ranged against

resistance are enormous and the pressures are real. But for socialists it is nonetheless both possible and necessary to meet the challenge. Why? Well given that language is a creative material and political practice, it follows that our words matter because they are part of the dialectical process by which we shape the world and are shaped by it. And precisely because our words are significant, it also follows that we need to pay attention to them, to use them in critical, reflective, positive and progressive ways, rather than ways which in effect make us talk and write against ourselves and our collective interests. There is no way out of this: we either resist the terms of our domination, or we accept them. Of course, those who have the institutional power to make meanings ‘stick’ at specific moments will attempt to make us think that those meanings are ‘real’, ‘natural’, ‘received’, ‘commonsense’, ‘eternal’, ‘just the case’ – ‘unaccentual’. But they aren’t, and it is a serious mistake to act as though they are. The challenge then is to use the multiaccentuality of language as one of the means of resistance; it is a call to words.

¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958), Part III, chapter 6; Raymond Williams, *Orwell* (London: Fontana, 1971); Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: New Left Books, 1979), Part V, chapter 2.

² George Orwell, ‘Politics and the English Language’, *Horizon*, vol. 13 (1946), and ‘The Principles of Newspeak’, reprinted in *George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 2013).

³ David Bromwich, ‘Euphemism and American Violence’, *New York Review of Books*, 3 April 2008, 28.

⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 13.

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- ⁵ Wilhelm Von Humboldt, *On Language. The Diversity of Human Language-Structure and Its Influence on the Mental Development of Mankind*, trans. P.Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 54.
- ⁶ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality. Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. J.B.Carroll (Cambridge Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1956), 213.
- ⁷ Linguistic determinism appears in various guises in texts as disparate as Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1980), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Random House, 1985), and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* (London: Currey, 1986). Roy Harris presents an extended historical and philosophical critique of linguistic determinacy in *The Language Makers* (London: Duckworth, 1980) and *The Language Myth* (London: Duckworth, 1981).
- ⁸ For a brief account of Marxists thought on language, see Tony Crowley, 'Marxism and Language', in *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the Language Sciences*, ed. P. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (Boston: Brill, 2006).
- ⁹ P.N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. Werle (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); V.N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L.Matejka and I.R.Titunik (London: Seminar Press, 1973); M.M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981) and *Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); L.S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, ed. and trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1962).

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 42.

¹¹ Raymond Williams, 'Crisis in English Studies', in *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), 210.