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Marx, Vološinov, Williams: language, history, practice.

1. Introduction.

This article will trace the development of a Marxist account of language from the relatively limited, though foundational, approach that can be found in Marx's own writings, through Vološinov's Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1929), and then finally to the work of Raymond Williams. The main focus of the latter part of the discussion will be on the achievement of Williams, who is best known as a literary critic, as one of the founders of the field of cultural studies, and as a major contributor to the Western Marxist tradition. It will be argued in this piece, however, that there is one aspect of Williams's work that is constantly overlooked, despite the fact that he emphasises how central it is to his distinctive approach to literature, culture, and society. That neglected element of Williams's thinking is his understanding of language as a vital, creative and fundamental historical practice, a form of labour through which we make and re-make ourselves and the world around us. This article then will address Williams's concern with language and contend that it is both an important development in Marxist social thought and a significant contribution to linguistic theory. The paper will conclude with an analysis of two words – 'dissident' and 'terrorism' - to demonstrate how 'historical semiotics', the approach that Williams pioneered, can facilitate an understanding of the operations of ideology and hegemony.

2. Language in the Marxist tradition: a brief sketch.

It is a strange and problematic fact that there is no fully developed Marxist account of language. This curious omission within socialist thought is puzzling given the centrality of language to social being, and it is challenging since the lack of such an account presents a difficulty in relation to the understanding of ideology (the political realm of ideas, beliefs and related practices by which a given social order is produced and re-produced) and hegemony

(the means by which consent is organised within a specific society), both of which are clearly fundamental to Marxist social thought. This is not to say, however, that there isn't a Marxist tradition of thinking about language. But it is a tradition that is for the most part partial and undeveloped. In its early stages, it focussed on a few scattered references by Marx, including, for example, his claim for the existence of a bourgeois form of language (Marx, 1964, p.249); the assertion that 'ideas do not exist separately from language' (Marx, 1973, p.163); and the related notion that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (Marx, 1964, p.60). Yet these remarks, which amount in effect to the observations that language in use is affected by the class relations which hold in a given social formation and that language is a key site of ideology, were often rather narrowly interpreted. This was particularly so within the Soviet Union where, for example, N.S. Marr, the Communist Party's thinker on language in the 30s and 40s, argued that between communities using different languages, the speech of the same class would be closer than the speech of different classes using the same language. No less a figure than Josef Stalin contradicted that claim in his tract 'Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics' (1950), in which he ruled that languages do not have a 'class character' but a 'national character' (Stalin, 1974, p.189). It was hardly a radical breakthrough in the socialist theorisation of language.

Other Marxists, however, have written importantly on language, though their work is often neglected. As Peter Ives has demonstrated, perhaps the most significant theorist was Antonio Gramsci, whose understanding of language lies at the heart of his account of the crucial concept of hegemony, though he also wrote extensively on dialect and standard language issues (Ives 2004 pp.63-125). Lesser figures include the British Marxists of the 1930s: Christopher Caudwell (Illusion and Reality, 1937; Studies in a Dying Culture, 1938) and Alick West (Crisis and Criticism, 1937). Their work included speculative research on literary language and a limited, if interesting, account of relations between language and the body. In

the 1940s, Margaret Schlauch, a much under-estimated American socialist, produced a useful introduction to the study of language (The Gift of Tongues, 1942), which included reflections on the relations between language and politics and the role of language in the work of specific writers, not least James Joyce. And a little later, Adam Schaff, a Polish linguist, published a long and detailed, if ultimately implausible, Marxist account of formal semantics (Introduction to Semantics, 1962). In the 1960s and 70s, and working in an entirely new direction, Basil Bernstein presented a model of language and class which was highly influential in educational debates (Class, Codes and Control, 1971). Related work included that of Michael Halliday (Explorations in the Functions of Language, 1973), and Ruqaiya Hasan (Linguistics, Language and Verbal Art, 1985), while further important research in this area was conducted by Renée Balibar on the notion of the 'Standard language' in France (Le Français National, 1974, and *L'Institution du Français*, 1985), and Pierre Bourdieu's investigation of language and symbolic power (Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, 1977, and Language and Symbolic Power, 1991) – although the status of Bourdieu's oeuvre within the Marxist tradition is debatable. Frederic Jameson's The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism (1972) and Terry Eagleton's 'Wittgenstein's Friends' (1982), were important theoretical interventions in the field, as were the more substantial works by Feruccio Rossi-Landi (Language as Work and Trade, 1983), and, more recently, Jean-Jacques Lecercle (A Marxist Philosophy of Language, 2006). Another significant development was Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's Marxist critique of the colonial linguistic legacy (Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, 1986). Evidently then, there is a tradition of socialist thinking on language, but as noted above, it is in many respects insufficiently developed and, in truth, apart from the major figures, mostly unread.

There is of course an 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). Of these thinkers, the most influential was of course Bakhtin, whose impact on literary studies in the West in the 1980s and afterwards was considerable. But for a Marxist account of language, the work that really matters is Vološinov, whose influence on Williams was deep.

3. Towards a general Marxist theory of language: Marx and Vološinov.

As noted earlier, Marx and Engels made only a few explicit references to language per se. But there is one important passage in The German Ideology, which forms part of the refutation of philosophical idealism, in which Marx and Engels provide a sketch of the materialist conception of history and 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 (Marx, 1964, p.42).

For Marx and Engels, 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 in this account, language was not conceived 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 (it is central to the Marxist conception of the distinctiveness of human species-being), and by which they acted with and upon nature, and with and upon other human beings, in order to create history.

It is the emphasis on the socially creative, practical nature of language that forms the basis of the critique offered by Vološinov in Marxism and the Philosophy of Language of two key tendencies which he identified in modern linguistic thought: 'individualistic subjectivism' and 'abstract objectivism' (Vološinov, 1973, pp.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 activity, with the corollary that all speech acts are individual, creative, and unreproducible. 'Abstract objectivism", on the other hand, is typified by Saussure's model of language and the 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 (energeia) of individual linguistic creativity, then the second treats language as a finished product (ergon), open to the objective gaze of the science of linguistics.

For Vološinov both of these accounts are problematically flawed. The focus on individual consciousness as the explanation of linguistic signification is a mistake, he argues, because individual consciousness is itself in need of explication from a social point of view. This is so because 'consciousness 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' (p.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, Vološinov argues that signs themselves, 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. It is this that explains their historicity, their variability in history: because language, like any field of social life, is the site of various forms of contestation between conflicting interests. Thus under capitalism, the dominant class attempts to make language serve its purposes by making meanings 'uniaccentual', which is to say, determinate, closed and 'given'. Whereas the effect of oppositional forces is to produce 'multiaccentuality', which is to say, meanings which open up alternatives, differences, historical possibilities. It is for this reason that the signs of any particular language will necessarily embody 'the contradictory and conflict-ridden social history of the people who speak [it]' (Williams, 1979, 176).

4. Williams on language.

The introduction to one of Williams's seminal texts 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, 1958, p.xiii).

The same 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’ (p.xx).

Elsewhere in this 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’ (p.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’ (p.xviii).

The study then is to be an investigation of words from ‘actual language’, our ‘common language’, as a form of social and cultural mapping. But to what sort of words was Williams referring? They were in fact ordinary words, common words, but words that nonetheless have political and historical significance. For example, these are the words 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’ (p.xiii). But these were simply the start of his project, and elsewhere in the introduction he cites,

> 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) (p. xvii).

Given the explicit focus on language, specifically on the histories of words and the social significance of their changing meanings, readers familiar with Williams’s work may think that the text in question must be his popular study, Keywords (1976). But in actuality, the quotations cited above are taken from the introduction to Williams’s much earlier and highly influential Culture and Society (1958), the work that re-shaped English literary criticism and later became the ur-text of cultural studies.

As Williams himself notes then, a concern with language was the starting point for the Culture and Society project. For in discussions in his Workers’ Educational Association classes in the 1950s, one of the most important topics was precisely the meanings of words - specifically, ‘culture’, then ‘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 and saw ‘in the language, not only an intellectual but an

historical shape' (Williams, 1976, p.13). This was a transformative moment (he describes it as 'like a shock of recognition') and it points to the initiation of two of Williams's lasting achievements. First, as noted above, it marks the turn to culture as an object of study and thus to what became known as cultural studies. And second, it signifies the starting point of the field that Williams pioneered: historical semiotics, understood as the study of the force of language in history. Its method was dual: an investigation of the historical and intellectual shape of words as they change historically, and the ways in which they are held together at particular moments, including of course the present.

It is clear then that a concern for a specific understanding of language, underpins Williams's work from the start and becomes increasingly important for him. And, as noted earlier, it is evident in the introduction to Culture and Society. But it also forms the basis of Keywords, which is an expanded version of an appendix that he wanted to put in to Culture and Society, and it is there centrally in Marxism and Literature (1976), Williams's most sustained theoretical work

In the Politics and Letters (1979) interviews with New Left Review, Williams describes Marxism and Literature as a departure since, he reflects, he 'hadn't written anything theoretical, apart from two articles, since the first part of The Long Revolution' (1961). The text started as a series of lectures in Cambridge in about 1970, but, he says,

> 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. (Williams, 1979, p.324).

It is notable that Williams identifies the language chapter of Marxism and Literature as 'the most pivotal', because what it presents, in effect, is a theorisation of the approach that underpins not just Culture and Society and Keywords, but also cultural materialism, the Marxist theoretical approach to culture which Williams pioneered.

5. Williams's Marxist theorisation of language.

Williams used Vološinov's emphasis on language as creative social activity, as practical consciousness, and his insistence on the historical openness of the sign, or its multiaccentuality, as a way of retrospectively theorising his early work. What Vološinov's insights facilitated was a clarification of Williams's perception, there from that first 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 (which also means, crucially, that they are open to the future). That insight in turn allowed Williams to understand the method that he had forged in the development of his work from Culture and Society to Keywords. In that regard, it is interesting to note that he claims, in the reflective essay 'Crisis in English Studies' (1981), that 'a fully historical semiotics would be very much the same thing as cultural materialism' (Williams, 1983b, 210).

But Vološinov's work was significant for Williams in a much broader sense, in that it prompted him to turn to a Marxist theorisation of language. Thus in Marxism and Literature, Williams asserted that 'the key moments which should be of interest to Marxism, in the development of thinking about language, are, first, the emphasis on language as activity, and, second, the emphasis on the history of language' (Williams, 1977, 21). The issue of the history of language will be considered later, but it is important to probe Williams's first claim here and its consequences. Because the question arises: why precisely should Marxist interest in language focus on the notion of language as activity? There are after all other reasons why

Marxism might be interested in language (the centrality of language to distinctively human species-being, for example). But the conception of language as a form of social and historical practice is crucial for Marxism because it allows for an understanding of language as a central component of both ideology and indeed hegemony, understood as active, ongoing social processes in which we are all engaged, whose purpose is to legitimate or challenge the current social order.

One function of ideology is to construct and maintain hegemonic order by passing off what is social as natural and presenting the historical as eternal. Given that, it is clear that the doctrine of multiaccentuality, with its emphasis on the plasticity of signs and meanings, allows us to debunk various uniaccentual ideological and hegemonic forms by revealing their historicity – in other words, their social constructedness, their variability, the ways in which they play active and practical roles in serving specific interests in formations of historical power. In this respect, Marx's method in his critique of Political Economy (and the section of the Grundrisse in which Marx deconstructs how specific economists understand theories of surplus value is a good example of it), anticipates Williams's approach in both Culture and Society and Keywords. Indeed, as Fairclough and Graham have argued, Marx's careful deconstructive reading of major philosophical, political and economic texts, is also a precursor to the relatively new field of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough and Graham, 2002, 185-229). From this perspective, what both Marx and Williams achieve is a politically significant explication of the ways in which apparently 'timeless' (uniaccentual) notions, were produced out of a very specific history, by particular interests, for given ends, and embodied in material discursive practices over time.

Once established, the principle of the social creativity of language presents a challenge to Marxism. Because if, as Williams argues, the sign is a product of speech activity between real individuals who are in a continuing social relationship, rather than a pre-existing unit that

belongs to an abstract system of language, then it follows 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, 1977, 37). This is an important point, and Williams expands upon its political ramifications when he 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, 1979, 330). The significance of this argument is that the necessary emphasis on the creativity of language entails recognition of both the force of ideological interpellation, the ways in which we are shaped by the dominant ideology, but also the possibility of resistance. And therein lies the challenge for Marxism: at an everyday level, how to deploy the creative, open, multiaccentual nature of language, the mode of practical consciousness, to interrogate, counteract, and produce alternatives to, the mundane words, phrases, labels, designations, habits of speech, and ways of talking that interpellate human beings ideologically in the interests of the dominant order?

The possibility of resistance is crucial for Marxism (which is after all a political system of belief and practice intended to change the world rather than simply interpret it). And the conceptualisation of language as a form of creative material and political practice is necessary to the idea of resistance because it entails that words matter precisely because they contribute significantly to the construction of the form of our social life. And, because words matter, it follows that they must be subject to critical scrutiny in order to evaluate their use and to ensure that they are deployed in radical and progressive ways, rather than ways which in effect make them operate in the interests of the dominant class. There is no way out of this: if the use of words is a significant part of the dialectical process by which we shape the world

and are shaped by it, then we either resist the terms that serve to facilitate our domination, or we accept them.

As noted earlier, Williams argued that there were two important ways of conceptualising language to which Marxism should attend: first, language as activity, and, second, the history of language. These are not of course unrelated since an analysis of the history of language reveals precisely how an active, creative language has been (and is) used as one of 'a network of social activities by which societies produce themselves ate every level: materially, socially, relationally, consciously, economically, and linguistically' (Fairclough and Graham, 2002, 19). In this process, one of the chief functions of language is to construct ideological structures, not least in the form of the uniaccentual meanings of 'common sense'. Given this, it follows that careful attention to the historical functions of language is central to Marxist critique. Williams's own contribution to this task was the study of 'keywords' by means of historical semiotics – an approach summarised as the dual task of tracing ideologically significant words as they developed in history, but also as they function in relation to other words in the present. Such an approach has two significant benefits. First, it avoids the simplistic tracing of shifts of meaning across 'empty, homogeneous time' (Benjamin, 1970, 266) that characterises historical semantics. And second, through its emphasis on history – social praxis past and present – it avoids the reductive formalism of those forms of discourse analysis that remain stubbornly at the level of text.

In order to demonstrate how historical semiotics can be a significant form of Marxist critique through its exposition of the historical construction of uniaccentual meanings, this essay will conclude by considering two contemporary 'keywords' in contemporary political discourse: 'dissident' and 'terrorism'. In both cases, the aim will be to show the historical and political significance of the struggle over meaning by demonstrating both the multiaccentuality of

these terms, and the ways in which they have been assimilated to uniaccentual, reactionary, 'common sense'.

6. Historical semiotics (i): 'dissident'.

'Dissident' first appeared in the English language from the mid-to-late sixteenth century, at around the same time as the semantically related term 'dissent', although their etymological roots are distinct. 'Dissident' derives from 'dissidēre' (dis + sedēre) – to sit or settle oneself apart, and by extension, to be out of alignment, hence to disagree, differ, be at variance. 'Dissent' is based on 'dissentīre' (dis + sentīre) – to feel or think in a different way, hence to differ in opinion, to disagree.

The slightly earlier term is 'dissent', which appears in the mid sixteenth century first as a verb and then towards the end of the century as a noun; it forms a cluster of closely related meanings in this period which indicate that its origin and early development are closely tied to the theological debates surrounding the Protestant Reformation. The senses include: 'thinking differently or disagreeing; differing specifically in religious opinion – especially variation from the doctrine or worship of a particular church, particularly the established, national, or orthodox church; being in a state of dissension or quarrel; differing in sense, meaning, or purport'. Once established, 'dissent' follows two main semantic trajectories: the more specialized sense of difference in religious doctrine (retained in the noun 'Dissenter') and the general sense of disagreement. Surprisingly, the Oxford English Dictionary does not record the more modern (late nineteenth century) meaning of 'dissent' as 'disagreement with the prevailing orthodoxy in social, cultural or political opinion'. That sense became positively accentuated in the mid to late twentieth century, though it has since weakened; it is now more common to hear 'dissent' meaning simply 'strongly disagree'.

‘Dissident’, which is clearly linked to ‘dissent’, first enters English in the sixteenth century as an adjective meaning ‘disagreeing or differing (in opinion, character, etc.); at variance, different’. Like dissent, ‘dissident’ also had a specialized use within religious or theological discourse, though unlike dissent, this sense developed after the term had been established in the language. The noun form, ‘a dissident’, meaning ‘someone who disagrees in general’ (as well as the particular meaning of ‘a person who dissents from the established or dominant form of religion’), does not appear till the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Perhaps the most striking and ideologically significant use of the term starts to appear in the mid twentieth century, first as a noun, with the sense of ‘one who openly opposes the policies of the government or ruling party’. The first recorded use of this sense in the OED is from Arthur Koestler’s history of the foundation of Israel published in 1949: ‘the very term “dissidents” had originated through Irgun's refusal to accept the authority of the Jewish Agency’. Around the same time, a related adjectival use appears, with the sense of ‘disagreeing in political matters; voicing political dissent’. Yet from an ideological perspective, the revealing shift in the use of ‘dissident’ is evident from its deployment in Cold War rhetoric from the 1960s to the 1980s. The Oxford English Dictionary marks this change in its definition of the adjectival form and records its use in very specific historical contexts. The revised adjectival definition was: ‘disagreeing in political matters; voicing political dissent, usu. in a totalitarian state’ (emphasis added); the noun was given as: ‘in political contexts, one who openly opposes the policies of the government or ruling party, esp. in a totalitarian system’ (emphasis added).

This narrowing in the sense, from ‘someone who disagrees with a political order and voices political dissent’ to ‘someone who does so in a totalitarian context’ is clearly produced as part of the ideological battles fought during the Cold War (almost all the Oxford English Dictionary citations to support this sense refer to the Soviet Union). It was the creation of a

new, historically specific and distinctly positive meaning and its ideological effect was that only those who lived under conditions of totalitarianism could be ‘dissidents’. That in turn meant that the label could be applied only with difficulty to those, for example, who protested or organized against capitalism (they could manifest ‘dissent’ though they weren’t ‘dissidents’).

One difficulty that this sense created was its elision of the differences between many distinct groups of ‘dissidents’ (Marxist critics, ethnic nationalists, those who desired reform by the State in the guise of openness and restructuring). Another was the production of a dominant representation of the ‘dissident’ in the Western media as a heroic ‘dissident intellectual’ or ‘dissident writer’ (rather than say a factory worker or even reformist Communist Party leader). This narrowing was always designed to serve a particular ideological interest and it is notable in this regard that Václav Havel, the ‘dissident’ intellectual and writer who became the President of Czechoslovakia, described this use of the term as an embarrassment. ‘Dissident’, he says, was used ‘with distaste, rather ironically, and almost always in quotation marks’ (Havel, 1986, p.78).

Yet if ‘dissident’ was positively accentuated by the dominant forces in the mid to late twentieth century as part of Cold War discourse, by the end of the century a much more negative sense of the term began to emerge in the lexicon of British and Irish political discourse in relation to Northern Ireland. It first appeared in media in the phrasal coupling ‘dissident Republicans’ (now often shortened to ‘the dissidents’ or even just ‘dissidents’) and refers to Irish Republicans who dissent from The Belfast Agreement (1998), the political settlement that brought an end to the armed conflict in Northern Ireland. This new use of ‘dissident’ has important discursive and thus social effects. First, like the generalising tendency of the earlier positive usage, it elides differences - in this case, between very distinct forms of Irish Republican dissent from the political settlement in Northern Ireland

(forms which range from the development of new democratic political parties to the renewed threat of organised violence). Second, and as a direct consequence of this elision, an inaccurate representation has been created of 'dissident Republicanism' as a tendency which, in all its forms, is wedded to the use of violence for political ends. This is an entirely false representation, since many Republican 'dissidents' are very much in favour of the peace, but bitterly opposed to the 'peace process'. Nevertheless, the result of this ideological production of a uniaccentual meaning has been the silencing of a legitimate and significant alternative viewpoint within political debates in Britain and Ireland, and the 'common sense' assumption that such views can be ignored. And that, as even the most casual student of Irish history would know, is a dangerous development and one that needs to be resisted. Perhaps then it is time for an attempt to re-accentuate 'dissident' in order to give it a new meaning: a person who holds principled opposition to any form of orthodoxy, someone prepared 'to say aloud what the rest cannot say or are afraid to say' (Havel, 1986, 78).

7. Historical semiotics (ii): 'terrorism'.

If 'dissident' is an important word in relation to political discourse in Ireland, there are few terms in general use that are more uniaccentual, and thus ideologically significant, than 'terrorism' in its variable contemporary usage. The derivation is from the Latin 'terror' - a person, thing or quality that causes dread or absolute fear (from 'terrēre' – 'to frighten', later 'terrifying', 'terrible') and appears in English, by way of French, from the late medieval period, often in theological discourse. And 'terror' retains its radical sense of extreme fear (with the exceptions of the ironic 'holy terror', or 'little terror') throughout its history. From a historical perspective, the most important development of the term, however, was the late eighteenth-century coinage, 'The Terror', to refer to the period during the French Revolution (early 1793-mid 1794) in which the revolutionary State enacted repressive violence against its political opponents. The use of the term as a mass noun, to mean organised repression and

violent intimidation, dates from this point and later leads to a series of phrasal derivatives (almost all of which were American coinages): ‘terror organisation’ (1886); ‘terror plot’ (1905); ‘terror campaign’ (1909); ‘terror tactics’ (1913); ‘terror raid’ and ‘terror threat’ (1917); ‘terror group’ (1919); ‘terror act’ (1921); ‘terror attack’ (1929); ‘terror bombing’ (1933); ‘terror suspect’ (1934).

‘The Terror’ is the immediate precursor to ‘terrorism’, coined in English in 1795 by Thomas Paine (imprisoned under the ‘reign of terrorism’), from French ‘terrorisme’. Importantly, in its early uses ‘terrorism’ unambiguously refers to violence carried out by the State for political purposes: ‘government by intimidation as directed and carried out by the party in power in France during the Revolution of 1789–94’. Almost immediately after it was coined, however, another sense developed that was less clear. It is recorded thus in the OED: ‘the unofficial or unauthorized use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims; (originally) such practices used by a government or ruling group (freq. through paramilitary or informal armed groups) in order to maintain its control over a population’. The indeterminacy of this definition is significant (it is a good example of a term whose valence derives at least in part from its lack of referential clarity). For example, the first phrase could describe the activities of the Irish Republican Army in its war against the British State in the recent conflict in Northern Ireland; the second phrase could refer to the British State’s collusion with Loyalist paramilitaries in its campaign against the Irish Republican Army in the same war.

The difficulties with ‘terrorism’ are not simply matters of semantic clarification, however, and they require an understanding of the evaluative accentuation of the term. For example, the OED cites Winston Churchill’s assertion, made in 1941, that ‘in German-occupied Poland the most hideous form of terrorism prevails’; but it also records a distinct usage in an article in The Spectator (1979) that refers to an author’s ‘war-time exploits as a terrorist in the

Resistance'. In the first example, 'terrorism', perpetrated by a State, is evidently pejorative, whereas in the second, 'terrorism' carried out by non-State operatives is validated. Now, of course, one popular response to this evaluative openness is to treat it as a matter of personal political preference ('one person's "terrorist" is another person's "freedom-fighter"'), but the issue is deeper and more difficult than this.

What is at stake ideologically in the use of 'terrorism' is the crucial question of the legitimacy-claims made for the use of violence for political purposes. And yet, strikingly, most contemporary, uniaccentual, uses of the term function precisely to elide the issue of legitimacy by taking it as simply given that the legitimate use of violence is the sole preserve of the State. This presumption is usually based on a loose understanding of the Hobbesian social contract between the sovereign State and its subjects, exemplified in the liberal democracies, under which the right to resort to violence is given up in exchange for basic securities and freedoms. But this arrangement, whose status was always, even in Hobbes, conditional and therefore contingent, is normatively presented as irrevocable 'common sense'. As a consequence, all violence carried out by non-State actors is considered illegitimate and therefore 'terrorism' (as opposed to the legitimate threat and use of violent terror on which the State is predicated). So rigid is this uniaccentual linkage between State, legitimacy and violence, that the recent coinage 'State terrorism' appears almost oxymoronic, while 'State-sponsored terrorism' simply reinforces the notion that although States may finance terrorism, they are not perpetrators of it. Yet while hegemonic, it is important from a historical and ideological viewpoint to recall that this conceit has been established only relatively recently (the distinction is not recorded in the second (1989) edition of the OED for example). Indeed, as the history of the term terrorism indicates from its very inception, the question of the legitimacy of the use of violence by the State has been a central concern.

‘Terrorism’ cannot be defined as a particular mode of violence, since it matters little in terms of effect whether a bomb is launched from an unmanned drone flying at 33,000 feet or left in a bag in a bar. Nor can ‘terrorism’ be specified on the basis of identifying those who perpetrate it, since as noted above, despite its now usual association with non-State actors, ‘terrorism’ has been linked to the State since its first use. Nor can ‘terrorism’ be determined in practice simply in relation to the status of the victims of violence, since, despite the proper distinction between combatants and non-combatants, the power of modern armaments entails the inevitability of civilian casualties (or ‘collateral damage’ as the military euphemism describes them). But if ‘terrorism’ cannot be defined in these terms, then what sense can be made of this troubling but powerful word?

The significant analytical emphasis must be placed on the obfuscatory role of the dominant, uniaccentual, use of ‘terrorism’ plays and the identification of the issues that the term is designed to elide. This means, in relation to the use of violence for political aims, raising a series of critical questions: who is using this violence and how is it being deployed? What is its intended purpose and actual effects? What are the legitimacy-claims attached to it? Such questions challenge the reductive and simplistic ways in which ‘terrorism’ is used in contemporary media and political discourse in order to stifle dissent and dissidence. And this ideological debunking of the term is crucial to revealing the contemporary links between power, violence and legitimacy.

8. Conclusion.

This article has attempted to present an account of Marxist thought on language and it has argued that the work of Raymond Williams, building on the insights of Marx and Vološinov, is a significant contribution to that tradition. What Williams takes from the earlier thinkers, is the emphasis on the crucial role of language, understood as a creative, practical social force,

in the everyday forging of ideological and hegemonic structures of power. But what Williams also derives from his influences, is the insistence that language offers as a potential means of resistance to those power structures. As noted above, Fairclough and Graham have shown how language analysis for the purpose of ideological debunking was central to Marx's critical method. And it has been argued that Williams's historical semiotics, with its dual treatment of the development of words in history and their use in the present, is a powerful development of this approach. Given that we live in 'a social history in which many crucial meanings have been shaped by a dominant class, and by particular professions operating to a large extent within its terms' (Williams, 1983a, p.24), attention to language is surely central to Marxist critique. For understanding the complexity, past and present, of the words and meanings that are used to shape the world, can serve to provide 'that extra edge of consciousness' (p.24) which necessarily underpins socialist praxis.

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