Language and how we understand history

History texts can be misinterpreted if we fail to consider how language is used now and in the past

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While some historians believe it is obvious what source texts "tell" us about the past, others may stop to consider how linguistic relics are fragmentary snippets from more complex fields of communication and endeavour. With many historical studies based solely on written sources, it may be worth considering some of the ways in which our understanding of language can lead us to misinterpret the past or believe that history "speaks for itself".

Language is in constant flux. We may not immediately recognize this, but language is changing all around us, influenced by social, political, economic, religious, and technological developments (Aitchison, 2001). Just as words fall out of use and vanish, new words arise through a variety of processes, including deliberate coinages and translations, and are taken from other languages. Just as the sounds and grammar of a language can shift gradually, so can the meanings and grammatical functions of words. Many items in everyday vocabularies meant something quite different in the past, complicating our understanding of bygone voices.

One broad pattern of change, called *semantic broadening*, occurs when a word takes on a wider meaning. An example is "business". In Middle English, this meant "care, anxiety, preoccupation" and "diligent labour", but it later broadened to include "trade, profession" and eventually "a commercial company" by the 1700s (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015a).

In contrast, *semantic narrowing* is the process whereby a word's meaning becomes more restricted. For instance, the word "meat" used to refer to foodstuffs in general, but came to distinguish the flesh of food animals from that of fish (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015b).

Other common processes of language change include shifts towards more positive or negative meanings. A change towards more negative meaning is known as *pejoration*. For example, King James II is alleged to have described St. Paul's Cathedral as "amusing, awful and artificial" on its completion, which appears critical today. However, in the 17th century those words meant something more like "pleasing, awe-inspiring, and skilfully achieved" (Potter, 1966: 116).

In contrast, in *amelioration*, a word's meaning becomes more elevated or positive than before. The word "ambitious" was used to indicate a vainglorious desire for honour or preferment. The more positive meaning of "ambition" in today's English appears to suggest a change in attitudes towards those who seek to succeed in a highly competitive fashion (Hughes, 1988: 12).

Therefore, while some words in historical texts are clearly unfamiliar, others may be deceptively similar to those we know and recognize – and we may misunderstand them. Such changes in meaning are not just linguistic curiosities; knowing about their historical development can help historians avoid anachronism in their analysis.

Linguistic Influences

As words are central to understanding the cultures and politics of different eras, exploring the conditions and motivations behind changes in meaning help us understand sociocultural dynamics that may otherwise remain hazy.

This leads us to a second consideration - the way in which both historical concepts and non-linguistic events are reproduced in language. Experienced or theoretically-minded historians may be familiar with the influence of linguistics and literary criticism on the practices of historiography that resulted in the so-called "linguistic turn" of the 1960s (cf. Clark, 2004), or the contextualist approach of the so-called "Cambridge School" (cf. Skinner, 2002). Advocates of these approaches critiqued earlier social and materialist explanations and instead emphasized problems of textual interpretation and the creation of historical narrative. Rather than adopting a "reflectionist" view of language - that there is a one-to-one correspondence between language and reality, they questioned the relationships between, authors texts, readers, and contexts to highlight the conflicts and tensions between language use and historical representation.

This can be illustrated using an example provided by linguists Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 9). A rise in water levels that causes a flood is a material event that happens independently of people's thoughts and talk. The consequences are disastrous for those in the wrong place, irrespective of what they think or say. Then, as people give meaning to the flood, it is no longer "outside" language. Some people categorize it as a "natural phenomena", drawing on meteorological concepts and arguments ("heavy rain"); others may suggest human agency, referring to global climate change ("the greenhouse effect"), or "political mismanagement", highlighting the government's failure to dredge rivers or build dykes. Finally, some may see it as a manifestation of God's anger towards sinful people. All these often overlapping arguments are used to "explain" the event from many different perspectives. This does not mean that reality does not exist, but that our access to it is mediated through language. Perhaps most importantly, each argument may lead to a variety of possible and "appropriate" reactions to the flood that may be endorsed or rejected in different ways by various groups or power elites in ways such as building dams, protesting against governmental or global environmental policies, or preparing for Armageddon.

Putting aside the question of whether such arguments are "true" or "false", we can see how language is used not only to reflect reality but also to contribute to its construction. Written language encodes contractual agreements, statutes and other laws, and national constitutions. Words can be used as "weapons" in power struggles between ideologues who wish to persuade, gain the moral high ground, and advance their own interests (think of the adjectives "pro-choice" and "pro-life" that positively frame different stances on abortion rights, but also implicitly vilify opposing views, and note the similar uses of the nouns "terrorist" and "freedom fighter").

Ideology and Power

Whether they represent the social norms or not of a certain time, arguments and linguistic choices made by writers are often connected to ideology and power, and

may reveal something of the social and psychological pressures that encouraged or prevented people from acting in particular ways. By focusing on the context of our sources rather than on individual texts as self-standing accounts, we may avoid favouring certain kinds of historical talk while simultaneously downplaying others, an act that ultimately—whether ideologically motivated or not—constitutes a revision of history.

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