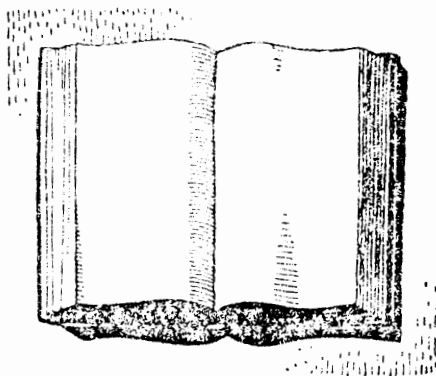


Review articles



I never read a book before reviewing it; it prejudices a man so.

(Sydney Smith)

Words, Words, Words

Books discussed in this review:

Raymond Williams, *Keywords*. Fontana, 1976. 286pp.
Paperback 95p.

Anthony Burgess, *Language Made Plain*. Fontana, 1975.
206pp. Paperback R2,05.

Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language*. Fontana, 1976.
268pp. Paperback R3,45.

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. Cape, 1976. X,
67pp. Boards £2.50.

The famous philosopher Wittgenstein described language as a game played according to an accepted set of rules. Consider, for example, the rules of the language game at a church bazaar as compared with those at a cocktail party. Break the rules of the game and you will soon find yourself on the sidelines, there to ponder the truth of this dictum: the meaning of words depends on their use in a cultural context.

The purpose of a dictionary is to classify words according to the common qualities possessed by classes of objects. The definition of 'pig' in a dictionary collects the common features of four-footed animals with curly tails, oblong shapes, and loud squeals. Individually, pigs differ within the class so defined. The meaning of the word 'pig' also varies. In certain situations, a gentleman could find himself labelled a male, chauvinistic 'pig'. The point again is that words are part of the historical process; indeed, some people would say they *are* the historical process. A good dictionary reflects the historical changes in word usage by the variety of definitions it offers; the best dictionary, which is still the *Oxford New English Dictionary* of twenty-five volumes, both records the historical changes and provides examples taken from usage at different periods.

Raymond Williams, in his *Keywords* (1976), has compiled a list of words which he feels are closely associated with recent cultural changes in society. Because of this close association, the words carry a variety of meanings that are often contradictory, confusing, or heavily reinforced. They came into prominence mainly during the late eighteenth century and are thus a barometer of the accelerated rate of social development since then. Williams pays his respects to the O.E.D., but finds its limitations in an emphasis on philology and etymology, and on the inevitable lagging behind current usage. So he offers, in effect, his own selected supplement to this authoritative work.

In his Introduction, Williams finds support for his venture in William Empson's justification for writing *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951). Empson had argued that the social use of words was more complex than would appear from consulting the O.E.D.; so he was encouraged 'to use the majestic object as it stands'. But Empson has a feeling for words second to none. Williams has very little of that feeling. In the section dealing with 'Utility', for example, generalisation is piled upon generalisation,

qualification upon qualification, until the meaning is gradually lost to view. Part of that section reads:

But, as with *materialist*, different kinds of objection were gathered and confused. Many of the opponents of *utilitarianism* and *materialism* have used the difficulties of these ways of seeing the world, which in practice have been so widely accepted, to urge residual values which, in terms of the traditional social order or a god (sic), take priorities over 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'.

(p.277)

The use of a coded system to indicate the beginning, middle, and end of various centuries referred to in *Keywords* seems an unnecessary complication of the text. Despite this added complication, the book is worth reading to see how easy it is to talk at cross-purposes.

Mention Anthony Burgess and most people think of *A Clockwork Orange*. Burgess has, however, an impressive record as a lecturer in linguistics and phonetics. He draws upon this specialised field in *Language Made Plain* (1975) to produce a book about words that is everything such a book should be. The factual information is most comprehensive, ranging from details of the speech-organs through the structure of alphabets, dialects, and the learning of foreign languages, to the future of English. All this information is conveyed with an admirable fluency of style and a delightful sense of humour.

Modern methods of tele-communication have, as McLuhan pointed out, reduced the world to a global village. We need, as never before, some knowledge of languages in general in order to live in an increasingly cosmopolitan society. Burgess does not go so far as to claim that this is a matter of life and death, but he adduces a passage from the Bible to illustrate the vital need for understanding the use of language:

Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth; for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan.

(*Book of Judges*)

There is no doubt about the future of English outside South Africa. It is rapidly becoming, as Burgess says, the great inter-

national tongue for all kinds of communication. Already English is the language used in world air and sea transport, and it predominates in the field of technology. It is the language of the greatest nation in the Free World, America; it is the second language of most Europeans and Eastern people. The result may be a confusion of English-speaking tongues, a veritable Tower of Babel; nevertheless,

the written word remains constant enough, unifying as the ideograms of Chinese unify. And English is big enough to enclose any number of aberrations.

(p.193)

You will recall Hamlet's famous panegyric: 'What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculty!' (II, ii,322-3) One of the faculties of man that distinguishes him from other living species is the ability to use words meaningfully — as Shakespeare does here. Whence comes this faculty? How are children able to use and understand sentences that they have never heard before? Noam Chomsky deals with various aspects of the language faculty and explanations of its unique character in *Reflections on Language* (1976). His answer to these queries is that the language faculty is a genetic factor. Biologically we are conditioned to grasp the fundamentals of language competence; we have inherited this genetic factor from the generations of *homo sapiens*. On this basis, he argues that attempts to teach apes to speak are doomed to failure. They can recognize and use symbols or pictograms, but the power of meaningful language articulation is denied them.

Chomsky's involvement in social and political issues has made him as well-known as Marcuse. He had begun with an almost exclusive preoccupation with the structure of language; he became increasingly interested in its usage to achieve various ends. He is still, however, cautious about purposeful word-usage:

Once, I had the curious experience of making a speech against the Vietnam war to a group of soldiers who were advancing in full combat gear, rifles in hand, to clear the area where I was speaking. I meant what I said — my statements had their strict and literal meaning — but this had little to do with my intentions at that moment.

(pp.61-2)

Almost inevitably, Chomsky talks about his contribution to the study of language: transformational grammar. He has given a fairly non-technical explanation of the elements that are common to language systems, the rules of the word game. These rules involve using noun phrases and verb phrases to generate an infinite number of sentences. If you have ever wondered how it is possible to become bilingual, then you will find a feasible answer in Chomsky's explanation of transformational grammar.

For anybody studying or teaching a language, some knowledge of linguistics is essential. David Crystal provides the basic information about this discipline in *What is Linguistics?* (1974). He has assumed complete ignorance of linguistics on the part of his reader, the sort of ignorance displayed in the following conversation:

<i>Interlocutor:</i>	You're at the University, are you? (Friendly smile) And what do you do there?
<i>Self:</i>	I teach Linguistics.
<i>Interlocutor</i> (Face drops):	Oh. And how many languages do you teach?

(pp.6-7)

The linguist is concerned with the way language works; his activity is descriptive, not prescriptive, and combines both the spoken and the written word in examining patterns of sound, grammar, and vocabulary. Crystal has listed five aspects of linguistic activity. These are the relation between speech and writing; the description of the overall language system used by various groups of people; the techniques used to carry out linguistic investigations; the establishment of linguistic theory *per se*; the application of linguistic knowledge in other areas of study. What sort of person is best equipped to undertake this fivefold activity? Crystal says he will probably be something of a schizophrenic:

One has to have two kinds of mind: the analytic, jig-saw puzzle mind, on the one hand, which will enable one to enjoy looking at a mass of language data and trying to discern patterns there; and the speculative, imaginative mind, which allows one to think about some of the more philosophical and theoretical issues in language.

(p.55)

The type of mind that delights in analysis of patterns in language has been responsible for the specialized branch of study termed structural linguistics. Words are treated as abstract units in this form of linguistics, and these units are emphasized as parts of a system or structure of fundamental relationships. The transformational grammarians see themselves as practising structural linguistics; so do certain literary critics. Strictly speaking, the linguist is not concerned with the literary aspect of language as such. But the more recent developments in literary criticism have resulted in the emergence of critics who combine linguistic and literary methods in analysing a text. Prominent among such critics is Roland Barthes.

The basic assumption underlying Barthes's critical methods is that the text is autonomous. It consists of a structure of phonetic, phonological, and grammatical units that is self-contained and can be analysed *in vacuo*. Anyone who has read the type of analysis produced by this approach will be struck by its feeling of clinical detachment, of emotional sterility. It may not be a thankless task, but it certainly seems joyless. Barthes has tried to correct this impression with *The Pleasure of the Text* (1976). His insistence that reading produces a type of sensory response similar to eroticism is startling, to say the least. It is almost impossible, according to the editor of this book, to recapture the erotic vocabulary of the original French text in translation; it is also almost impossible to paraphrase the translation itself. Barthes (or his translator) must explain the nature of pleasurable reading:

The pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense. In these cases, there is no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling; the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ (schoolboy's dreams) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction). Paradoxically (since it is mass-produced), this is far more an intellectual pleasure than the other....

(p.10)

In a very real sense, then, Barthes is in love with language. The Greeks had a word for this sort of thing. They called it *tonos*, or an intense literary passion. Baudelaire, whose influence on Barthes's writing is acknowledged, called it 'volupté'. The result of Barthes's

romantic attachment is a series of aphoristic or gnomic utterances grouped under such keywords as 'Oedipus', 'Boredom', 'Image-reservoir', and 'Intertext'. The interesting point is that at no stage in the book is a text analysed. This seems a logical, though regrettable, procedure. French structuralism begins by removing the text from the author; it ends by removing the text from the critic. There is a moral in all this somewhere.

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Language and Learning

Books discussed in this review:

- Albert C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language*.
Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974. 506 pp. Boards
£4.00.
- Charles Barber, *Early Modern English*. André Deutsch, 1976.
360 pp. Boards R16,00.
- George Steiner, *After Babel*. Oxford University Press, 1976.
507 pp. Paperback R5,75.
- D.H. Bullock and C.W. Turl, *Words in Use*. G. Bell and Sons,
1977. 140 pp. Paperback R1,40.
- A.C. Gimson, *A Practical Course of English Pronunciation*.
Edward Arnold, 1975. Boards £2.75; Paperback £1.25;
Tape £6.75; Cassettes £7.50; Learning Pack £8.25.