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Edited by Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell L. Hanson
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Editors' Introduction

"Language," Locke wrote, "is the great bond and common tie of society" (1961, bk.III, i: 1). By this he meant that language enables us to engage in the practices that make us the moral and political creatures that we are. It is by virtue of possessing a common stock of concepts that we constitute the communities in which we live. And yet the common tie of language is apt to become worn and frayed. There is a real and recurrent fear that our conceptually constituted communities are, after all, among the most fragile and least durable of all human creations. Not surprisingly, then, the fear is often aired in the form of a cautionary tale in which communicative entropy ends in individual isolation and mute violence. It is a tale told most memorably, perhaps, in the biblical story of Babel, but there are more recognizably political variations on the theme in Thucydides' account of the revolution at Corcyra and in Hobbes's imaginary state of nature. They are tales with a common moral: the loss of a common language is the loss of community and the destruction of a common world.

In speaking of losing the language out of which our common world is constituted we do not refer to the entity analyzed by modern linguists. A moral or political language is not, that is, reducible without remainder to the vocabulary, grammatical structure, and syntax of this or that natural language – Attic Greek, say, or Latin, or modern English. Rather, a moral or political language is a medium of shared understanding and an arena of action because the concepts embedded in it inform the beliefs and practices of political agents. The social and political world is conceptually and communicatively constituted, or, more precisely, preconstituted. According to this constitutive view of language, who and what we are, how we arrange and classify and think about our world – and how we act in it – are

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deeply delimited by the argumentative and rhetorical resources of our language. The limits of one's language mark the limits of one's world. Our moral language maps political possibilities and impossibilities; it enables us to do certain things even as it discourages or disables us from doing others. But although our language maps moral and political possibilities, it is not a map depicting an independently existing topography. On the contrary, the political landscape is partially constituted by that which locates and marks its main features. Far from being fixed or stable, these features change over time. Thus map and terrain vary together.

As our language goes, so goes our society. "Even as people belong to the same culture by the use of the same language," writes Bertrand De Jouvenel, "so they belong to the same society by the understanding of the same moral language. As this common moral language extends, so does society; as it breaks up, so does society" (De Jouvenel 1957: 304). Many of the major works of political philosophy can be read as responses to, reflections upon, and antidotes for conceptual chaos and communicative breakdown (White 1984). These usually take the form of a critique in which the political philosopher attempts to undermine an existing moral or political language that he takes to be incoherent or contradictory, often in preparation for proposing particular conceptual innovations of his own. Such conceptual changes are therefore never without political import. For, as Alasdair MacIntyre (1966: 2–3) observes,

> since to possess a concept involves behaving or being able to behave in certain ways in certain circumstances, to alter concepts, whether by modifying existing concepts or by making new concepts available or by destroying old ones, is to alter behavior.

Conceptual change is therefore itself a species of political innovation. To link political and conceptual change in this way leads us to view the world in ways that might at first sight seem disturbing. There are at least two sources of unease. The first is that this perspective undermines the so-called contingency thesis, which holds that linguistic entities like political (or moral, or economic, or scientific) theories are one thing and (empirical) reality another; from which it follows that political (or moral, or economic, or scientific) change is one thing and conceptual change another. On this view conceptual change is an altogether secondary matter, perhaps even an effect or a reflection or an epiphenomenon. The contingency view has had far-reaching consequences, not least for the thinking of those who believe themselves immune to philosophical influences. Something like the contingency view undergirds the

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conception of the role of political ideas shared by Namierites and Marxists alike (thereby proving nothing, save perhaps that it is not only politics that makes strange bedfellows). Yet to accept this view, as the first two essays attempt to show, is to subscribe to a distorted and misleading account of the relation between thought and action, theory and practice. An alternative "constitutive" view of language yields an altogether different and arguably more accurate account of that relation.

A second and closely connected source of unease is that the constitutive view appears to entail relativistic implications of a rather radical sort. For if politics is an activity partially constituted via concepts whose meanings are historically mutable, it then follows that there are no objective or transhistorical truths – no political givens, no grounds, no rock-bottom bases upon which arguments can be founded and against which truths can be tested. And if moral codes are historically mutable, nihilism necessarily follows. The conceptual chaos of the Corcyrean Revolution and Hobbes's state of nature become the norm, not the exception. Several of the essays address this sense of unease, and others try to show in some detail why the constitutive idea of "conceptual history," although arguably relativistic, is anything but nihilistic. For conceptual histories tell stories of change within continuity and of continuity within change. Concepts, or more precisely the criteria for their correct application, cannot be changed at will or by whim.

Conceptual-cum-political change is at once critical, creative, and conservative. It is critical, inasmuch as it stems from a sense that, in Lamartine's famous phrase, the world has jumbled its catalog or has somehow become deranged. To expose and to criticize contradictions or incoherences in one's moral language is to begin to remake and rearrange one's moral and political world. This process is itself a creative one, in as much as it may require argumentative and rhetorical skills of a fairly high order. Although critical and creative, conceptual change has a profoundly conservative aspect as well. For it never occurs *de novo* or *ex nihilo*. Almost always occurring with reference to relatively settled and stable linguistic conventions, conceptual change tends to be piecemeal and gradual, sometimes proceeding at an almost glacial pace. Paraphrasing what Burke says about the state, we might say that a language that is without the means of change is without the means of its own preservation. And what is preserved and periodically enhanced is nothing less than the possibility of communication and, hence, of community itself.

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To construct a conceptual history is to show in some detail how this process works in specific historical settings. It is also to trace the thread of life and language that connects past and present. Far from being purely academic or antiquarian, our aim in conducting these conversations with our past is a political one. It stems from an uneasy sense that our own culture is in the throes of a deepening crisis, a crisis characterized in no small part by the breakdown and corruption of a common moral and political language. The crisis afflicting our culture bears an uncanny resemblance to the earlier one narrated by Thucydides. And as words lost their meaning and the measured eloquence of Pericles gave way to the verbal and physical violence of Cleon, so do we live in an age of one-dimensional discourse, of Newspeak and psychobabble and bureaucratese spoken by communicators great and small who communicate little save violence and threats of violence.

The construction of conceptual histories can have the emancipatory effect of opening up the unidimensional discourse in whose terms our political and cultural conversations have for too long been conducted. Consider, for example, the concept of corruption. A conceptual history suggests that our present understanding of corruption might itself be impoverished if not corrupt. To retrace the history of "corruption" is to show how our use of the concept is in certain respects contradictory if not incoherent. Or consider the concept of patriotism. To be a patriot or to be patriotic, we are told nowadays, is to be uncritically supportive of one's government, whoever its leaders and whatever their policies. And since "patriot" has considerable commendatory force, would-be patriots are unlikely to be outspokenly critical of their government. A conceptual history, however, calls this present-day understanding into question by showing that to be a patriot or to be patriotic was once to have the courage to take a principled stand against one's government.

This is not to say, however, that conceptual histories are romantic, or still less reactionary, attempts to return to or to restore earlier meanings. Quite the contrary. The aim is not to restore the past but to remember it and to retrace the path to the present (O'Neill 1976). Novelists as different as Dos Passos and Proust and Orwell and Kundera have shown how remembering our past enables us to have a clearer – and perchance a more critical – perspective on our present. Little wonder, then, that the modern state, East and West, attempts to control the past by rewriting history or, failing that, by obliterating memory altogether. Citizens adrift in the present and cut off from their past become more manipulable and pliable

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subjects. If we are not to remain lost in the present we have little choice save to retrace our steps. By uncovering and recovering lost meanings conceptual histories enable us to escape the politically stultifying confines of a parochial and increasingly dangerous present.

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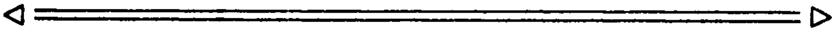

Language and political change

QUENTIN SKINNER

I

This volume is concerned principally with the relations between our changing political world and the changing language we use to describe and appraise it. While individual chapters trace these interconnections in a series of conceptual histories, in this opening essay I shall attempt in a more general way to consider what can be learned about the processes of political innovation by examining the changing meanings of words. This is of course a vast question, and in order to make it manageable I shall concentrate on one recent and highly influential study which has focused on the links between linguistic and political change. The work I have in mind – which I shall use as a stalking-horse in what follows – is Raymond Williams's *Keywords*.[1] It is Williams's central contention that a study of "variations and confusions of meaning" may help us to improve our understanding of matters of "historical and contemporary substance" (1976: 21; 1983: 24). If we take "certain words at the level at which they are generally used," he suggests, and scrutinize their developing structures of meaning "in and through historical time," we may be able "to contribute certain kinds of awareness" to current social and

[1] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, paperback, 1976), reissued in a revised and expanded form by Fontana in 1983. My critique of the book originally appeared (under the title "The Idea of a Cultural Lexicon") in *Essays in Criticism*, July, 1979. For help with that version I remain greatly indebted to John Dunn, Susan James, Jonathan Lear, Christopher Ricks, and Richard Rorty. The present essay is a revision and extension of the (slightly altered) reprint of the 1979 article which appeared in *The State of the Language*, ed. L. Michaels and C. Ricks, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, pp. 562–78. I gratefully acknowledge their permission to publish it here in its revised form. Most of the claims in Williams which I criticized in 1979 and 1980 have been revised or deleted in Williams's 1983 edition. I have therefore given page references to both editions of his book.

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political debates, and in particular an "extra edge of consciousness" (Williams 1976: 20–1; 1983: 23–4). But what precise kinds of awareness can we hope to attain from studying the histories of keywords? And how should we conduct our studies in order to ensure that this awareness is duly attained? These are the questions I should like to examine at somewhat greater length.

II

Before proceeding, however, we need if possible to neutralize one serious doubt. It might be objected that, in singling out "a shared body of words," we are focusing on the wrong unit of analysis altogether (Williams 1976: 13; 1983: 15). Williams's aim, he tells us, is to illuminate "ways not only of discussing but at another level of seeing many of our central experiences" (1976: 12–13; 1983: 15). But if we wish to grasp how someone sees the world – what distinctions he[2] draws, what classifications he accepts – what we need to know is not what words he uses but rather what concepts he possesses.

It is true that this objection may appear a purely verbal one. For it might be replied – and the claim has often been made – that possessing a concept is equivalently a matter of knowing the meaning of a word. This certainly seems to be Williams's own view, for in discussing the term *nature* he equates "the word and the concept," and in speaking of *democracy* he explains how the "concept" is "embodied" in the word.[3]

However, to argue for any such equivalence is undoubtedly a mistake. First of all, it cannot be a necessary condition of my possessing a concept that I need to understand the correct application of a corresponding term. Suppose, for example, that I am studying Milton's thought, and want to know whether Milton considered it important that a poet should display a high degree of originality. The answer seems to be that he felt it to be of the greatest importance. When he spoke of his own aspirations at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, what he particularly emphasized was his decision to deal with "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme." But I could

[2] Or she, of course. But in what follows I shall often allow myself the convenience of treating "he," "his," etc., as abbreviations, where appropriate, for "he and she," "his and her," etc.

[3] Williams (1976: 84, 189). But in the later edition (1983: 95, 224), these claims are deleted, and in the new Introduction Williams (1983: 21) explicitly acknowledges "the difficult relations between words and concepts."

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never have arrived at this conclusion by examining Milton's use of the word *originality*. For while the concept is clearly central to his thought, the word did not enter the language until a century or more after his death. Although a history of the word *originality* and its various uses could undoubtedly be written, such a survey would by no means be the same as a history of the concept of originality – a consideration often ignored in practice by historians of ideas.

Moreover, it cannot be a sufficient condition of my possessing a concept that I understand the correct application of a corresponding term. There is still the possibility (explored by Wittgenstein as well as Kant) that I may believe myself to be in possession of a concept when this belief is in fact mistaken. Consider for example the difficulties raised by certain highly general terms such as *being* or *infinity*. A whole community of language users may be capable of applying these terms with perfect consistency. Yet it might be possible to show that there is simply no concept which answers to any of their agreed usages.

What then is the relationship between concepts and words? We can scarcely hope to capture the answer in a single formula, but I think we can at least say this: the surest sign that a group or society has entered into the self-conscious possession of a new concept is that a corresponding vocabulary will be developed, a vocabulary which can then be used to pick out and discuss the concept with consistency. This suggests that, while we certainly need to exercise more caution than Williams does in making inferences from the use of words to the understanding of concepts and back again, there is nevertheless a systematic relationship between words and concepts to be explored. The possession of a concept will at least *standardly* be signalled by the employment of a corresponding term. As long as we bear in mind that "standardly" means neither necessarily nor sufficiently, I think we may legitimately proceed.

III

If our aim is to illuminate ideological disputes through the study of linguistic disagreements, the first issue we need to clarify – as Williams acknowledges – is obviously this: what exactly are we debating about a word when we find ourselves debating whether or not it ought to be applied as a description of a particular action or state of affairs?

Unfortunately, Williams's answer is confusingly vague. "What is really happening in such encounters," he claims, is a "process"

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whereby "meanings are offered" and are then "confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed" (Williams 1976: 9; 1983: 11–12). All such debates are thus taken to be about "meanings"; about the "historical origins and developments" which have issued in the "present meanings" of the terms involved (Williams 1976: 13, 19–20; 1983: 15, 22–23).

This question-begging tendency to speak without further explication about "changes of meaning" is due, I believe, to the fact that Williams at no point tries to isolate and describe the class of terms in which he is chiefly interested – the class of what he calls the "strong" or "persuasive" words, the words which "involve ideas and values" (Williams 1976: 12, 15; 1983: 14, 17). No consistent account of how certain words come to "involve values" is ever presented. But it seems clear that, if any further progress is to be made in discussing the phenomenon of meaning change in ideological debates, the provision of such an analysis will have to be treated as a crucial preliminary step. As it happens, this is a less Herculean task than might be feared. A great deal of attention has lately been paid by theorists of language as well as moral philosophers to isolating and commenting on precisely these terms.[4] Drawing on their accounts, we may say, I think, that three main requirements need to be met if such terms are to be understood and correctly applied.

First, it is necessary to know the nature and range of the criteria in virtue of which the word or expression is standardly employed. Suppose, for example, that I am unaware of the meaning of the appraisive term *courageous*, and ask someone to explain to me how to use the word properly. He (or she) will most naturally reply by mentioning various criteria that serve to mark off the word from similar and contrasting adjectives, and so provide it with its distinctive role in our language of social description and appraisal. When listing these criteria, he will surely have to include at least the following: that the word can be used only in the context of voluntary actions; that the actor involved must have faced some danger; that he must have faced it with some consciousness of its nature; and he must have faced it heedfully, with some sense of the probable consequences of the action involved. Summarizing these criteria (in what is only apparently a tautology), we may say that the conditions

[4] Among moral philosophers I am most indebted to Foot (1958); Murdoch (1970); and the very illuminating comments in Hampshire (1959), especially pp. 195–222. Among philosophers of language, my approach owes most to the writings of Austin (1975); Wittgenstein (1959); and the analysis of Gottlob Frege's views presented in Dummett (1973a), especially pp. 81–109.

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under which the term *courageous* can be applied are such that the action involved must have been a courageous one.

Next, to apply an appraisive term correctly I also need to know its range of reference. I need, that is, to have a clear sense of the nature of the circumstances in which the word can properly be used to designate particular actions or states of affairs. The concept of reference has often been taken to be an aspect or feature of the meaning of a word. But it is perhaps more helpful to treat the understanding of the reference of a word as a consequence of understanding the criteria for applying it correctly. To grasp these criteria is to understand the sense of the word, its role in the language, and thus its correct use. Once I have acquired this understanding, I may expect in consequence to be able to exercise the further and more mysterious skill of relating the word to the world. I may expect, for example, to be able to pick out just those actions which are properly to be called courageous, and to discuss the sort of circumstances in which we might wish to apply that particular description, or might wonder whether we ought to apply it rather than another one. For instance, someone might call it courageous if I faced a painful death with cheerfulness. However, it might be objected that strictly speaking no danger is involved in such circumstances, and thus that we ought not to speak of courage but rather of fortitude. Or again, someone might call it courageous if I stepped up from the circus audience to deputize for the lion tamer. But it might be countered that this is such a heedless action that it ought not to be viewed as courage but rather as sheer recklessness. Both these arguments are about the reference (but not the meaning) of *courageous*: both are concerned with whether a given set of circumstances – what a lawyer would call the facts of the case – are such as to yield the agreed criteria for the application of the given appraisive term.

To apply any word to the world, we need to have a clear grasp of both its sense and its reference. But in the case of appraisive terms a further element of understanding is also required. We need in addition to know what exact range of attitudes the term can standardly be used to express. (To adopt J. L. Austin's jargon: it is necessary to know what type of speech acts the word can be used to perform.) For example, no one can he said to have grasped the correct application of the adjective *courageous* if they remain unaware that it is standardly used to commend, to express approval, and especially to express (and solicit) admiration for any action it is used to describe. To call an action courageous is at once to describe it and

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