

Language under the Microscope: Science and Philology in English Fiction 1850-1914

Submitted by William Harrison Abberley to the University of Exeter
as a thesis for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English
In September 2012

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Abstract

This study explores how Anglophone fiction from the mid-Victorian period to the outbreak of the First World War acted as an imaginative testing-ground for theories of the evolution of language. Debates about the past development and the future of language ranged beyond the scope of empirical data and into speculative narrative. Fiction offered to realize such narratives in detail, building imaginative worlds out of different theories of language evolution. In the process, it also often tested these theories, exposing their contradictions. The lack of clear boundaries between nature and culture in language studies of the period enabled fictions of language evolution to explore questions to which contemporary researchers have returned. To what extent is communication instinctive or conventional? How do social and biological factors interact in the production of meaning?

The study traces two opposing tendencies of thought on language evolution, naming them language ‘progressivism’ and ‘vitalism’. Progressivism imagined speakers evolving away from involuntary, instinctive vocalizations to exert rational control over their discourse with mechanical precision. By contrast, language vitalism posited a mysterious, natural power in words which had weakened and fragmented with the rise of writing and industrial society. Certain genres of fiction lent themselves to exploration of these ideas, with utopian tales seeking to envision the end-goals of progressive theory. Representations of primitive language in imperial and prehistoric romances also promoted progressivism by depicting the instinctive, irrational speech from which ‘civilization’ was imagined as advancing away. Conversely, much historical and invasion fiction idealized a linguistic past when speech had expressed natural truth, and the authentic folk origins of its speakers.

Both progressivism and vitalism were undermined through the late nineteenth century by developments in biology, which challenged claims of underlying stability in nature or purpose in change. Simultaneously, philologists increasingly argued that meaning was conventional, attacking models of semantic progress and degradation. In this context, a number of authors reconceptualized language in their fiction as a mixture of instinct and convention. These imaginative explorations of the borderlands between the social and biological in communication prefigured many of the concerns of twenty-first-century biosemiotics.

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