"Language on Holiday:" Wittgenstein and the Language-Reality Gap in Historical Narratives

ARI FINNSSON

The role of language in historical representations is a crucial issue. Empiricist and realist understandings of historical studies were vastly complicated by new theories of language developed in the last century and a half. Important works by Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, among others, threw into doubt the ability of language to correspond to reality. This posed major problems for the ability of the historical discipline to represent the reality of the past. Various modernist theorists have challenged the conclusions of postmodernist linguistic and historical theories, arguing that they leave the possibility for knowledge about the reality of the past in serious doubt because of a gap they open up between the language used to describe the past and the reality of the past itself. Frank Ankersmit provides a key re-envisioning of the nature of language in the historical discipline to attempt to accommodate this change in the understanding of the nature of the relationship of language to reality. This paper will use Ludwig Wittgenstein's later language theory to interrogate Ankersmit's historical theories as well as criticisms directed towards Ankersmit's and other postmodernist theories. I argue that a revised conception of the nature of language based on Wittgenstein's language theory, while it disagrees with elements of Ankersmit's theory, does enable the postmodern historian to answer crucial modernist critiques.

The problem of language in history was brought up as early as by the Prussian philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), who argued that language is the "formative organ of thought" – historical understanding is dependent upon language.[1] Language, however, plays a relatively unproblematic role in conventional histories. The nature of language is traditionally explained in roughly in two ways: reocentric and psychocentric semantics. In reocentric semantics, words derive their meaning from things in the external world. Words stand in for things in the world. The correlation of words to reality is not in doubt, and the problem of language for the historian is merged with the problem of truth. In psychocentric semantics, words stand in for ideas in the mind rather than things in the external world and may or may not provide an accurate picture of the world, although they are still unproblematically linked to the world insofar as ideas in the mind are

[1] Alun Munslow, *The New History* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2003), 46.

thought to be directly related to their subjects in the physical world.[2] In both of these systems, the relationship of language to reality is indubitable – "the facts" can be reasonably regarded as unmediated and can be accurately written down and recorded.[3]

The role of the conventional or modernist historian is to "reconstruct to the best of his ability the past as it 'actually was'."[4] History is admitted to be fallible on three counts: the fallibility of the historical record, the subjectivity of the historian, and the selectivity inherent in the writing of history. The past remains, to some degree, irretrievable to the historian and cannot be "recaptured in its entirety."[5] What is rarely at question are three fundamental assumptions: that there is an essential and discoverable reality to the past, that historians are able to, at least partially, represent this reality through language, and that the truth of a statement is derived from its correspondence to reality. The philosophy at the heart of conventional histories is realism – the belief that historical inquiry refers to a past reality that existed once, but does no longer, and that written histories are truthful to the extent that they accurately correspond to the past.[6]

The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857-1913) foundational linguistic theories complicated traditional conceptions of language and the historical discipline. Saussure's key insight was to think in terms of signs instead of words. Languages are re-defined as sign systems where a sign is anything that stands for something other than itself (e.g. a word or a picture.) Language is, therefore, not restricted to words, nor is it a naming system where words correspond to things. Signs come into existence through interaction, not through an individual creative process wherein humans create words for their ideas. Signs, for Saussure, gain their meaning through relationships and oppositions to other signs. No sign stands on its own; signs work only as part of a complex sign system. The meaning of a sign depends on something more than its simple correspondence to the world.

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[2] Roy Harris, *The Linguistics of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 6-7.
[3] Munslow, *The New History*, 53.
[4] Gertrude Hammelfarb, "Postmodernist History," in *Reconstructing History*, ed. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn (New York: Routledge, 1999), 72.
[5] Ibid., 73.
[6] Robert F. Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 47.

Saussure separated the sign system into three categories: the signifier, signified, and object. The signifier is the word in the language, the signified is the mental concept to which the signifier refers. The actual object (i.e. the thing in the world) is external to the sign system. The relationship of the sign to the object was complicated by Saussure's observation that the linguistic sign is arbitrarily chosen and in no way resembles the object that it denotes. Consequently, the certainty and permanence of the link between the sign and the object was thrown into doubt. Language, for Saussure, is characterized by an arbitrary link between the signifier and the signified and an arbitrary link between the signified to its object. Language is no longer unproblematically correspondent to reality.[7] This raises an important problem for the historian with regards to the ability of language – in the form of historical narratives – to refer to past objects and events.[8]

Roland Barthes' (1915-1980) work on semiotics further complicated matters. Barthes, a French literary theorist and philosopher, introduced a two-stage process of meaning creation. In the primary signification stage, the signifier denotes a signified to create a sign. This primary stage corresponds roughly to Saussure's system. This process is only possible because the sign instantly belongs as a signified in a secondary signification of a large myth system. The myth is an accepted part of a culture that is understood by everybody within the culture. Signs and signs systems are, therefore, embedded codes with normative meanings.[9] For Barthes, everything is a sign, even "the most direct product of nature is as subject to signification as the most socialized institutions."[10] By way of example, the red on a traffic light symbolizes "stop" only means "stop" insofar as the green light below it means "go." Signs, therefore, are related to their signifier, to a reservoir of other signs (an "organized memory" of forms from which it is distinguished) that they may be drawn from in order to enter the discourse, and to their actual neighbours in the world.[11]

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[7] Callum G. Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), 33-37.
[8] Murray G. Murphey, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), 1.
[9] Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*, 39-40.
[10] Roland Barthes, "The World as Object," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 68.
[11] Roland Barthes, "The Imagination of the Sign," In *A Barthes Reader*, edited by Susan Sontag, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 211.

Barthes' theories have important ramifications for the relationship of language to reality. Barthes key insight is that the signifier comes before the signified. For Barthes, the signifier does not disappear once the signified is discovered. The signified is socially constructed by its circulation between the user and the consumer of the sign. In this way, language determines the order of the world, not the other way around. Signs are the building blocks of what we think of as reality; reality is something made in culture with signs, myths, discourses, and texts that are created by that culture. In essence, since language defines the world and language is culturally defined, the world is culturally defined. There exists no single shared reality. Historical representations can only be attempted by ordering culturally defined signs (i.e. words) into culturally defined narratives (i.e. histories) which did not exist in reality and which bear no resemblance to it. A human representation of the complex relations of reality can never be complete. Historical events can never be pieced together in a neutrally observed, complete, and verifiable account. This is because there is no central reality to be discovered and put back together. The past cannot, therefore, be reconstructed nor can its reality be portrayed through linguistic historical study.[12]

Michel Foucault's (1926-1984) historical theory builds on the linguistic theories of Saussure and Barthes through his emphasis on language. Foucault agrees with Barthes that the historian has no unmediated access to the past. All attempts to represent the past are shaped by language. Foucault argues that language is itself shaped by a framework of power dynamics. Language is, like for Barthes, an arbitrary system of culturally constructed sign-signifier-signified relationships between words and the world. Knowledge, including historical knowledge, is shaped by a system of rules governing the generation and utilization of knowledge that is particular to each historical epoch. History is, at its essence, an act of imagination by the historian. Rather than attempting to represent historical events, Foucault argues that historians should seek to examine the narrative statements that constitute history. Foucault's historical project will not produce objective truths about the reality of the past, but will reveal the interplay of narrative and linguistic interpretation.[13] Language, not the world of things, becomes the focus of historical study.

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[12] Brown, *Postmodernism for Historians*, 40-47.
[13] Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 2006) Accessed April 11, 2017, Taylor & Francis E-Books, 129-133.

The work of important thinkers, including Saussure, Barthes, and Foucault, on the theory of language raises the issue of the gap between language and reality. Saussure's division between the signifier, signified, and object complicates the relationship of language to reality. Language is separated from reality and the link between the two becomes tenuous and arbitrary. Barthes' work argued that the relationship between language and the world runs the other way; instead of reality defining language, language defines reality. Foucault's theories about the rules governing the production of knowledge shaped his historical theory that placed the emphasis of historical study on language. Language, far from being an uncomplicated and unmediated method of speaking about the world, becomes a complicated system that makes the re-discovery of a single and essential past impossible.

Postmodern historical theories have been heavily criticized by modernist historians. The chief criticism of post-modernist theories is that they deny the reality of the past. For these critics, postmodernism denies the correspondence between language and reality and therefore, of any kind of truth about reality.[14] Ankersmit's historical theory provides one important attempt to bridge the language-reality gap.

Frank Ankersmit (1945-), a Dutch historical theorist and intellectual historian, seeks to redefine the task of the historian by distinguishing between descriptions and representations. In broad terms, a description refers to reality and a representation is about reality. Descriptions are simple statements about states of affairs, such as "the cat is black." Representations, however, are unfixed and are defined by the set of descriptions within it. A historical representation of the Renaissance would not be something that refers to an object in the past, but would "be about" something in the past; the term "the Renaissance" doesn't refer to any object in the past, but is "about" events in the past. [15] Ultimately, since representations are composed of descriptions, the ability of language to refer to the past is maintained in historical representations. Ankersmit makes another distinction between knowledge from the compulsion of experience, what reality demonstrates to be true, and knowledge from the compulsion of language, what we hold to be true on the basis of a priori, analytical, or philosophical arguments. In essence, Ankersmit argues that "language

[14] Hammelfarb, "Postmodernist History," 72.
[15] Frank Ankersmit, "The Linguistic Turn: Literary Theory and Historical Theory," *Historical Representation* (2001), 41.

can be a truth maker no less than reality."[16] Ankersmit argues that these historical representations of the past should be conceived of as proposals for representing a certain part of the reality of the past with a certain set of language. These proposals should be judged against one another, not against the past itself.[17] Ankersmit's theory attempts to bridge the language-reality gap by elevating historical discourse above simple descriptions to the level of representations. Since historical representations do not have to correspond directly to the reality of the past in order to gain meaning, Ankersmit is able to side-step the problem of the language-reality gap at the level of representation. Ankersmit's descriptions, however, still refer to the past and the epistemological gap between bits of descriptive language and the things that they refer to re-emerges.

Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889-1951) later philosophy of language differs importantly from previous thinkers and can help resolve the problem of linguistic reference to reality. Wittgenstein considers language and the activities into which language is woven as language-games.[18] For Wittgenstein, "the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."[19] Language becomes a part of human behaviour, not something external to the material world. Like Barthes and Saussure, he rejects the view of language as a naming system. The meaning of a word does not come from the object that corresponds to it, or even from an idea in the mind. Wittgenstein thinks that to conceive of words as meaning what they correspond to is to confuse the meaning of a word with its bearer.[20] We can speak of an object that no longer exists because the meaning of a word is not its bearer. Wittgenstein rejects the view of language as a referential system of signs. Instead, "[f]or a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning' – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language."[21] Wittgenstein does not wish to define the meaning of a

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[16] Ibid., 32.
[17] Frank Ankersmit, "In Praise of Subjectivity," *Historical Representation* (2001), 92-96.
[18] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, ed. P. M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 8.
[19] Ibid., 15.
[20] Ibid., 24.
[21] Ibid., 25.

word as its use, the meaning of a word is merely explained by its use. Wittgenstein wants to resist the impulse to define anything in terms of its essential qualities. In the example of the category of games, Wittgenstein argues that there is no essential set of features that define "games" in a way that includes all things that we call games and excludes all others. Rather, Wittgenstein argues that games share a kind of "family resemblance": a complicated network of similarities.[22] The concept of family resemblance applies well to problems in the historical discipline. Ankersmit argues that the way in which the word "revolution" is defined determines what the results of a historical study into revolutions will be. Wittgenstein would argue that any attempt to define "revolution" would be futile, as there is no such thing as the essence of revolution.

Wittgenstein thinks that philosophical problems, such as the gap between language and reality, arise when "language goes on holiday". Only then does naming appear as a "strange connection of a word with an object."[23] Wittgenstein argues that there is nothing extraordinary going on in language; there is no language-reality gap that must be bridged. Language, as an element of human behaviour, is a part of reality and does not need to correspond to or represent reality. Ultimately, "a *misunderstanding* makes it look to us as if a proposition *did* something strange."[24]

For Wittgenstein, Ankersmit's distinction between representation and description is a false dichotomy. Even simple descriptive sentences such as "the cat is black" are not referential. There is no need for a distinction between descriptive statements and representations; both are fundamentally the same kind of sets of language. Likewise, Ankersmit's division of knowledge into two categories, knowledge from the compulsion of experience as opposed to the compulsion of language, would also be seen as an artificial distinction. Wittgenstein does not see language as distinct from reality, and knowledge gained from language would, therefore, not be of a fundamentally different nature to knowledge gained from experience.

The meaning of historical narratives, for Wittgenstein, would be derived from their use in the language-game of history. Any attempt to theorize a connection to the past through historical narratives, whether through direct correspondence or through Ankersmit's

[22] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 36.
[23] Ibid., 23.
[24] Ibid., 48.

representation, would be, for Wittgenstein, doomed to fail. Since statements do not derive their meaning from any kind of correspondence to reality, it follows that historical narratives do not gain their meaning from a correspondence to the reality of the past. This approach fits well with Ankersmit's argument for comparing historical narratives against one another, rather than against the past.

Wittgenstein's re-envisioning of language as a type of human behaviour can bridge the language reality gap. When language is conceived of as apart from reality and having to correspond to it, then the postmodern emphasis on language does seem to be a denial of the reality of the past, or at least an attempt to ignore it. Language, however, according to Wittgenstein, does not correspond to reality, or to ideas in the mind of the language-user, but is a part of reality. The language of the past is part of the reality of the past, and is the only part available in the present. To study history through linguistic texts is to study the reality of the past, insofar as language constitutes a part of reality. History can be seen as a literary artifact as the sources that we have are artifacts of language. Thus, the language-reality gap fades away.

Important developments in the philosophy of language since the end of the 19th century have hugely complicated the historian's task. Language in conventional histories is regarded as relatively unproblematic, and deficiencies in the representation of the past are due to the fallibility of the historian themselves or to the evidence used. The nature of the relationship of language to reality is rarely in doubt. Works by Saussure, Barthes, and Foucault, however, raise important issues with regards to the correspondence of language to reality. A reconceptualization of language as a complex system of culturally defined sign-signifier-object relationships made the prospect of representing the past through language not just impossible, but also fundamentally misguided. Fundamental assumptions about historical truth as reliant on correspondence to the past and language as an unmediated generator of knowledge were eroded. Language and reality were separated and their relationship was made ambiguous. Not only was the correspondence of language to reality undermined but, rather than reality defining language, language became seen as defining reality. Frank Ankersmit attempts to reconcile this view of language by making distinctions between referential descriptions and representation, which do not refer to the past. Theories like Ankersmit's, however, are often criticized for appearing to deny the reality of the past. Wittgenstein's later language theory, through its

redefinition of language as a part of human behaviour can bridge the language-reality gap. Ultimately, accusations of a postmodernist denial of the reality of the past are dependent on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of language. Words do not refer to the world, nor do they gain their meaning or truthfulness through a correspondence to the world. Instead, Wittgenstein argues that language is a form of human life, a language-game that is a part of reality. A revised understanding of Ankersmit's theory on the basis of Wittgenstein's theory of language would suggest that all language sets fall under the category of representation. Historical narratives and descriptive statements alike should not be evaluated according to their correspondence to reality. Proposals for the representations of the reality of the past should be understood as moves in the language game of history and can be judged against one another for their usefulness. Once language is understood as an element of reality it no longer needs to correspond to reality. To study language is to study reality.

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