Discourse as Another Form of Knowledge

In the last chapter, the discussion focused on historians who wrote of epistemology or knowledge in a historical context. Problems emerged because of the implicit assumption that to study knowledge is to study knowledge, that is to say, historians in the previous chapter confronted knowledge head on without considering the possible subdisciplines that assist philosophers with epistemological questions. The philosophy of mind, the philosophy of consciousness, the philosophy of language, and even neurobiology share similar concerns but formulate their questions in radically different ways; yet these options were not taken into consideration.¹ If there is, however, one subdiscipline of philosophy to which historians devote a great degree of energy, it is the philosophy of language. For at least a generation now, the philosophy of language has manifested itself as discourse theory in historical writing.

A historian who advocates some form of discourse theory normally argues that a deep understanding of language is critical to historical analysis. This claim reflects the twentieth-century obsession with language, but rarely is the meaning of discourse theory clarified. In many instances, historians who invoke linguistic structures do no more than a classic philologist would—they look for the etymological origins of words and the way the meaning of a word changes over time. In terms of the interdisciplinary approach, these contemporary historians would find many willing interdisciplinary partners at the end of the nineteenth century. In a sense, the historian is trying to persuade the reader that the discourse theory is related to recent discoveries in the philosophy of language, when, below the surface, the methodology is at least a century old. In other cases, historians claim that since knowledge is mediated through language and language is socially constructed, then knowledge of the world is socially constructed. These historians then assert a nonrepresentational model of the world whereby debates on language are fundamentally related to knowledge and power. While this approach is more philosophically significant, it is worth paying attention to historians who take this approach, but very quickly

slip back into a positivistic mode. Finally, there are historians who effectively link sophisticated linguistic tools with specific historical situations and take the discussion beyond the facile declaration that a human being can describe the world through language.

This chapter is divided into five distinct sections, each section indicating how theories of language can appear in unique ways. The first section shows how historians can write about language and discourse without attaching any deep theoretical meaning to their claims by looking at older usage of discourse and language. Since at least the seventeenth century, the term discourse has appeared in scholarly titles, though it is only recently that the term has become loaded with theoretical significance. Similarly, historians can evaluate linguistic usage in very innocent yet effective ways. We will see an example where a historian traces the shifting meaning of the Russian word *intelligentsia*, though this shift is treated as no more than a standard case of linguistic change.

In the second section, a number of cases have been selected to show contemporary historians who write roughly about language, but whose approach is ultimately very similar to the generation of historians that preceded them. In these examples drawn from the Vietnam War, French politics in the twentieth century, early industrial America, and colonial Bengal, the reader has an opportunity to judge the role of the theory—when is it necessary and when does it distract from the historical claims?

As we see in section three, discourse theory has also been linked to state propaganda; it is not uncommon to read that a state manipulated or controlled the discourse. It is difficult, however, to separate our normal expectations of censorship in totalitarian states from censored situations in which discourse theory can shift our historical interpretations. For example, we expect the communist states of Eastern Europe to censor the press and thus need no theory to make this claim. But how deep did that control go? Could a communist party control of language control the very thoughts of citizens? What about a political group in Puerto Rico, could they control thoughts? These are deeper claims and therefore require an added level of discourse theory. To explore the effectiveness of this method, this section focuses on two political works that use discourse theory to argue that political groups could penetrate the deepest thoughts of their citizens. These works are then paralleled with other studies that make deep philosophical assertions about language.

Section four deals with examples taken from the history of science. Discourse theory and the philosophy of language have played an important role in this historical subdiscipline because of the extensive efforts to undermine the objectivity of science. Twentieth-century philosophers of language in the