

The Victorian Novel: A Sociolinguistic Study

Charles Dickens's Novel Hard Times as a Case-Study

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Abstract

The present paper tries to shed light on the interface between the Victorian novel and sociolinguistics, taking as a case-study Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. It aims at showing that the influence of both the linguistic and the social structures is bi-directional: society and language may affect each other. In this respect, speech genres differ between characters separated by certain social variables such as gender, age, status, religion, ethnicity and level of education. In fact, literature and sociolinguistics are concomitants

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Introduction

In all its genres, British literature is considered to be rich in its themes and its linguistic techniques. It has seen various phases of change beginning from Old English to the present day passing through different historical periods.

One of the most important periods in the history of England was that of Queen Victoria who reigned from 1837 till 1901 (Carter and McRae, 1996). In literature, the period began with the death of Sir Walter Scott in 1832, and went up to 1914 (ibid.). The Victorians made many changes in different fields such as science, economy and politics.

During the same Victorian period, there were several social problems such as poverty and bad living conditions. In the meantime, the middle class became a rich and powerful force in the society (Pollard, 1993). Further, this age was known for the entrance of machines into industry. Carlyle (1829) states:

“Were we required to characterize this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical, or Moral Age, but, above all others, the Mechanical Age.” (Carlyle, 1829, quoted in Klingopulos, 1996: 20)

Victorian writers, such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, attempted to fulfill their commitment through expressing “the spirit of the age with all the resources of imagination, feeling and thought” (Pollard, 1993: ix). They revealed their response to their society during the nineteenth century. Moreover, they tried to show their readers that there were several abuses behind that beautiful scene of the Victorian society. These writers are deemed to be so important that they ought to be taken into account in any study of English literature.

1. The Victorian Novel: A General Glance

The novel became the fundamental form in the Victorian age (Klingopulos, 1996). One of the most outstanding literary figures during the Victorian age was Charles Dickens (1812-70) whose works have remained popular up to now. Through many of his works, Dickens changes the theme of the novel, focusing on the social problems of his time (Miller, 1965). The main themes of Dickens’s writings are about sufferings of both children and the working class (Thornley and Roberts, 1984). These are the subject of one of his well-known novels, *David Copperfield* (1850) (Carter and McRae, 1996). David Copperfield, the main character of the novel, is the Victorian boy who is able to release his dreams. The novel tackles part of Dickens’s childhood and his success (ibid.). *Great Expectations* (1861) is another famous novel of Dickens (Shelston, 1993). It is an autobiographical story with an unhappy ending (ibid.). Philip, the author’s main character in the novel, has many hopes which cannot be fulfilled. The expectations of Philip are not great as they were for David.

Most of Dickens’s writings of the 1850s were characterised by a sense of irony (Carter and McRae, 1996). *Hard Times* (Dickens, 1854) is often regarded as a work of the Victorian times. Through this novel, Dickens attempts to criticize the values of the industrial Victorian society. Dickens’s later novels tackle the situation of the London society (Miller, 1967).

Many other Victorian writers continued to deal with social concerns. Through *The French Revolution* (1837) and *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle, for example, mainly criticized the ‘Laissez-faire’ policy (Carter and McRae, 1996). The three Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, were able to change the way the novel introduces the female character (Coote, 1993). Their writings were about women and their struggle within the Victorian society.

Social, religious and political issues became the dilemma of the time. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* which caused different contradictions of faith (Thornley and Roberts, 1984). Many Victorian literary works, therefore, reflected this situation of contradictions. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is considered to be one of the most outstanding novelists who wrote about problems of the Victorians in the late nineteenth century. Through many of his novels, Hardy deals with the conflict between traditional and modern values (ibid.).

As far as the present paper is concerned, there are many motives behind the choice of the Victorian novel as a corpus. The Victorians appear to be the British people contemporaries in different ways: political, educational, religious and cultural problems are regarded as similar to the difficulties which confront British people at the present time. Moreover, the Victorian period saw an intensive production of literary works, especially novels dealing with social realities during the Industrial Revolution (Cuddon, 1992). It is on these premises that the Victorian novel has been chosen as a subject of the present inquiry.

2. Dickens's Prose Style

Dickens is often known for the continuous vitality of his prose style (Grant, 1984). Most of his novels are characterised by his gift of fascinating characterisation (Hyland, 1981). His minor characters are, in terms of action, distinguished by their individual speech patterns, idiosyncratic idioms which belong only to those characters and are never repeated (Grant, 1984). Dickens's extremely flexible style creates such discriminations and social observations (ibid.). His characters take place in the world of the novel to which they belong through their language (Wilson, 1967). They are remarkable individuals (Price, 1967). Oliver Twist, Micawber, Uriah Heep, Tiny Tim, Squeers, Scrooge and dozens of other characters are part of the English folklore.

In writing, Dickens's powers are thought to be many. The author can make plots of complexity to ensure a sense of mystery and uncertainty in his novels (Hyland, 1981). This way helps him as a novelist whose writings are produced in serial form (ibid.). He develops the technique of suspense to a fine art in his works (ibid.). His plots are deemed to be the product of his fertile imagination. His characters are vividly and cogently drawn and invite the readers warmly into the pages of his novels (Thornley and Roberts, 1984).

A further quality of Dickens's novels is his gift for humour (Carey, 1973). This feature is closely related to that of characterisation (ibid.). His humour is of a more varied kind than would be done by characters' depiction alone (ibid.). Many instances of his amusing comments, the comic scenes and the complete wit of the dialogue are all parts of the rich vein of humour that makes his novels distinguishable (Hyland, 1981).

Dickens's novels are not only fun; they are full of satire (Grant, 1984). He is often considered as a satirist and a critic of the Victorian society. He shows all the inadequacies of the Victorian institutions. Dickens's satire strikes England and leaves its mark (Hyland, 1981). He attacks schools, family, Parliament and the Church. It is said that his novels frequently reflect aspects of his own personal experience.

Idioms of the Victorian folk used by Dickens have a particular impact on the reader (Gillie, 1996). The use of such idiomatic expressions is considered as a way to introduce the Victorian culture and traditions to the reader. Therefore, Dickens's language is not only a communicative device, but it also bears a cultural heritage of his society. All his novels are the embodiment in words of a very special way of experiencing the world (Miller, 1965). The pervasive stylistic features of the writer, his recurrent words and images and his special tone are as personal to him as his face or his way of walking (ibid.). His style is his own way of living in the world which is given a verbal form (ibid.). Dickens's novels, including *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, represent important segments of the curve of his temporal development in his creative vision.

3. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*

There were fictional works particularly those written by Dickens that improved the language of literature (Gillie, 1996). Dickens is, yet, regarded to be that Victorian writer with real experiences and “extraordinary virtuosity of imagination which would have put a strain on any powers of organization” (Klingopulos, 1996: 97). For instance, *Hard Times* (HT), one of his best known novels, has occupied a large part in critics' literary studies. The skill and the talent of the writer have made of this novel a highly stylistically appreciable piece of literary writing worth being studied.

Charles Dickens's artistic productions are varied in themes and styles (Shelston, 1993). His writings make the reader aware of those areas of interaction between literature and society at that period (Klingopulos, 1996). He is thus regarded as the representative figure of the literary tradition of nineteenth century British realism. Dickens is deemed to be one of the greatest geniuses in English literature: he is “unique” (Churchill, 1996: 117). Hence, the wide popularity and the familiarity of Dickens may be advantageous to any study on his novels (ibid.).

Dickens's *Hard Times* is considered to be a work of the Victorian times (Carter and McRae, 1996). The novel is often tackled at the level of themes, neglecting its linguistic and artistic aspects (Churchill, 1996). In his celebrated essay on the novel (*Hard Times*), mainly on its language, Leavis (1950) states that:

“The final stress may fall on Dickens' command of word, phrase, rhythm, and image: in ease and range there is surely no greater master of English except Shakespeare.” (Leavis, 1950, quoted in Churchill, 1996: 133)

A linguistic investigation of this literary work seems, therefore, rewarding in the sense that it can reveal different sociolinguistic features of the author.

Sub-titles in the novel, “Sowing”, “Reaping” and “Garnering”, reminded the Victorian reader of the Bible's words “As you sow, so also shall ye reap” (Hyland, 1981: 12). These words refer to the upbringing of children. Through *Hard Times*, Dickens attempts to expose the abuses and the failings made by the Victorian institutions.

Stylistically, the novel is full of many instances of significant characteristics of Dickens's writings. Some of these features manifest themselves in simile, irony, imagery, repetition and diction.

Simile is regarded to be the most tangible form of metaphor, which is considered as a cover term for different figures of speech (Hatch and Brown, 1995). It is one of the well-known figures of speech in which one item is compared to another in order to introduce an image (Cuddon, 1992). In simile, the comparison is explicitly recognized by using words such as ‘as’ and ‘like’ (Leech, 1969).

Referring back to his description of Coketown, Dickens makes the comparison on the basis of the quality shared by two items: “[...] it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage.” (HT: 19). The first item is ‘Coketown’, the second one is ‘the face of a savage’ and the common quality can be ‘darkness’. Both items share the same colour. The terms ‘tenor’, ‘vehicle’, ‘ground’, ‘marker’ and ‘topic’ are applied to refer to the component elements of simile (Chapman, 1973: 82). Thus, the tenor is ‘Coketown’, the vehicle is ‘the face of a savage’, the ground is ‘the darkness’, the simile marker is ‘like’ and the topic is ‘a description of Coketown’. Dickens uses this linguistic device (simile) in order to depict the depressing reality of Coketown. He attempts to give the reader a complete picture of this industrial town.

Dickens makes use of *caricature* to describe his characters' physical appearance (Forster, 1990). For this purpose, he introduces similes to draw more details about the people he describes in

the novel. His portrayal of Bitzer's appearance defining the horse is another illustration of the use of *simile* in *Hard Times*:

“Bitzer, after rapidly blinking at Thomas Gradgrind with both eyes at once, and so catching the light upon his quivering ends of lashes that they looked like the antennae of busy insects, put his knuckles to his freckled forehead, and sat down again.” (HT: 4)

Bitzer is not a usual human being; he is the product of his mechanical society. He gives a definition of a horse in the classroom in a robot-like manner (Hyland, 1981). In the above passage, Dickens describes Bitzer's lashes as the antennae of an insect.

Behind the use of irony, there is often a secret communion between the author and his reader (Leech and Short, 1981). In HT, the bitter reality of Coketown (an industrial town) is ironically depicted:

“It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, [...].” (HT: 19)

The ending phrase “for ever and ever” appears to have “a fairy-story ring to it; it is almost as if Dickens were describing gleaming fairy palaces” (Hyland, 1981: 65). Another example of irony is shown in Tom Gradgrind's dressing as a clown in the final scenes of *Hard Times* in contrast with his father's ambitions.

As a general term, imagery covers the use of language to represent certain objects, actions, thoughts and feelings (Cuddon, 1992). In *Hard Times*, Dickens makes use of imagery to describe his characters, appealing to the visual perception of the reader. From the first chapter of the novel, he uses imagery to describe the physical appearance of Thomas Gradgrind who is shown introducing pupils to his school of facts:

“The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellarage in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall.” (HT: 1)

Furthermore, the first chapters of the novel provide many examples of the use of repetition. Dickens's aim behind the use of such a linguistic device is to produce rhetorical effects. He repeats the same opening of sentences in the second paragraph of the First Chapter through the sentence: “The emphasis was” (HT: 1). Further, Dickens's description of Bounderby in Chapter Four, with the repetition of "A man" (HT: 12) at the beginning of each sentence, shows the parallelistic emphasis. This stylistic device is not difficult to detect, and its obviousness seems appropriate to describe the characters in the novel.

The novel's vocabulary has undoubtedly raised difficulties in understanding the meanings of some words which were related to the Victorian era. Dickens's diction makes the novel a distinct and a different literary work. The author uses some of his words in a technical way. The word “quadruped” (ibid: 4) is, for instance, used to describe the horse as having four legs. This word seems to have a professional tone related to scientific facts. In addition, idioms of the Victorian folk used by Dickens have a particular impact on the reader (Gillie, 1990). The use of such expressions is seen as a way to introduce the Victorian culture. Therefore, Dickens's language is not only a communicative device, but it also bears the cultural heritage of his society.

Moreover, the names of characters and locations are not casually chosen in the novel. For example, Bounderby is so named because he is by nature a bounder, a cheat and a deceiver who looks for advancement at the expense of others (Hyland, 1981). The name of 'Gradgrind' has some

connotations of slavish attention to petty detail and its concern with the different stages of life (the grade) (ibid.).

Victorian novels like *Hard Times* are frequently about wealthy-middle-class Englishmen in London and its environs (Carter and McRae, 1996). Yet behind and around these men were women, workers and servants and a kingdom on which the sun never set. Thus, the reader of this novel should be aware of what women do and say, of the roles they are encouraged to have and the results exacted if they do not have them, of how characters earn their money, of what social class they are members of and of who and why they marry.

Hard Times raises various issues related to the Victorian society as a whole. As a literary work, the novel can be considered as a store of different sociolinguistic features.

Dickens makes use of different forms of conversations in various social situations. Sociolinguistics shows us some humorous realities of human speech and how any linguistic form can often describe the age, gender, religion and social class of the speaker (the character); it codes the social function of language (Hudson, 1996). Moreover, it is the study of language aspects (features, styles and variation) in relation to the social context (Spolsky, 1998). Sociolinguistics involves the description of language features (lexis and syntax) and an identification of the social factors that lead people to use one form rather than another (ibid.).

The basic framework of any sociolinguistic description includes participants' setting, topic, notions of social distance, formality, status and ideological and referential functions (Trudgill, 2002). For example, when participants, context and topic are considered, the use of language variation of different language styles becomes more predictable and meaningful (ibid.). Linguistic diversity correlates with social diversity. People often use a language to signal their membership of particular groups. Sociolinguists need to describe the linguistic patterns that correlate with the macro-level abstract categories of class, age, ethnicity and gender to explain the social meaning of language (Freeman and McElhinny, 1996).

Conclusion

One rich cultural beginning embedded in the Victorian novel is its language. In this respect, Victorian novel and sociolinguistics are concomitants: the use of sociolinguistics increases the understanding of the use of the language found in the novel. In fact, this study attempted to show that the language used in literature is of sociolinguistic importance and is the result of continuing political-social-economic forces.

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