Book Review

Raf van Rooy. **2020**. *Language or Dialect? The History of a Conceptual Pair*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780198845713 (hardback), 384 pp. £75.00. Also available as ebook.

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Most readers will be familiar with the definition, "A language is a dialect with an army and navy", as offered by Max Weinreich (1894–1969) in a conversation (and cited by Van Rooy p. 1). One might wonder if a book with the title *Language or Dialect?* could have much to offer beyond all that is implied in that somewhat world-weary aphorism. One would be wrong. In this very readable book of 24 digestible chapters, Van Rooy guides us with assurance, rigour, and clarity through the history of how the terms *language* and *dialect* have been conceptualized, paired and differentiated from one another, beginning with earliest attestations in Greek, and ending with more recent vulgarization and politicization of the notions. After Part I (Prehistory, 500 B.C.–1500), the heart of the book examines how the pair of terms *language* and *dialect* were conceptualized and used between 1500 and 1800, in Parts II (The Origin of the Conceptual Pair, 1500–1550), III (Consolidation by Elaboration, 1550–1650), and IV (Systematization and Rationalization, 1650–1800). The final eight chapters comprising Part V (From Silent Absorption to Outspoken Abandonment, after 1800) go beyond the scope of Van Rooy's original Leuven thesis to continue the conceptual history from 1800 to the present. All quotations are presented in English, with the original text readily accessible in footnotes on the same page. This works very well – just occasionally I would have welcomed a little more explicit discussion of the use of competing or parallel terms in the original languages, e.g. Rask's use of *Sprogart*, German *Mundart* versus *Dialekt* as used by Schleicher and others (pp. 221–222). Tables and figures usefully illustrate or help visualize certain conceptualizations. There is also a full index. Those familiar with the history of linguistic thought will appreciate how Van Rooy teases out the nuances and incremental conceptual developments in the thinking of familiar figures, but the book is an instructive read for non-historians too, as Van Rooy demonstrates how scholars have tended to be unaware of how they imbue existing terms with anachronistic meanings and assumptions that are of their own time and way of thinking – a salutary reminder to any of us engaged in linguistics.

Van Rooy's history begins with the earliest and scanty attestations in Ancient Greek of the word *diálektos*, and then in Latin, showing how underspecified and

under-conceptualized the term was. There was no assumption that dialects are subsumed "under" a language, for example. In the Latin west, Roman authors such as Quintilian, while not unaware of regional variation, in fact tended to compare Greek dialects (Attic, Ionic, Doric, Aeolic) to Latin register. Piccolomini (1405–1464) considered Germanic a concatenation of related varieties (p. 25). For Dante, by contrast, Italian had two main classes, under which sat at least fourteen "primary variations" across different regions, with "secondary" and even "subsecondary" variations. But Van Rooy concludes that before 1500 "most scholars did not make a clear-cut conceptual distinction between a language-like and a dialect-like entity" (p. 27), though Roger Bacon (1214–1292) was an exception (pp. 28–44). It was often an awareness of other languages that triggered reflection on the distinction between a language and a dialect. Conrad Gessner (1516–1565) – a keen classifier of many things, not just language – was, Van Rooy suggests, an eager early adopter of a language-dialect distinction, to aid his classificatory scheme (pp. 47–62).

By the mid-16th century, the term *dialectus* had been naturalized in Europe's Latinate republic of letters (p. 53), and scholars began to make serious efforts to distinguish the concepts of dialect and language. The notion of a *lingua communis* emerged; a *koine* was now (unlike in Greek and Roman thought) conceived as qualitatively different from dialects, as an entity under which dialects could be grouped, and with reference to which they could be distinguished (pp. 64–69). That the concept of dialect was becoming self-evident is reflected in the emergence of the common phrase – in 16th-century efforts to map out peoples in lesser-known parts of the world as "differing only in dialect" (pp. 74–76). By the 1550s there was, Van Rooy suggests, something approaching a working understanding of a dialect as a "variety of language differing only superficially from other varieties of the same language" (p. 75). However, there remained terminological confusion with *idiom* and *style*.

A recurrent implicit theme through history, though not one developed by Van Rooy, is the potential of dialect usage to trigger comedy or ridicule. Already implicit in Aristophanes's works, it became explicit when Petrus Antesignanus (1525–1561) noted efforts of some speakers of French to avoid being identified by their regional features – though Antesignanus also allowed that usages found in certain French cities and regions could enrich the common language too.

Humanists' rediscovery of Greek and its named dialects encouraged comparison with other languages being discovered and treated as countable entities, at the same time as aspirations emerged towards national languages, increasingly linked to a nation state, as explicitly in the French Academy's dictionary, for example (p. 106). From about 1650 onwards, it was taken for granted that dialectal variation occurs in all languages (an idea first made explicit by Simon Stevin (1548/9–1620). From the 17th century onwards, levels or gradations of dialects become more common (e.g. Schottelius's notion of the *Hauptdialekte* ("main dialects") of German, pp. 114–117).

Another new conceptual injection in this period is the use of Aristotelian thinking, as in Georg Stiernhielm (1598–1672), who was unusual in defining both terms explicitly, and who used the Aristotelian notions of substance and accidentals to distinguish languages, differing from one another in their *substance* (which for Stiernhielm meant their words and roots), and dialects, differing merely in their *accidentals* (in the sense of non-fundamental properties).

A "profound" (p. 126) conceptual development in the language-dialect distinction is the incorporation from the 17th century onwards of a highly normative dimension: dialects are explicitly understood as deviations from the analogical norm of the national language; in the 18th century, that language is, or should be, not merely the common language, but the "standard". Dialects are, then anomalous, increasingly also considered therefore to be corrupt. Language gains positive connotations of superiority; dialect increasingly negative ones of inferiority (cf. Van Rooy's Table 9.1, p. 134).

Half-way through the volume, Van Rooy summarizes the range of criteria developed by the end of the early modern period to distinguish languages from dialects, the result of the combination of rediscovering the (in fact reimagined) Greek terminological heritage, scholarly interests in linguistic diversity and classification, and sociolinguistic reality (Table 11.1, p. 148). Those criteria encompass the nature of linguistic difference (substantial vs accidental); geographical coverage; mutual intelligibility (a theme to which Van Rooy also returns for the more recent period since 1900, see pp. 256–262, taking into account more recent attempts to measure and/or problematize this idea); regularity (or analogy); ethnic-(political) coverage; historical primacy; and status. Van Rooy reminds us that all of these conceptual developments go beyond anything articulated in Ancient Greek, a fact of which these early modern writers, who believed they were using an existing intellectual framework, were blissfully unaware.

Van Rooy presents the later 17th century and 18th century as a period of systematization of a conceptual pair now taken for granted. For example, the historian Johann Christoph Gatterer (1727–1799) took a proto-lexicostatistical approach, seeking to measure the degree of difference in a vocabulary of some 300 words in order to categorize languages that are closely and less closely related; and dialects that are closely and less closely related (pp. 186–191). Gatterer's approach seems to have influenced the three-way distinction of languages, related languages, and dialects made by Johann Christoph Adelung (1723–1806). Adelung, however, sought evidence not just in the "characteristic" vocabulary, but also in derivation and inflectional features.

What constitutes differences among dialects and languages was, Van Rooy notes, the subject of surprisingly little discussion, however. Pronunciation, whole words, parts of words, and inflection might all be mentioned; so too "letters", which might

boil down to any of the preceding categories. One exception was Johann Georg Wachter (1663–1757), who argued that languages differ according to their consonants, dialects according to their vowels. Van Rooy suggests "this highly specific criterion might have been grounded in the idea that consonants made up the framework of a word, into which vowels were implemented" (p. 201) – here I was surprised not to see consideration of the possible relevance of knowledge of the system of roots in the Semitic languages, and/or from the awareness of Ablaut in Germanic languages. Ferdinando Galiani (1728–1787), by contrast, suggested that only differences in "syntax" (though very vaguely conceptualized) demarcated distinct languages.

The field of dialectology emerging in the 19th century (though the term itself dates to 1650) significantly gave primacy to dialects – understood as rural phenomena – as worthy objects of study. At the same time, however, Van Rooy identifies an emerging scepticism about the possibility and usefulness of attempting to distinguish dialect and language, as already expressed by Carl Friedrich Fulda (1724–1788) in 1760 (see p. 214). William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894) deliberately used the two terms interchangeably (p. 226), though he did consider dialects to be antecedent to language – an interesting reversal of earlier assumptions of the primacy of unitary languages from which dialects emerge, as for example by Joseph Justus Scaliger (1540–1609) (pp. 136–141). An important insight was the recognition by Hugo Schuchardt (1842–1927) in 1928 that terms such as *Untermundart, Mundart, Dialekt* and *Sprache* are relative terms (p. 235).

The early 19th century is, Van Rooy tells us, "rather uninteresting" (p. 225) for further theorizing the language-dialect conceptual pair – this may be true, but I confess I would have been glad to have seen Humboldt at least mentioned, if only to be dismissed. However, as van Rooy rightly points out (p. 244), it is impossible to do full justice to this more recent period, and Van Rooy does take in most of the figures we might expect, such as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), who largely concurs with Schuchardt, and emphasizes the relevance of extralinguistic factors; the sociological approach of Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and Charles F. Hockett (1916–2000), whom Van Rooy considers typical of the American structuralist tradition (p. 255) in taking the idiolect of an individual as the basic unit of research from which higher-level abstractions could be derived; Uriel Weinreich (1926–1967, son of Max Weinreich), who sought to bridge the gap between structuralism and dialectology and who preferred the non-committal and now very widely used term *variety*; and André Martinet (1908–1999), who in a 1954 article distinguished language, dialect, and patois, the latter being the case of a local dialect which "had lost its overarching provincial dialect" (p. 252), an idea I would have liked to hear a little more about. Generativism's relative lack of interest in distinguishing dialects, given its assumption of language as a closed system, is also touched on. Van Rooy also

notes the productiveness of the term *dialect* in yielding new coinages (pp. 275–278), both with the first element *dia-* (as in Romanist Eugenio Coseriu's *diatopic, diastratic, diaphasic*), and the second element *-lect*, yielding idiolect, sociolect, and indeed plain lects), and its use in terms such as *dialect chain, dialect levelling*, etc.

Particularly interesting in this final part of the book is the discussion of the popularization and politicisation of what counts as a language or dialect, whether in the Ebonics controversy of the 1990s and beyond (concerning the status of African American Vernacular English as "not merely dialects of English", and its implications; see p. 290), and the impact in Europe of the well-intentioned Charter for Regional or Minority languages, which forced states to declare what, within their territories, counted as a language or dialect, with important policy implications too (pp. 290–291).

As I have sought to demonstrate, in this fine volume Van Rooy confidently navigates a couple of millennia of linguistic reflection to present us with an absorbing and thought-provoking history of the conceptual pair of language and dialect – a highly impressive achievement. Inevitably there are minor quibbles. Germanic scholarship certainly gets the lion's share of attention, though for the early modern period, Van Rooy argues (p. 207) that this is partly to do with the strong tradition of Greek scholarship in German-speaking areas and with the way in which the Reformation forced reflection on the relative status of High German and Low German and their varieties (p. 207). Van Rooy rises admirably well to the fearsome challenge of expanding his study from 1800 to the present, but I was surprised to see no mention at all of Humboldt, and I would, in a perfect world, have welcomed more discussion of the rather different conceptualizations of dialect and language beyond Europe, not least in China and in Chinese-speaking countries. The latter is touched on (p. 292), but seemingly relying on one English-language journalistic source which does not fully capture the complexity of the ideological and terminological situation. However, these are minor points. Overall, this is a bold, enjoyable and enriching conceptual history, warmly recommended both to historians of linguistics and to anyone who uses the terminology of dialect, language, variety and the like today.