

Linguistics Department Commencement Address, May 1997

Thanks for inviting me to discuss my current research; I'm sorry there's no handout. For the past month I've been obsessed with a problem in the historical dialectology of northern England — Why exactly does the irritating old servant Joseph in Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* say *clane*, *lave*, *mane*, and *Hathecliff* rather than *clean*, *leave*, *mean*, and *Heathcliff*? — and I was flattered when you asked me to address this topic here at your graduation ceremony. Since I don't want the topic to seem out of place, for comparison with other ceremonies I naturally turned to the campus paper a few weeks ago. Maybe you saw the headline: 'Big Names Galore Featured in May Commencements'. My own name didn't seem to figure in the article, but all my big-name colleagues were there, commencement brethren as we fancy ourselves: George Stephanopoulos *has* the biggest name, for sure; but Jerry Brown, Johnny Cochran, Bill Cosby, Stacey Keach — what a party!

So there we were, my brethren and I, after the annual commencement speakers' dinner with the Chancellor, the Governor, the other Regents, shooting the post-prandial baccalaureate breeze while we nursed some port laid down by Mrs. Hearst and smoked a Cuban cigar, and it goes without saying our joint business came up. Bill had a thing or two to say about the inconcinnity of almost anything one might preach at what Stacey dubbed this liminal sermon — it's not stand-up but you all want entertainment; it's not *I Spy* but you want drama; this is no Supreme Court but we brethren are supposed to affect a certain gravity — which naturally led us to ask what we *were* going to talk about. White House anecdotes for George, as it turns out, for Johnny academic doggerel like 'If the grades are there, You're now an ex-Bear', and as for me, I said this:

'I intend to hew to the generic line by starting with a joke, one we all know and like, George Bernard Shaw's synopsis of our profession: "He who can, does; he who cannot, teaches." You can take this as a quip about the difference between doing something and being able to explain how it's done, but I think Americans especially find a broader interpretation appealing: there's talk and there's action, and talkers and doers; and we teachers talk, we don't do.

'When Shaw set up this amusing dichotomy, he couldn't have known what linguistics students all know now, that sometimes words *are* actions. This was the central point of J. L. Austin's 1955 lecture series on "How To Do Things With Words", the foundation of speech-act theory. Austin distinguished two kinds of utterance: ordinary true-or-false assertions or statements, which he called *constatives*; and utterances which *do* rather than *report* things. These he called *performatives*, a simple one being the utterance "I now pronounce you man and wife", which changes things when said by the right person in the right place at the right time — in other words, when *felicitous*.

'In the same way, later today and today only, we professors of linguistics will rise up from our usual constative torpor to engage in a few annual performative utterances: we'll pronounce you doctors, masters, and bachelors; and these pronouncements are felicitous here today by virtue of the odd costumes we wear and a certain legal license. The commencement ceremony is our one corporate action, which I find satisfying both

for this reason and for the history of its trappings. The ceremony originated in the first universities in medieval Bologna and Paris, where the earliest real degree was the master's degree entitling you to teach. The so-called *inception* ceremony at which this degree was awarded in thirteenth-century Paris, for instance, had two main ingredients. The first ingredient was the candidate's inaugural lecture, based on the principle of Roman law that you assume an office by performing its functions: an event surviving today as the thesis defense to which candidate doctors subject themselves, and sometimes bachelors. The other main ingredient of the thirteenth-century inception is still part of our commencement in the twentieth century: the *birettatio*, which is the placing of the *biretta* on the new master's head, *biretta* being Latin for "doofy academic hat". Nowadays we use the hood, not the hat, which is semantically bleached and worn by mere bachelors, and we do this for doctors as well as masters because today, as usual, most of our new masters are pilgrims crossing their Slough of Despond; but it's the same action. This seven-hundred-year old ceremonial action even plays its part in my own view of the past year and a half of the Linguistics Department. In the Ishi Courtyard after last year's commencement one of you, a recent morphology student, said something touching: that the hooding of doctoral students by their advisors had provoked such a sense of connection that you almost wanted to go to linguistics graduate school. Now, a year later, that is exactly what this student is planning to do, after a transformation which I hope has other reasons too. Intellectual and personal transformations seem to have affected many of you over the past year, in stimulating as well as disillusioning ways; and for me, who got to observe your intellectual exteriors last spring, seeing these changes and in a limited way talking about them with you has been a source of remarkable pleasure which is all the more rewarding for being utterly unexpected.'

At this point in my sketch of the address Stacey interrupted: 'I bet you never finished *How To Do Things With Words*'; and Pete and Ward explained that the performative-constative distinction is a straw dichotomy knocked down by Austin himself in favor of an even more general theory. In this theory our performative utterances today are called *illocutionary* acts, but *perlocutionary* acts also exist, in which you make some utterance in order to achieve some effect. Maybe all teaching is really action of this kind: speech intended to change you in some way. If so, at least for those of you leaving Berkeley, this address of mine is our very last perlocutionary opportunity, and demands a different rhetorical style.

Turn left as you leave this building and head uphill along Strawberry Creek. Pass through Sather Gate and across the bridge, and you'll be in a plaza between two buildings. These buildings represent the two revolutions Clark Kerr described for the history of American higher education. Blocking the Bay view to your left will be Dwinelle Hall, now being renovated, in whose bowels the Linguistics Department lives like some tapeworm feeding on material partially digested by the foreign language departments above it. This vast building stands for the second revolution, the more recent one, which above all saw the expansion of public universities in the 1950s and 1960s. Kerr's first revolution, the earlier one, is represented by a lovely building you'll see to

your right. Completed in 1917, Wheeler Hall is the last of the great Beaux-Arts buildings in John Galen Howard's design for the center of our campus, a design which in turn arose from the architectural competition in 1897, a century ago, to create what one San Francisco newspaper called a 'Western acropolis of learning'.

Enter Wheeler Hall, and to your left you'll see a marble plaque installed in 1919 in honor of Benjamin Ide Wheeler, who in that year retired as President of the University of California. The Greek under his name is from Bacchylides' poem praising the winner of an ancient chariot race: 'Myriad are the virtues of men, but the one which stands apart from all of them is if someone guides what is at hand with a reasonable mind.' It was Benjamin Ide Wheeler, this Ben Hur of Berkeley, who between 1899 and 1919 guided us through America's first academic revolution, the creation of the modern research university.

Now a Shavian skeptic who distinguishes teaching and action may not see research universities as altogether good: there is said to be a sharp distinction also between teaching and research, and those with research ability are thought to be inarticulate teachers. I don't think many inspiring teachers or creative researchers can subscribe to this view, and certainly Wheeler did not. At the laying of the cornerstone of Wheeler Hall on March 23, 1916, President Wheeler himself called attention to its location with these words:

Back to back with the library and its seminaries representing discovery stands this new building representing teaching. Research and teaching — we must have them both and have them blended. Teaching without the quickening force of discovery will soon grow stale. Research, without telling its story to the quickening of others, and without embedding its lessons into the uses of human society, will grow selfish and die by the hand of its own zeal.

For myself, and I can speak only personally, no clear line divides research and teaching: what justifies each is the same excitement at the discovery of the unexpected. In teaching, one of my fondest memories is from Linguistics 115 on April 10, 1996, a day when I presented some fairly intricate evidence for a kind of linguistic abstractness in the Nxaʔamxcin language of eastern Washington. I remember a moment of silence after we had spent much of the hour on this daunting language, just before I got to the punch-line, when a student quite unintentionally and unselfconsciously said 'Oh!' The 'Oh!' of sudden insight is the same as the 'Oh!' of research, for example when you realize your words with funny spellings in *Wuthering Heights* are the very words which had the vowel /æ:/ and not /æə/ a thousand years ago, though the difference between the two vowels having vanished in every other modern variety of English. This moment can be so confusing and clear and overwhelming all at once, you can't bear to sit down or stand still, but I really can't say which is more rewarding, having the experience yourself or seeing it take a student unawares.

Elusive as these moments of realization are, they're what many of us seek in our research and what I think we all seek for our students in the classroom. Our purpose is not to add new facts to your list but to give you faith in your own ability to find and interpret them on your own. To quote Benjamin Ide Wheeler again:

The slavery from which education seeks to free [you] is not only a blank slavery of ignorance, but

slavery to the word of formal authority ... the horrible slavery of those who wear the fetter of formula, having in their hand no file to test its metal, whether it be softer than lead. A liberal education is and always was no other than an education that liberates ... out of the bondage of convention, recipe, and ruts ... The university's real commodity is light, not the pitch-sputtering torch of the agitator, nor the painted lamps of the bigot, but the calm and steady light of well-determined truth.

Once this light of Wheeler's liberates you, we've done our job.

Now the study of linguistics seems like a good way of doing the job, and not just because it sometimes seems to consist *only* of thought, liberated from the fetters of accuracy. In fact our science lies at the historical center of this modern university. President Wheeler himself received his Ph.D. in linguistics in 1885 from the University of Heidelberg. He was a graduate student during the revolutionary decade when the scientific field of linguistics was created in Germany, and he wrote his thesis under this revolution's Trotsky, Hermann Osthoff. His thesis established the existence of a phonological process now called 'Wheeler's Law' in every textbook of Greek historical linguistics: 'Finally dactylic oxytones become paroxytone', if you'd like to know how he himself stated it. In 1899 Wheeler came to Berkeley as President to guide this university in its own revolution: to create some kind of American version of the scientific and scholarly curriculum of German universities.

At the beginning of his second year here, Wheeler taught his first Berkeley class, which met for the first time at 9 am on August 15, 1901. This was Linguistics 1, 'Introduction to the Science of Language', designed for graduate students and advanced undergraduates. I taught Wheeler's class this spring, and I can report that while it still meets at 9 am and is still called 'Introduction to Linguistic Science', our science has made some progress: we now have enough material to meet three hours a week rather than two.

Three new courses were added to the Linguistics curriculum in its second year, but Wheeler then and regularly taught the ancestors of today's Linguistics 100 and 131. The academic year 1903-04 saw a watershed of sorts: Pliny Earl Goddard taught an early Linguistics 110, an introduction to phonetics; and the great Berkeley anthropologist Alfred Kroeber taught what is now Linguistics 175, a survey of American Indian languages. In that year, though the creation of an actual Department of Linguistics was five decades in the future, what have since become the traditional strengths of linguistics here at Berkeley were already plainly visible.

You may wonder what ties these linguistics anecdotes to the broader mission of making a great research university out of the former College of California, which in 1866 under President Durant had had a total of twenty-five students and four seniors. Let me introduce a new character to the cast by way of contrast: another foreigner in Germany who also received a Heidelberg linguistics Ph.D. in the same year as Wheeler, and also wrote a thesis under Osthoff. This is the Englishman Joseph Wright, who later became Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford and founded the scientific study of English dialects. Wright was born and raised in a town fewer than ten miles from the village where Emily Brontë had lived, but in quite a different world. For one thing, as shown in his published analysis of his native dialect, he didn't grow up with words

like *clane* and *mane*; his dialect had only two quite isolated examples of the odd pronunciation described in *Wuthering Heights*. More importantly, his parents were poor: his earliest memories were of living in a workhouse; at the age of six he started full-time work and at the age of seven he was working in a mill; and only at fifteen did he learn to read. Joseph Wright could hardly have afforded an English academic education, nor would one have been given to someone like him. But his accent didn't matter in Germany, where higher education was unrestricted and state-subsidized. This is the model of accessible higher education, emphasizing research rather than social class, which lies behind Wheeler's vision for our University of California.

Benjamin Ide Wheeler and Joseph Wright make an interesting minimal pair as fellow-students with very different legacies today. Like Wheeler, Wright tried to transform his university into one with a more intellectual than genteel orientation, but in his own time he failed: Oxford tradition blocked what California allowed. But unlike Wheeler, Wright has left behind him a new and still thriving field of scientific study: English dialectology. By contrast Wheeler has his Law but very little else. Why this difference in legacy?

Apart from the obvious fact that Wheeler was a university president and Wright a mere professor — a fact which ultimately just begs the question — I think the difference in their legacies is explained by their differing assessments of the linguistic revolution of their student years. It is a truism of our field that two great social forces spawned nineteenth-century linguistic study. One of these forces was colonial imperialism, which brought Europeans to the ancient languages of India and Iran; the other was the romantic nationalism which for example led Jacob Grimm to study nonliterary dialects of German. During the first half of the nineteenth century when these forces were prevalent, it was a common view of scholars that languages are in some way manifestations of the essential properties of cultures, and that the analysis of languages can therefore reveal essential truths about cultures.

The linguistic revolution of the 1870s and 1880s — led by Wheeler's and Wright's teachers in Germany — was partly based on the discovery that the older approach didn't work, that languages can be understood as systems which function almost mechanically, independent of the cultures where they arise. This was the beginning of what we now call the *structuralist* revolution, and the crucial difference between Osthoff's two foreign students is that Joseph Wright accepted it fully but Benjamin Ide Wheeler had certain misgivings. So it was that Wright used the new methods of his time to make the discoveries they permitted, and as I have said it is intellectual discovery that can inspire students. Wheeler was no believer like Wright, but since he was also no theoretician or revolutionary he turned elsewhere, and eventually brought to California broader lessons for education at large.

For Wheeler, what was missing from his teachers' doctrines was a view he expressed in 1905, in an article called 'The Whence and Whither of the Modern Science of Language': linguistics is 'a social science dealing with an institution which represents more intimately and exactly than any other the total life of man in the historically determined society of men.' A 1906 commencement address at Stanford offered a similar

view: language is ‘a social instrument’ which ‘takes its form ... not from the prompting to express what is within one, but from ... what will be intelligible to others. It is a means of communication.’ We need not ask if this looks today like good or bad linguistics, and in any case it goes with the values shown in Wheeler’s now absurd advice to the Berkeley freshman class in 1904:

If you cannot play football or tennis, put on the [boxing] gloves ... Sleep eight hours at least out of the twenty-four and keep regular hours for sleep. Keep your body clean. Bathe daily. Washing the parts conventionally exposed to the weather is not a bath.

An emphasis on fitness, cleanliness, and conviviality together was characteristic of one strand of turn-of-the-century American culture, and an important one for Wheeler. In this Progressive Era of American history, he was deeply attached — far too attached, as hindsight makes obvious — to a certain flavor of democratic thinking. Indeed, his 1905 overview of linguistics offers a remarkable and in retrospect unsavory analogy with the forces of imperialism and nationalism lurking behind the nineteenth-century study of language. Like the European colonial powers, says Wheeler, this nation has ‘combined the widening of peaceful interchange and common standards of order with strong insistence upon the right of separate communities in things pertaining separately to them to determine their lives’, and he endorses Jefferson’s infamous claim that ‘no constitution was ever before so well established as ours for extensive empire and self-government’.

Though sociological commitments led Wheeler from his teachers he was of his era, no more and no less, and maybe his brand of democratic imperialism made our ‘Western acropolis of learning’ possible — just as an ancient brand made possible the acropolis of Athens, and a later non-democratic brand made Alexandria possible. For it was Alexander’s city of learning between the Mediterranean and a desert without borders which Wheeler himself invoked in his own inaugural address at Berkeley, saying truly as it happens that ‘Here on the borderland as in Alexandria of old must be garnered the accumulated lore of the East as well as the West’. Let us hope that Berkeley will not be like Alexandria, a great city become small.

I’d like to believe that Benjamin Ide Wheeler’s enduring intellectual act will be an almost completely unnoticed 1901 article on the cause of regular sound change. This article shows me what he might have accomplished in linguistics had his era — and his day job — not restrained him. For what he outlines is a sociological theory of the irregular kind of change we now call *lexical diffusion*, a theory which first exposes and then resolves a conceptual problem still today inadequately treated. For the archaeologist of intellectual history Wheeler’s views go a long way toward explaining among other things why linguistics is among the social sciences at Berkeley, not the humanities. And for an archaeologist of language, as it turns out, Wheeler’s sociolinguistic ideas cast a useful new light on my puzzling differences between the pronunciations in *Wuthering Heights* and the dialect of Joseph Wright. Armed now with Benjamin Ide Wheeler’s ‘calm and steady light’, let’s all get on with our acts and words.