

# HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

The Language of Time, Cause and Evaluation

CAROLINE COFFIN

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# **Historical Discourse**

The Language of Time, Cause and Evaluation

Caroline Coffin

**Continuum**

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 0-8264-8776-9 (HB)

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

For the Coffin family – past and present – who have motivated and influenced me in many positive ways and to whom I am for ever indebted.

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## Preface

This book is about the language or discourse of history and is based on original research that I have conducted over the last ten years. The main aim of the book is to show readers how linguistic analysis can illuminate the way students of history use language to write and, in so doing, think about and conceptualize the past. It focuses on historical discourse that occurs in secondary school, examining in detail the kinds of texts<sup>1</sup> that students are required to read and write as they move from the earlier to later years. Much of the research underpinning the discussion was initially carried out as part of a large-scale literacy research project known as 'Write it Right' (WIR) and was conducted in the 1990s under the auspices of the Disadvantaged Schools Programme in New South Wales, Australia (see Coffin, 1996). The overarching aim of the project, on which I worked as a researcher and literacy/EAL<sup>2</sup> consultant, was to use the tools of functional linguistics to reveal the reading and writing demands of a range of school subjects and related workplace sites. Christie and Martin (1997) and Veel (forthcoming, 2006) provide a summary of some of the most significant findings.

The WIR project provided me with an opportunity to carry out a detailed ethnographic and linguistic investigation of what is involved in learning the discourse of history. Through interviews and a study of comments on student work, for example, I was able to explore what teachers and examiners expect and value in student reading and writing. Most significantly, my participation in classroom lessons across 17 schools over a period of two years (which included team teaching in history literacy interventions) gave me insight into history from the student perspective and gave me a stronger sense of why historical discourse may be challenging for some students, particularly those with low literacy levels. I am therefore very grateful to the teachers and students who participated in that project. Equally, I am indebted to my fellow WIR researchers who worked cooperatively and productively under Jim Martin's leadership. Colleagues included Susan Feez, Sally Humphrey, Rick Iedema, Joan Rothery, Maree Stenglin, Robert Veel and Peter White. In particular, I am grateful to Jim Martin for all his stimulating input, support and encouragement. Finally, I am greatly indebted to Michael Halliday, the 'powerhouse' behind not just the WIR project but all my linguistic research.

Since my time on the WIR project in Australia, I have had the good fortune to work with, and talk to, history teachers in the UK, gaining insight into the way history is taught and learned in that particular context at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In particular, my thanks go to Timothy Brazier (Head of History, Bromley High School, Kent), Kevin Jones (Head of Humanities Faculty, Langley Park School for Girls, Beckenham, Kent), Martin Spafford (Forest Gate Community School, Waltham Forest, London) and Dave Martin (History Advisor and textbook author, Dorchester and research fellow at the Open University).

As a result of my research and collaboration in schools across Australia and the UK, the insights presented in this book are based on a large corpus of over 1000 authentic history texts representing the types of reading and writing that secondary school history students undertake. Readers will find in this book a wide range of examples of history discourse covering a multitude of historical topics. Texts include those written by textbook authors, school-teachers, literacy consultants and students, some of which are effective examples of history writing and some of which are less so. I should emphasize, however, that the quantitative findings referred to at various points in the book and set out in the Appendix are based on a smaller, more manageable corpus of 38 samples of student writing. The texts in this 'mini-corpus' were carefully selected to represent the most commonly recurring types of text within the much larger corpus. In addition, they were all examples of successful student writing (as measured by assessment comments and marks, alongside discussions with history teachers) since my purpose in the quantitative studies was to:

- a) capture key linguistic resources for making historical meaning  
*and*
- b) elucidate the features that address the requirements of secondary history curricula  
*in order to*
- c) form a basis for literacy interventions.

Although my direct involvement in history teaching and learning has been within the Australian and UK contexts, I am interested in developments more broadly and I have benefited from research conducted in many different contexts, including America and Europe. For this reason, where useful, I make reference to curriculum statements from the American as well as Australian and UK contexts. My aim here is to inform readers of any significant differences or developments in the way history is taught and learned around the world and, of most significance to this book, the implications of these for the role of language and literacy in learning. For those readers unfamiliar with one or more of the different school systems, Figure 1 may provide a helpful overview.

Finally, I would like to thank my various critical readers who helped to make enormous improvements to the book. These include Francis Christie

**Table 1** The structure of secondary/high schools in America, Australia and England

	America	Australia	England
Secondary school entry and end points and approximate ages (note, however, that there is often variation depending on the existence of middle schools)	grades 7–12 (ages 12–18) or grades 9–12 (where middle schools cover grades 6–9)	years 7–12 (ages 12–18)	years 7–13 (ages 11–18)
Learning stages and average corresponding student age	N/A	stage 3/4 (ages 11–12) stage 5 (ages 13–15) stage 6 (ages 16–18)	key stage 3 (ages 11–14) key stage 4 (ages 14–16) key stage 5 (ages 16–18)
Terms for learning objectives or goals	standards	outcomes	attainment targets
Significant public exams and approximate age	Varies from state to state	School Certificate (age 16) Higher School Certificate (HSC) (age 18)	GCSE (age 16) AS level (age 17) A2 level (age 18)

(Emeritus Professor of Language and Literacy Education, University of Melbourne, and Honorary Professor of Education, University of Sydney, Australia), Beverly Derewianka (Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Australia), Dr Clare Painter (Senior Lecturer, School of English and Linguistics, University of New South Wales, Australia) and my colleagues at the Open University, UK, particularly Kieran O'Halloran (Lecturer in the Centre for Language and Communication) and Dave Martin (Research Fellow in the Educational Dialogue Research Unit).

I am equally grateful to Carol Johns-MacKenzie and Pam Burns at the Open University for all their help and expertise in obtaining copyright permissions and helping to prepare the manuscript.

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Beechener, C., Griffiths, C. and Jacob, A. (2004), *Modern Times*. Oxford: Heinemann. Topfoto, Edenbridge, Kent TN8 5PF, United Kingdom.

Walsh, B. (2001), *GCSE Modern World History*. London: John Murray.



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## Notes

- 1 In this book the word *text* is used to refer to any stretch of language, spoken or written. For that reason, each piece of language that I use for illustrative purposes (complete or incomplete) is labelled Text 1.1, 1.2 etc. Those texts which were written by students or teachers and which were collected as part of my research on the WIR project and subsequent personal research are not explicitly referenced, unless they are published exam essays. All examples taken from textbooks are fully referenced.
- 2 English as an Additional Language is the term used to describe teachers and consultants working with students for whom English is not their first language. In some contexts the terms TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) or ESL (English as a Second Language) are used.

# 1 Introduction: why history?

## **Why investigate historical discourse?**

In this book, I show how the type of historical discourse that circulates within essays and school textbooks requires students to think about and conceptualize the past in particular ways. I demonstrate that students make different linguistic choices in the way they structure their writing and that successful students do this with increasing sophistication as they move from the earlier to later years of secondary schooling.

You might wonder why investigating historical discourse is of interest and who it might be of interest to. Based on my experience, I would argue that in the first place it is educationally valuable. Learning to read and write history successfully is not a straightforward process for all students. In fact, it is the linguistically demanding nature of history which may account for the fact that less able students are often reluctant to continue their studies beyond the obligatory years (in the UK this is Year 9). It seems to me that a comprehensive description of the discourse of history and how different demands are made of students across the secondary years makes an important contribution to understanding potential difficulties and provides a firm foundation for making improvements to educational practice.

A further reason why an investigation of the discourse of history is of interest lies in its public significance. We only have to consider the 'History Wars' and debates that have recurred with such frequency in the press and on the floors of government and congress over the last decade to realize that issues of history have 'spilled beyond school-house walls and become part of the national agenda' (Stearns *et al.*, 2000, p. 1). This increase in public interest in history and concern over what school history should include has, I think, in part been sparked by issues of identity, both individual and collective. Such issues appear to be exercising the Western world in the early part of the twenty-first century – for many people, it is our history that makes us who we are. The British historian Keith Jenkins puts it this way:

people(s) in the present need antecedents to locate themselves now and legitimate their ongoing and future ways of living ... all classes/groups write their collective autobiographies. History is the way people(s) create, in part, their

identities. It is far more than a slot in the school/academic curriculum. (Jenkins 1991: 18–19)

Perhaps another reason why history has captured people's interest and imagination lies in the increasingly colourful and dramatic media presentations of the past. These range from epic historical Hollywood films making imaginative use of computer graphics in order to depict past times vividly (e.g. *Gladiator*, *Troy*, *Alexander the Great*) to TV docu-dramas on important historical figures (e.g. *Henry the VIII*, *Elizabeth I*) presented by charismatic historians. Then there are the nation-gripping TV debates and polls on great figures from the past (e.g. *Great Britons*, *Great Americans*, *Great Germans*). In contrast, there is also the emphasis on the ordinary individual in historical narratives such as Antony Beevor's retelling of the Battle of Stalingrad which, rather than simply being viewed as military history, has been hailed as a 'compelling tale of human retribution' (Max Hastings, *Evening Standard*).

Finally, there is the trend for history to be seen no longer as the preserve of the professional. Increasingly, we are all being encouraged to be historians and to investigate our personal and national heritage. The growth of interest in family history (encouraged in the UK by programmes such as *Time Team*) is interesting because it ties in with issues of identity mentioned earlier.

If history is seen as a significant social phenomenon, surely its discourse merits some serious reflection and discussion in order to better understand it. The book is therefore of interest to those who view linguistic tools as a means of furthering our understanding of the social and cultural world we inhabit.

### Why study history?

Clearly, beyond the walls of academia and school, history has quite different uses and may be harnessed for a range of purposes (including political, social and entertainment). But, even when viewed as an area of study, its meanings and purposes may vary. Below are three quotes which illustrate some of these differences. Each addresses the issue 'why study history?' In turn we have an academic, teacher and student perspective.

#### *Arthur Marwick, academic*

The simplest answer to the questions 'Why do history?' or 'What is the use of history?' is: 'Try to imagine what it would be like living in a society in which there was absolutely no knowledge of the past.' The mind boggles. It is only through a sense of history that communities establish their identity, orientate themselves and understand their relationship to the past and to other communities and societies. Without history, we, and our communities, would be utterly adrift on an endless and featureless sea of time. (Marwick, 2001, p. 32)

#### *Timothy Brazier, history teacher*

History makes them [students] well-informed citizens, well-rounded adults, it gives them a broader perspective on the country in which they live and how the country

they know has developed . . . It explains the problems of the modern world, how these problems have been caused and possibly gets them to the solutions.

. . . immigration, for example, it's really important they have a take on these issues, that they can understand them rather than be in blind ignorance . . . and have the ability to enter into a debate even in an informal way. (Interview, March, 2005)

*Jessica, secondary school student (aged 13)*

I think people learn about history because they get insight into their country's past and how much people have done for them and why society is like it is today . . . It's very useful for general knowledge. I mean, if you're on 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' and a million-pound question was 'Who ruled – dot, dot, dot', then it'd be very useful.

. . . It's good for seeing different points of view because for every bit of history there are two sides. I mean there's never a one-sided argument in history. Like saying Sadaam Hussein is evil. Obviously he is, but I suppose there could be another side to that story. He could have had a troubled childhood or was brought up badly. It helps you get into other people's shoes, see why they did things like they did. (Interview, May, 2005)

The previous quotes give some insight into the purpose of history as perceived by an academic, teacher and student. This book will expand such insights by using discourse analysis to explore further what history means – both as an area of knowledge and as a means of developing particular ways of thinking about and interpreting the past. In the remainder of the chapter, I introduce some of the aspects of historical discourse which linguistic analysis can illuminate and which I will go on to explore in the following chapters. I hope to show that the discourse of history is a complex but fascinating domain of language use and that understanding how it works is interesting in its own right as well as being of educational use.

### **How do different views of history affect ways of writing about the past?**

Predictably, history, like any discipline (along with school history, like any area of teaching and learning) is not unified, fixed or stable in the way it builds and presents knowledge. It follows that it is not always easy to pin down what we mean by historical discourse. The following texts, for example, are all pieces produced by professional or student historians concerning the First World War. Yet they each have a distinct style and construe the past in quite different ways. This is because each text is underpinned by its own particular view of what history is and/or how it should be taught. As you read through the texts you might find it interesting to speculate on what these may be. For example, is history about producing a gripping narrative or providing a detached analysis?

## Text 1.1

### **August 1914**

SO GORGEOUS WAS THE SPECTACLE on the May morning of 1910 when nine kings rode in the funeral of Edward VII<sup>1</sup> of England that the crowd, waiting in hushed and black-clad awe could not keep back gasps of admiration. In scarlet and blue and green and purple, three by three the sovereigns rode through the palace gates, with plumed helmets, gold braid, crimson sashes and jewelled orders flashing in the sun. After them came five heirs apparent, forty more imperial or royal highnesses, seven queens – four dowager and three regnant – and a scattering of special ambassadors from uncrowned countries. Together they represented seventy nations in the greatest assemblage of royalty and rank ever gathered in one place and, of its kind, the last. The muffled tongues of Big Ben tolled nine by the clock as the cortège left the palace, but on history's clock it was sunset and the sun of the old world was setting in a dying blaze of splendour never to be seen again. (Tuchman, 1962/1991, p. 13)

## Text 1.2<sup>2</sup>

*Dear Mother and Isobel,*

*Since you last heard from me we've come all the way to Verdun. We crossed the channel on a big ship. We didn't have much space at all, because it was so crowded! When we arrived in France we disembarked and started to march East. Now we have reached the trenches and not much seems to be happening apart from a steady but light sniping crossfire between the lines and a couple of gas attacks. the gas attacks were awful. The first we heard was the sound of a stukka divebomber approaching and then the sirens went off. We all fumbled for our masks and everyone was put on stand by to defend against an imminent German assault, but it never came.*

*Today we heard about an offensive that i'll be taking part in. I can't tell you where or when it will be in case this letter is intercepted. It will be the first time that I go 'over the top', i'm looking forward to serving King and country but i'm quite nervous because old Tom who's the only one in our company who's been over the top before says that it's hell on earth. Since I arrived in the trenches we haven't done a lot. It's very muddy and wet the foods awful, there are rumors that they've caught and cooked some of the many rats which scamper around the trenches as I write.*

*I trust you're all fine back in England. Please give my love to everyone in Minster. Please write back as soon as possible Love from William*

## Text 1.3

### **Britain and the outbreak of war in 1914**

Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, built on the agreements made with Japan and France by the Conservatives. In 1905 the German Emperor tried to undermine the Anglo-French Entente by declaring an interest in the future of Morocco. In the ensuing conference on Morocco at Algeiras in 1906, Britain supported France. Germany's clumsy diplomacy strengthened the Anglo-French Entente. In 1907 an agreement was made with Russia to settle differences over Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. This created the Triple Entente, which aligned Britain with France and Russia against the Triple Alliance, but it did not commit Britain to go to war as an ally of France and Russia.

...In 1914 Britain was still not firmly committed to an alliance with France and Russia. As the crisis sparked off by the assassinations at Sarajevo developed, drawing in Russia and France, it still seemed possible that Britain would remain neutral. The German invasion of Belgium tipped the balance. (Scaife, 2004, p. 56)

#### **Text 1.4 Explain why the Allies were able to force the Germans to accept an armistice in November 1918**

*Probably the greatest factor for German defeat was the collapse of the Homefront. The German U-Boat campaign had lost the favour of neutral countries for Germany, the blockade by the British Navy on food imports (Germany imported 1/3 food and raw materials pre-war) and the loss of Britain as a trade market for Germany (had been greatest market pre-war) meant massive German food shortages. By 1918, 18000 people had died due to starvation, and energy intakes had halved. This helped to break the morale of the people as well as the basic fact of material shortages and poverty. Political division between the conservative forces and anti-war parties (KPD and SPD) and naval mutinies also help to create division and weaken Germany.*

*(Board of Studies, 1997, p. 22)*

#### **Text 1.5 Pandora's Box: propoganda and war hysteria in the United States during World War 1**

The United States in 1917 was a heterogeneous, ethnically fragmented society.<sup>9</sup> The demographic shockwaves of the New Immigration that began in the 1890s combined with accelerated industrialization, an increasingly organized capitalist system, and rapid urbanization to foster social dislocation and unrest. The multiple frustrations engendered in this process led to violence within a society that was involved in a 'search for order.'<sup>10</sup> At the root of this violence was the struggle of old-stock Americans against a massive flood of immigrants, which signaled a profound social and cultural change.<sup>11</sup> ... The Progressive crusade thus took on an almost religious quality, although it had lost most of its momentum by the eve of World War I.

<sup>9</sup> See Hans Speier, 'Klassenstruktur und totaler Krieg,' in Uwe Nerlich, ed., *Krieg und Frieden im industriellen Zeitalter*, 2 vols. (Güttersloh, 1966), 1:247.

<sup>10</sup> Stressed by Robert H. Wiebe in his seminal study, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967).

<sup>11</sup> For a good survey of the history of social violence in the period before World War I, see Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America: From 1870 to the Present* (Boston, 1978), 1-101.

(Nagler, 2000, p. 485)

From the sample texts you will have seen that some history writing is akin to story-telling and some more a matter of analysis and logical argument. That is, the first three extracts are clearly narrative in style whereby the writer records a succession of events as they unfolded in time. Moreover, in Text 1.1 (and in 1.2 to some extent), these events are described in a style that resembles fictional writing – there is colour, suspense and atmosphere, and a sense that the writer wants to involve the reader in the 'story'. In Text 1.1, an extract from the historian Barbara Tuchman's study of the plunge into the First World War, the description of the funeral of Edward VII is especially effective in the way it vividly captures the spectacle and grandeur of the

ceremony. It also strikes a dramatic note in its use of literary metaphor – *history's clock, the sun of the old world . . . setting in a dying blaze . . .* Perhaps not surprisingly *August 1914* has been described as 'a masterpiece of the historian's art'.

You might have recognized that Text 1.2, unlike Text 1.1, is not the product of a professional historian but written by a school student (aged 14). This student adopts the persona of a soldier in order to give an inside view of life in the trenches. Like the previous text it offers a recount of events and displays features associated with story telling. For example, it gives us insight into the (fictional) soldier's *feelings* about the war (e.g. *i'm quite nervous*). An emphasis on 'feeling' and imagination is particularly encouraged in approaches to history teaching that value 'empathetic understanding'.<sup>3</sup> One of the aims of setting tasks in empathetic understanding such as that represented in Text 1.2 is to combine the official history that students learn with a consideration of the way individual social subjects may have viewed events and what they may have felt about them. However, students may sometimes interpret empathetic tasks as an opportunity to use their imagination to step into the shoes of figures from the past, rather than a chance to display an *informed* use of imagination firmly rooted in a solid understanding of the subject matter. The result can be discourse more appropriate to the subject area of English than of history.

Another reason why examples of empathetic understanding such as Text 1.2 may not be viewed as historical discourse lies in the fact that they simulate what in history are referred to as 'primary sources'. Primary sources refer to the various types of documentary and other forms of evidence generated at (or close to) the time of a particular historical event: for example, personal letters (as simulated in Text 1.2), news reports, posters, maps, legal documents and cartoons. Primary sources are therefore quite different to the 'secondary sources', the records and interpretations produced by historians with some distance from events.<sup>4</sup> In other words, while historians need to read, analyse and integrate primary sources into their writing, the purposes and linguistic styles used in such sources are quite distinct from those in secondary sources. In this book, therefore, our main focus is on historical discourse produced by historians (including textbook authors) and student historians with the express purpose of recording, explaining or interpreting past events.

In comparison with the first two extracts, Text 1.3 (taken from a student revision guide) is less colourful and emotive but, in common with them, focuses on retelling events. The writers of Texts 1.4 (written by a student) and 1.5 (written by a professional historian), in contrast, focus less on people and events and more on explanation and interpretation. Their approach follows a more 'scientific' model in which propositions about abstract historical processes (e.g. *probably the greatest factor for German defeat . . .*) are supported through evidence. As a result, their less colourful style could be described as academic and 'objective'. The term 'objective' is, however, contentious, and one we will return to and explore further in the next section.