



Words and the First World War: Language, Memory, Vocabulary

by Julian Walker.

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While this book was going to press, its author was still chasing words. He was looking, specifically, at occurrences of “Vipers” in newspaper articles about the war. It turns out that Vipers is likely a corruption of “Wipers,” soldiers’ slang for the town of Ypres, Belgium. The larger point is that, from the very beginning of the First World War, neologisms—slang, technical terms, anglicized French—were entering the English language as part of everyday speech.

Julian Walker, a writer,¹ artist, and Honorary Research Associate at the University of London, looks at the history of words coined or adapted during the war. Such words include the ubiquitous Western Front exclamation “napoo,” meaning “no more, finished,” and the evolving connotations of the German word *kultur*, which came to designate not only the high art of, say, Goethe and Beethoven, but also the perceived barbarity of the German army. Rhetorically, the new words were employed for patriotic effect and also fostered camaraderie among troops, noncombatants, and others.

Words and the First World War contains six thematic chapters, ranging in subjects from a consideration of language and socioeconomic class to the “reticence, phlegm, [and] sangfroid” (283) of postwar silence. Walker draws on many and varied sources: contemporary newspapers, trench journals, phrasebooks, lyrics, cartoons, postcards, and memoirs illustrating the spread of a new specialized war language across various media and audiences. The book is fully indexed and contains an excellent bibliography of primary and secondary sources, including memoirs, military histories, and linguistic studies.

Chapter 1, “Language, Dialect and the Need to Communicate,” concerns assorted informal communications, including postcards and poems published in newspapers. Walker addresses the level of education of English troops and the use of multilingual phrasebooks, which, despite valiant efforts to aid communication between combatants, could hardly cope with the plethora of languages and dialects in use on various fronts. We encounter here, for instance, the clichéd saying about being “in the pink,” as in, “hoping you are both well as this PC [postcard] leaves me in the pink” (247).² The one-hundred-page second chapter, “Language at the Front,” looks at forms of colloquial speech, such as puns, jokes, and curses. Chapter 3, “Us and Them,” focuses on characterizations of different ethnicities and “the enemy” through nicknames and slang. Chapter 4, “The Home Front,” describes in detail how advertisers capitalized on war language, and the implications of the Defense of the Realm Act. Chapter 5, “Owning the Language,” examines vocabulary

1. The author, with Peter Doyle, of *Trench Talk: Words of the First World War* (Stroud, UK: History Pr, 2013), and co-editor, with Christophe Declercq, of *Languages and the First World War: Representation and Memory* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

2. Cf. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975; new ed., NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013) 197–98.

used within military circles. Chapter 6, “Letting Go,” explores the soldiers’ slang dictionaries that began to appear after the war, as well as the language of remembrance and battlefield pilgrimage.

The book is filled with quotations from primary sources, referenced in 2068 (!) endnotes. The following passage typifies Walker’s easy transition among media. Here, he adduces popular songs and cartoon postcards to illustrate terms coined to idealize masculinity and, conversely, demean women.

Married men were popularly presented in music-hall songs and picture postcards as henpecked or disappointed, overloaded with the sudden arrival of babies, and seeing their free-roaming activities curtailed. An underlying misogyny framed women as potentially predatory, to be punished for impersonating WRENS [Women’s Royal Naval Service members], showing “swank” [audacity] and wanting to “get off with officers”; a postcard shows a soldier struggling with four women, with the caption “The Territorial: receiving the attack!” (193)

We see here unsubtle characterizations of men and women in a culture that valued the glorious heroism and independence of the enlisted man in words that, rhetorically, encode wider societal attitudes of the time.

The author does not canvass only spoken or written language. A particularly interesting section discusses the “soundscape of the Front,” where soldiers translated the sounds of artillery fire with onomatopoeic terms like “thunder,” “roar,” and “boom,” noting that it was urgently “essential for people to be able to read noise.... Noise was information, especially the noise of the shell in flight: instantaneous recognition allowed a decision to be taken on the direction to throw oneself, or whether not to bother” (124). Walker aptly cites A.M. Burrage’s explanation³ that “We know by the singing of a shell when it is going to drop near us, when it is politic to duck and when one may treat the sound with contempt.”

Unfortunately in a work so carefully researched and illustrated, the graphic design of the book is problematic. Among other distractions, the exceedingly large Helvetica bold font used for chapter titles and subtitles clashes with the small serif font of the main text. And emphasis on particular language issues is conveyed by heavily boxed borders sometimes spanning several pages.

Those who enjoy this edifying and readable volume should also consult Walker’s blog, “Languages of the First World War,” where he continually updates his research.⁴ Book and blog are indispensable reference tools for anyone researching twentieth-century history and literature, not only the documents of war. One hopes they stimulate further explorations of the wartime coinage of words and phrases and the social and psychological implications of their use.

3. In *War is War* (1930; rpt. Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword, 2010) 78.

4. Languagesandthefirstworldwar.wordpress.com/.