

The Language(s) of Hierarchy in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*¹

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Angus Ross, in the introduction to his edition of Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner of 1719*, notes that

Crusoe sets out to subdue his new environment, to construct in his tropical island a standard of living [...] equivalent to life in his native England. He masters the new environment to produce the 'norm' he is accustomed to (Ross 1985: 17).

Most modern studies of Defoe focus on the study of the representation of ideology in his writings. In that sense, Maximilian E. Novak, Defoe's most recent biographer, identifies the variety of modern approaches to *Robinson Crusoe* as those that highlight the meanings of the text as "economic parable, a spiritual autobiography, an adventure story, and a fable illustrating human development" (Novak 2001: 536). The aim of this paper, however, will be to consider the particular function that Defoe assigns to language when he uses a discourse that is not explicitly political or societal but which nevertheless conveys the narrator's intention of establishing a hierarchical order regarding those with whom he deals, that is, the humans on his desert island, animals, and the reader himself.

I.

At the beginning of Defoe's novel, the first-person narrator Crusoe gives a sample of how he is able to establish narrative as well as hierarchical authority within the contexts of his adventures by saying:

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Angus Ross (University of Sussex) for a critical reading and comment on an earlier version of this essay.

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, tho' not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade lived afterward at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but by the usual corruption of words in England, we are now called, nay, we call our selves and write our name, Crusoe, and so my companions always call'd me (Defoe 1966: 5).

This starting passage is representative of the authority that the speaker assumes throughout the novel. The assertive character of the text demands that the narrator be aware of his position and the force reflexive language may exert on those who listen to,² or in the reading process, read the text and are then actively involved in conveying meaning onto the situations presented. Analysing the narrative structure will show that the narrator, already at the very beginning of his story, is assertive, authoritative, and that he aims to establish an hierarchical order, and that man and animal will fall into that as the story unfolds. In the above passage, the adjective "good" is used three times to illustrate the excellence of Crusoe's family. The pride the narrator takes in supplying the reader with details of his family's wealth is used to enhance their merit and the position in life that his father (but unfortunately not himself) had acquired. It will be this unacknowledged rivalry and implicit competition between his father's achievement and his own so-called "wandering inclination" that will induce Crusoe to set out to establish a more perfect hierarchy, that is, a hierarchy not only based on words but on actions. These actions, as has been pointed out by Erwin Wolff, however, are always conditioned by situations that might question or endanger Crusoe's ideally conceptualised order of hierarchy (Wolff 1983: 112–13). Wolff, for that reason, suggests a terminological substitution of the protagonist's supposed 'actions' by 'reactions' to a number of developments that require Robinson's immediate decision and response. Further, it is the protagonist's awareness that his father's family (of which Crusoe appears to be so proud) is better than his own (consisting of Friday, his dog, cats and Poll, the parrot). Importantly, however, in spite of Crusoe's rebellion against parental (or fatherly) domination, he yet confirms an hierarchical system that is based on male

² The performative or theatrical aspect in Crusoe's narrative is highlighted when, apart from using direct speech, he uses markers such as "said I aloud" to highlight the uniqueness of utterance on an island where there is no other human being.

authority. In this essay, though, I shall concentrate on Robinson's rhetoric of power and authority.

At times, as at the beginning of the narration, there are two competing voices, the one asserting narrative superiority and complete individuality, whilst the other accepts and affirms the societal links, the interrelation, and interdependence between Crusoe and the people he meets. Semantically and lexicologically, the tension between these two competing voices is expressed in the use of the active and the passive voices. Thus, when Crusoe talks about his name, he starts by saying that "we are now called" Crusoe, but then realises that he has to change the grammatical mode in order to assert his narrative authority; he continues by saying that "we call our selves and write our name." This then implies that he dominates his own existence by self-consciously using his name in speech and, what is more important, in writing, using the active voice (see Jager 1985: 360–82). Interestingly, his mother is not mentioned as the person who gave birth to her son but who conferred the identity of the name "Robinson" onto him. He cannot impose his sense of hierarchy and domination on his birth, though, for he was born and, in a predestined or Calvinian sense, could not help being born to the parents whose authority he would deny later on. As early as the description of his origin, it becomes evident that Crusoe's identity is not family-centred but that his notion of individuality is one of self-sufficient independence. Despite Crusoe's rejection of the traditional family structure and its insistence on a son's obedience to his father's commands, he notes that, although he did not accept his father's advice of not going to sea, he accepted 40 *l.* from his family to support his first adventure: "This 40 *l.* I had mustered together by the assistance of some of my relatives whom I corresponded with, and who, I believe, got my father, or at least my mother, to contribute as much as that to my first adventure" (Defoe 1966: 39). In a sense, this support can also be understood as their implicating themselves in his misfortunes, adopting partial responsibility for his "first adventure."

There is no indication that Crusoe rejects or despises slavery; rather, the immediate realism of his experience as a slave (without authority) should have shown him that inequality between the ruling authority and those meant and made to serve unquestioningly (without any individuality) was unacceptable. By opting for the easy option of an absolutist ruler that defines the hierarchical structure on his island, however, he demonstrates his conservatism, as well as his resistance to the Enlightenment rights of man entailing equality among all men, as well as

the abolition of slavery. Ross notes: "This confident, paternalistic, attitude would have been Crusoe's natural one (and was probably Defoe's) [...] Crusoe is of his own day, and though intellectually puzzled, acts towards the Indians in the all-conquering way of the successful, mercantile civilization which Defoe so admired" (Ross 1985: 20–21). In that sense, when Crusoe and Xury have escaped together and are forced to find food, Xury kills a hare and presents it to Crusoe. Crusoe, in the narrative, remarks that "we filled our jars and feasted on the hare we had killed" (Defoe 1966: 48). The "we" seems to imply that Crusoe has had a part in killing the hare – an assumption that reveals how Crusoe takes credit for actions for which he has not been responsible. Also, the "we" might not only be understood as Crusoe and Xury but as Crusoe's use of the *pluralis maiestatis*, indicating that he is responsible for all action and that it is he who takes decisions to survive without any guiding authority.

He skilfully manipulates linguistic authority by calling the captain that saved him so selflessly "my good steward" (Defoe 1966: 57). Before that, however, Crusoe informs the reader that "he would take nothing from me, but that all I had should be delivered safe to me when I came to the Brasils" (Defoe 1966: 54). The captain has saved his life, but nevertheless, as soon as Crusoe has established his authority in Brazil as a tobacco-planter, the captain, in Crusoe's view, turns into "my good steward," thereby (if not in reality, but at least in Crusoe's view) becoming a dependent of Crusoe, a dependent that may be defined as an "official who controls the domestic affairs of a household, supervising the service of his master's table, directing the domestics, and regulating household expenditure" (OED, s.v. steward). In a similar way, Crusoe demonstrates a surprising ability to understand the captain's foreign language, for, when first coming on board of the captain's ship "they [the crew] asked me what I was, in Portuguese, and in Spanish, and in French, but I understood none of them" (Defoe 1966: 53). As soon as he arrives in Brazil, however, he seems to be perfectly proficient in the captain's language so that he can give him detailed directions for the recovery of his fortune in London. His mastery of language, in that sense, seems to reflect the general authority that he will assume on his desert island.³

³ How contradictory Crusoe's account of his mastery of foreign languages is indicated by the fact that "I had no body to converse with but now and then this neighbour" (Defoe 1966: 56) who, although a "Portugueze of Lisbon" (Defoe 1966: 55) was born of English parents.

When Crusoe is stranded on the island, he attempts to secure as many goods from the wreck of the ship as possible. After he has collected and accumulated a number of items that could somehow be of use to him he says: "I had the biggest mazzagin of all kinds now that ever were laid up, I believe, for a man, but I was not satisfy'd still" (Defoe 1966: 42). Crusoe is an 'unreliable' narrator in that he provides catalogues of items he was able to secure from the ship which, however, lack the specificity he tries to establish through circumstantial detail. Enumerations like the following indicate that he wants his stock keeping to be convincing although it is far from being accurate as indicated by his frequent use of the imprecise "or": "We had several spare yards, and two *or* three large spars of wood, and a spare top-mast *or* two in the ship" (italics mine) (Defoe 1966: 68). In the same unspecific manner, he notes later on: "I ty'd four of them fast together at both ends as well as I could, in the form of a raft, and laying two or three short pieces of plank upon them crossways" (Defoe 1966: 68). The narrative authority of Crusoe is counteracted by his use of "or." However, for his 'rule' on the island, it is important that he possesses these items nominally whilst the exact quantity of the items he names is less important than the establishing of his authority.

It is evident that Crusoe seeks security. This security however is not one-dimensional. He hankers after social, political as well as linguistic security. His self-awareness is strongly motivated by the use of superlatives, but even the superlative once it has been achieved, has to be superseded again. Narratologically, the repeated use of anti-climax would counteract his successful establishing of an hierarchical order on his island. For that reason, failure or shortcomings are never explicitly admitted except for those instances where his eloquence is overcome by the hardness of his situation. In these situations, however, references to the Bible (by means of citation or prayers to God) help him to maintain his position of supposed authority in that he is then able to display intellectual superiority and religious faith. The following passage is expressive of the ambivalence between his unquestionable self-confidence and his sense of not being willing to admit disappointment:

I was gotten home to my little tent, where I lay with all my wealth about me very secure. It blew very hard all that night, and in the morning when I look'd out, behold, no more ship was to be seen; I was a little surpriz'd, but recover'd my self with this satisfactory reflection, viz. that I had lost no time, nor abated no diligence to get every thing out of her that could be useful to me, and that indeed there was little left in her that I was able to bring in if I had had more time (Defoe 1966: 44).

This "satisfactory reflection," however, is utilitarian in that he only thinks of the accumulation of objects he might use at some point. It is certain that he would have discarded the ship as soon as he had completely exploited her. According to Mark Kinkead-Weekes, Robinson "keeps our attention fixed on the man, so that although the sea threatens to overwhelm him, we never doubt that he is in control. The verbs accumulate to establish our response; for a while they belong to the sea, but the loose syntax turns, the object becomes the subject and the passive the active" (Kinkead-Weekes 1986: 197). Kinkead-Weekes goes on to say that "Crusoe is Everyman, isolated on his desert island in order to reveal Man as he 'really' is" (Kinkead-Weekes 1986: 198).

2.

After he has spent almost two weeks on the island, he realises that he should "lose [his] [...] reckoning of time for want of books and pen and ink." He therefore resolves on cutting calendar marks into the surface of a piece of wood and establishes a temporal framework according to which he can organise his life. Importantly, however, he imposes his own authority on the reckoning of time, and is not forced through necessity to measure the time that elapses while he is on the island. Narratologically, though, he controls time in that the *erzählte Zeit* may be manipulated, condensed or prolonged, as Crusoe, the writer of the journal, thinks fit. Crusoe creates a 'parallel' world with a new temporal start, a new beginning, a new genesis. The circumstantial detail mentioned earlier is here used to establish his authority over the readers and to destroy possible doubts or questions that might arise from incoherences in the narrative. On the other hand, the chains of details are overpowering and, during the reading process (when the reader is following the story), do not leave the reader the opportunity of pausing and checking critically the probability of the narration. Crusoe's insistence on keeping a calendar, as well as the narrator's enumeration of detail highlight Defoe's technique of authenticating the actions of the protagonist and of making them more probable to the enlightened early eighteenth-century reader. One passage representing a catalogue of circumstantial detail is the following:

[...] we are to observe, that among the many things which I brought out of the ship in the several voyages, which, as above mention'd, I made to it, I got several things of less value, but not at all less useful to me, which I omitted setting down before, as in particular, pens, ink, and paper, several parcels in the captain's, mate's, gunner's,

and carpenter's keeping, three or four compasses, some mathematical instruments, dials, perspectives, charts, and books of navigation, all of which I huddled together, whether I might want them or no (Defoe 1966: 49).

Criticised by some scholars as Defoe's inability to be coherent, these long catalogues of detail are meant to constitute the capital on which a functioning society depends. According to John Richetti, Robinson is "a representative of capitalist ideology, driven to acquire, control and dominate" (Richetti 1975: 23). Richetti identifies as Crusoe's motivation the "internalised ideology of capitalism" (Richetti 1975: 25). Crusoe realises, however, that his attempt at exerting power by uttering his domination through speech is ineffectual if he does not receive any response to his demonstration of linguistic power and authority. This point is evident when he speaks about his dog, for "I wanted nothing that he could fetch me, nor any company that he could make up to me, I only wanted to have him talk to me, but that he would not do" (Defoe 1966: 49). Up to this point, Crusoe has managed to create a linguistic hierarchy in that he establishes and emphasises his narrative and individualist superiority in relation with the reader. Although he apparently longs for a human being that can communicate with him, it would be a type of communication that does not question but confirms his authority at all times. The parrot, Poll, in that respect, has learnt phrases which it reproduces without changing their meaning or challenging Crusoe.

Crusoe has traditionally been called the classical 'homo oeconomicus' as well as the colonizer per se. Speaking of his property, he says: "You are to understand that now I had, as I may call it, two plantations in the island; one my little fortification or tent, with the wall about it under the rock, with the cave behind me, which by this time I had enlarg'd into several apartments or caves, one within another" (Defoe 1966: 111). He establishes a linguistic code by which he creates synonyms that in reality and common usage are two different things. For Crusoe, thus, a "fortification" and a "tent" are identical. He introduces *termini technici* that he defines by means of synonyms, too: in that respect, he mentions "my little pale or surrounded habitation" (Defoe 1966: 82), "my pale or fortification" (Defoe 1966: 85) as well as "a canoe or periagua" (Defoe 1966: 137). Also, he appropriates the primitive living conditions on the island to what he perceives as civilised discourse. So, the tree in which he seeks shelter for the first night on the island, is defined in terms of civilised western culture. The tree is not only termed "lodging" or "apartment"

(Defoe 1966: 67) but, through Crusoe's act of naming, is turned into a "lodging" that provides security to the stranded protagonist.

His attempt at colonising and developing the island as well as his taking possession of the environment establish, on the one hand, his setting up an order of authority and possession whilst they, on the other, counteract what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called the *état naturel*.⁴ Crusoe further points out that "I spared no pains to bring to pass whatever appear'd necessary for my comfortable support" (Defoe 1966: 112). Instead of adhering to the ideal of a life in accordance with the bounty of nature as Rousseau did, Crusoe interferes with the order of nature in that he considers himself the master of the island who has been instated by God. This supposedly successful establishing and confirming of (a self-created) hierarchy is completed when Friday arrives on the island.

Repeatedly, Crusoe blurs the distinction between what he actually does and what he says he does. While narrative and linguistic authority enables him to counteract the strict rules of realism, his colony on the island can only start to work after Friday arrives and is integrated in the rhetorical hierarchy that Crusoe developed in the absence of anybody else. Only then is Crusoe's rhetorical hierarchy turned into a 'real' hierarchy. Novak, in his *Daniel Defoe: Master of Fictions*, compares Crusoe to the prodigal son. Crusoe's domination of his environment, however, culminates in a subversion of the story of the prodigal son. On his return to Brazil, the "news of his newfound wealth leaves him overjoyed, and it might be said that the story of the prodigal son's loving reception by his father is replaced by an accumulation of money, that family relationships are replaced by the power relationship of capitalist accumulation" (Novak 2001: 541).

In moments of despair, Crusoe, however, does not affirm the hierarchy he is establishing throughout the novel, but is lamenting his isolation and rhetorically questions his position in the *catena aurea*, another hierarchy of which he is an inherent part. More generally, however, the protagonist negates his position in the *catena aurea* and propagates an extreme version of individualism, an individualism, however, that only and exclusively applies to himself. It is this type of

⁴ See Novak 1963: 22ff. According to Novak (23), some "writers believed that the isolated natural man might, through the use of his reason, achieve the same moral and intellectual condition as the human being raised in society. [...] The majority of writers, however, argued that man was a social animal, that the bestial life of the solitary savage was insecure, and that so far from being happy, the isolated natural man lived in constant fear of death."

individualism which Raymond Williams calls “a new stress on a man’s personal existence over and above his place or function in a rigid hierarchical society” (Williams 1976: 135). This “uneven state of human life,” however, is interpreted ambivalently throughout the text, for at one moment the protagonist is proud of establishing his power whilst at another he can hardly bear to be alone and reproaches God for punishing him for his restlessness and the ‘wandering inclination.’⁵ It is only after several years that the authority he had assumed is threatened by his discovery that cannibals celebrate their slaughtering feasts on the beach of ‘his’ island.

I came to reflect seriously upon the real danger I had been in for so many years, in this very island; and how I had walk’d about in the greatest security, and with all possible tranquillity; even when perhaps nothing but a brow of a hill, a great tree, or the casual approach of night had been between me and the worst kind of destruction, vis. that of falling into the hands of cannibals and savages, who would have seiz’d me with the same view as I did of a goat or a turtle, and have thought it no more a crime to kill and devour me, than I did of a pigeon or a curliou. I would unjustly slander my self, if I should say I was not sincerely thankful to my great Preserver, to whose singular protection I acknowledg’d, with great humility, that all these unknown deliverances were due, and without which, I must inevitably have fallen into their merciless hands (Defoe 1966: 143).

Crusoe realises that his notion of “security” had been an illusion only. On the other hand, he relativises the cannibalistic life-style he witnesses by comparing it to his own carnivorous eating habits of eating a pigeon, for instance. Until then, it was Crusoe who had been responsible for maintaining “greatest security,” and it is only in moments when the protagonist is confronted with extreme danger and fear that he turns to God and “with great humility” acknowledges his piety.⁶ Thus, there is one element in the *catena aurea* that frightens him, that is, his dependence on being delivered by God. Read in terms of executive sovereignty, this would mean that the presence of savages contradicts his absolute authority and “thus [...] all the harmony he has enjoyed.”

⁵ Sill 1983: 160 notes that Crusoe’s “mastery of his natural environment is an outward sign of his mastery of himself, which he acquires through the discovery of human limitations. This discovery is often painful, as he attests in his account of the labor wasted on the boat that he is unable to bring to the water.”

⁶ See Richetti 1975: 24: “[...] to get away from the destructive effects of isolation, he realizes on the island that he is part of providential design. He experiences and accepts divine control but that control can only be realized in the free context he has himself created.”

By injecting the suggestion of another's interest in the island, it makes Crusoe's dominance questionable, and necessitates all the cultural formations that follow from a division of interests, including surplus accumulation, military fortifications, and private property (Sill 1983: 162)

3.

The climax of the novel is reached when Crusoe encounters Friday. After he has delivered him from the savages, he sets out to describe his physical appearance, a description whose detailed character might be read as being the characteristic descriptive detail so necessary for the genre of the novel, but it may at the same time remind the reader of a warehouse catalogue in which property is advertised.

His hair was long and black, not curl'd like wool; his forehead very high and large, and a great vivacity and sparkling sharpness in his eyes. The colour of his skin was not quite black, but very tawny; and yet not of an ugly yellow nauseous tawny, as the Brasilians [...] but of a bright kind of a dun olive colour, that had in it something very agreeable, tho' not very easy to describe. His face was round and plump; his nose small, not flat like the negroes, a very good mouth, thin lips, and his fine teeth well set, and white as ivory (Defoe 1966: 150).

The narrator describes Friday in terms that single him out and distinguish him from the slaves Crusoe had met in Brazil. However, the physical appearance of Friday as well as its description are meant to convey the great material value of Friday who will have to take his place in the two-man society of his master. To show Crusoe that he has absolute power over Friday, he

lays his head flat upon the ground, close to my foot, and sets my other foot upon his head. [...] and after this, made all the signs to me of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable, to let me know how he would serve me as long as he liv'd. I understood him in many things, and let him know that I was very well pleas'd with him; in a little time I began to speak with him, and teach him to speak to me; and first, I made him know his name should be Friday [...]. I likewise taught him to say Master, and then let him know, that was to be my name; I likewise taught him to say yes and no, and to know the meaning of them (Defoe 1966: 150).

This primitive (yet universally understandable) gesture symbolises that Crusoe's absolute power is acknowledged and that he is recognised as the

supreme being on the island.⁷ The tone of the description, however, is expressive of the social and linguistic superiority that the protagonist possesses, for phrases such as “to let s.b. know” and “I understood him in many things” illustrate that the narrator is the central person and that the whole life on the island revolves around him. It is not clear from the above quotation whether Friday did indeed grasp the meaning and the complex ideological implications of “mastership.” Crusoe, to make matters more difficult, makes the distinction between the “name” of “master” and the function and power mastership entails.

It has never been questioned why Defoe chose the name of ‘Friday’ for Robinson’s companion. The reason Robinson himself provides is not reflective of the general subtlety of the novel. An etymological reading of ‘Friday’ may be suggested, for the word derives from OE and reflects the heathen contexts we might associate with Anglo-Saxon mythology and superstition. In that respect, Friday could mean the power that is inherent in the wild nature of the savage. This meaning, however, is counteracted by the context of the calendar which attempts to introduce order to the different days of the week. So, an order is imposed on a set number of days and, metaphorically, the wild and heathen character of Friday, the savage, is tamed and embedded into a civilised context. Crusoe’s ambivalent notions of religion and faith have already been mentioned. In the context of the protagonist’s conferring a name to Friday, we might consider the act of naming as an attempt to create an independent religion, or in other words, a fusion of the heathen culture, the primitive environment Crusoe encounters on the island and the Christian, and more strongly Puritan, faith. However, apart from establishing superiority only, Crusoe when “he comes to instruct Friday in the faith, [...] instructs himself, and this is the one place where Friday is admitted, as noble savage, to human equality” (Kinkead-Weekes 1986: 200). While Friday possesses those virtues that Novak has characterised as essential for the “state of nature,” that is, “gratitude, honesty, and courage,” and therefore is the “perfect natural man,” Crusoe makes him “abandon[...] the state of nature for the advantages of civilization” (Novak 1963: 37) and thereby corrupts him. In addition to linguistic hierarchy and authority that are being established constantly throughout the novel, a new religious authority as opposed to

⁷ On a system of absolute executive power, see Schonhorn 1977: 22, who notes that Defoe presents the view that *Robinson Crusoe* is essentially “an examination of, even the necessity for, a unitary executive sovereignty.”

Crusoe's original faith may be discovered. According to Novak, we thus "have to conclude that Crusoe's rebellion, his overthrowing the authority of his father, has its reward within the work, and that its creation has [...] psychological rewards" (Novak 2001: 542).

Neither Novak nor any other recent critic of *Robinson Crusoe*, however, has realised the pertinent importance of the protagonist's language of authority. Not only does language in Defoe's novel inform the reader of what Crusoe actually does to establish an hierarchical order on the island, but it is also revealed that Crusoe makes plans he does not put into effect. Instead, he uses these ideas to complement the practical realization of his hierarchy. A prominent example of this divergence is expressed when he develops a language code by which "fortification" and "tent" mean the same. The eighteenth-century reader would have been aware of the difference, but Friday, a native not acquainted with the English language, will learn a linguistic code from Crusoe, and Crusoe will not only serve as master but also as sole authority in matters of language. As has been shown in the reading of Friday's name, Defoe seems to have been conscious of the etymological undertones and the use he could make of them to express the pagan and uncivilized character of his 'subject'. Further, the author's use of grammatical modes such as the active and the passive voices, enables Crusoe to centre on his own existence and individualism, whilst a skilful use of gender patterns (grammatical and contextual) provides strong support for Crusoe's male-dominated system of authority on the island.

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