

Language and Power in the Modern World

An abstract, teal-toned image with white geometric shapes, possibly representing a modern architectural structure or a complex network, serving as a background for the authors' names.

Mary Talbot
Karen Atkinson
David Atkinson

LANGUAGE AND POWER IN THE MODERN WORLD

Mary Talbot, Karen Atkinson, and
David Atkinson

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about language and power. But what is power? How should we go about studying it in relation to language? And for that matter, why? These are not easy questions to answer. Our aim in writing this book is to get you thinking about them, and to get you thinking about the way power ‘works’ in the linguistic practices that people engage in. Power in language is certainly not just about what we might initially think of as ‘powerful language’ (drowning out the voices of others by shouting a lot, for instance). Consider the claim that:

power is more than an authoritative voice in decision making; its strongest form may well be the ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world. Such visions are inscribed in language and enacted in interaction. (Gal 1991: 197)

Taking this further, add the view that:

Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed. (Weedon 1997: 21)

From this perspective, language is where forms of social organisation are produced, and disputed, and at the same time where people’s cultural identities come into existence. In effect, language constitutes realities and identities.

Our view in this book is that ‘power’ is constituted in many different locations, in many different ways. Language is crucial in articulating, maintaining and subverting existing relations of power in society, both on global,

national and institutional levels and on the local level of interpersonal communication. Power, then, has multiple locations and valences. This perspective on power views it as productive, as deployed in **discourse** (all terms in boldface can be found in the glossary). It is basically a critical discourse analysis view, an approach to the study of language and power which is strongly influenced by the ideas of Michel Foucault (see, for example, Fairclough 1992). According to Foucault, positions of institutional power are bestowed on some to the exclusion of others. Power is deployed by those who are in a position to define and categorise, to include and exclude.

Many cultural analysts, including linguists, draw on Foucault's conceptualisation of power. Consider, for example, the following:

Power, in Foucault's view ... is a force and an effect which exists and circulates in a web of social interaction:

Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application. (Foucault 1980: 98)

The point that power is not monolithic – that is, it does not emanate from one fundamental source such as the barrel of a gun or the ownership of the means of production – is important to Foucault with his metaphor of the 'net-like organisation', but it has also been echoed by many other contemporary theorists (large numbers of feminists, for example). More and more, such theorists are insisting that there are many simultaneous dimensions of power – for instance class, 'race', 'ethnicity', gender, generation, sexuality, subculture – and that theories which privilege one dimension (most commonly, class) as the 'ultimate' source of power are inadequate to capture the complexities of social relations. (Cameron et al. 1992: 19)

Central issues in Foucault's theorisation of power are that it is not monolithic and it is not one-way. Resistance, contestation and struggle are accompaniments of power.

There are two other particularly useful theorisations of language and power that are highly relevant to what we cover in this book. These relate to the concepts of **hegemony** and **symbolic capital**. Hegemony implies a hidden or covert operation of power. It refers to control through consent; or, more accurately, to the attempt by dominant groups in society to win the consent of subordinate groups and to achieve a 'compromise equilibrium' in ruling over them (Gramsci 1971). This winning of consent is achieved when arrangements that suit a dominant group's own interests have come to be perceived as simply 'common sense', such as, for example, whose language we should speak and write. The **dominant dialects** of British and American English (so-called

Standard British and Standard American English) are virtually the only varieties of English to be seen in print or, indeed, to be heard in broadcasting. The hegemonic status of these two national 'standard' varieties is overwhelming. Their use is seen as simply 'right and proper'; the idea of promulgating other varieties is largely perceived as scandalous. This is not to deny contestation and struggle as other varieties vie for some sort of acceptance, as will be seen in Chapter 4 on 'Language and Youth' in this volume. Consider, for example, Robin Tolmach Lakoff on the controversy surrounding the Oakland Schools Board (OSB)'s decision on the teaching of *ebonics* in the United States:

As I bent over to pick up my San Francisco Chronicle the next morning my eye was caught by a typically florid Chron top-of-page-one headline:

OAKLAND SCHOOLS OK BLACK ENGLISH

Ebonics to be regarded as different, not wrong

Worthy of note is the presupposition in the subhead: the normal way Ebonics is 'regarded' is as 'wrong': what's newsworthy is the OSB's proclamation that it is only 'different'. (From? We don't even need to mention the standard explicitly.) (Lakoff 2001: 228)

The concept of symbolic capital presents another way of accounting for the dominance of standard American English. Using the analogy of economic capital, Pierre Bourdieu (1991) argues that different ways of speaking carry different 'capital' in the 'symbolic marketplace'. Mainstream American English pronunciation is a symbolic asset in the US news media, whereas the local Brooklyn variety is most emphatically not. Similarly, in the British context, received pronunciation (RP) is the voice of authority. RP speakers are commonly perceived as being intelligent, having authority. Other accents do not carry the same capital, as a barrister with a strong Liverpool accent was made aware on being measured for a formal suit in his hometown. He reports being asked by the tailor: 'You work in the clubs, do you?' To spell this out, the tailor who was measuring the barrister for a suit assumed he was kitting himself out for a job as a nightclub bouncer. In other words, she assumed his occupation and social standing were considerably less prestigious than a barrister's, simply because of the way he was pronouncing standard British English (LINC 1991). Of course, in Britain, RP also connotes negative attributes; being 'snobby' and most definitely 'uncool'. An RP accent would not go down well in TV programming aimed at contemporary youngsters, whereas the Liverpudlian barrister might find himself in possession of an asset in that context, in Bourdieu's symbolic sense. Chapter 5, on 'Multilingualism, Identity and Ethnicity', deals in detail with issues around the symbolic capital of English, exploring, in particular, the status of English in Hong Kong and the 'English Only' Campaign in the USA.

LANGUAGE AND POWER IN THE MODERN WORLD: OUR APPROACH

This book is about both theory and practice. It is about theory in the sense that it describes systematic ways of understanding language. Its basic standpoint in this sense is that, in studying language in the modern world, we need to recognise that language use is simply not characterised by free, equal parties engaging in discourse on some sort of level playing field. In order to understand how language works and what it does, it is necessary to go beyond texts themselves and also to take into account aspects of the social conditions in which language is produced and interpreted. The book is practical in the sense that it is also about applying theory to the analysis and understanding of particular instances of spoken and written language, particularly through the activities which each chapter provides for you to work through. There are, of course, many overlapping themes across chapters; media issues are taken up in the chapter on youth, for instance, and gender arises in the chapters on the media and on multilingualism. These provide productive links across the five areas covered in the book.

Much of the book is about revealing and challenging aspects of the intense socialisation to which we are all subjected, not only through language but also about language. In this sense, its concerns, far from being obscure or removed from daily life, could not be more central to aspects of power which are vital to all of us. It comprises five main chapters, each with several readings and activities mediated by a substantial introduction. The readings in each of them have not been chosen to promote one approach over another, rather to illustrate a variety of approaches to the study of language and power.

Directions taken in the past few decades which share a focus on power are often grouped under the terms critical linguistics, critical sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis or, more generally, simply critical language study. The word 'critical' is being used in a specific sense here, indicating a focus on power as it relates to issues of gender, 'ethnicity', class and so on and making its hidden workings visible. These orientations form the theoretical backbone of this book and, although they are quite diverse, they have certain features and starting points in common.

For instance, one basic assumption that all the above critical perspectives share is that language is part of society, and not in any way distinct and separate from it. The expressions 'language and society' and 'language in society' can be misleading (these are common titles for introductory courses and textbooks on sociolinguistics). Language is not a phenomenon independent or disconnected from society; rather it is itself a 'social institution, deeply implicated in culture, in society, in political relations at every level' (Cameron 1997a: 66).

*Language plays a vital role in constituting what
people perceive as reality*

Another common perspective is that language plays a vital role in constituting people's realities. This insight has evident implications for the power and

influence of media language. The media are particularly important in the modern world for a variety of reasons. For instance, for many people they have become increasingly accessible and often dominant in daily life, partly or wholly substituting more traditional sources of information such as the church, trade unions, and so on. They make powerful contributions to our understanding of what is public and what is private in contemporary life and they tend to naturalise these distinctions so that they appear as ‘common sense’ (see Chapter 1, on ‘Language and the Media’).

That language is constitutive has important implications elsewhere – for instance, for issues of language and gender. It has been argued that socio-linguistics must go beyond describing patterns of use and how they correlate with social variables (such as gender) to accounting for how these correlations come about and are constantly negotiated and contested (Cameron 1995, 1997a). Chapter 3 (‘Language and Gender’) of this book discusses how this recognition has led to a rejection of simple contrasts between supposedly competitive ‘male’ and cooperative ‘female’ interactional styles in favour of a more nuanced analysis which recognises the crucial roles of societal and institutional power.

*Power is exercised through language in ways
which are not always obvious*

Much power in the modern world is unseen in the sense that it becomes ‘naturalised’. It is exercised not through direct coercion but through the creation of ‘common sense’, by a process of hegemony. It isn’t necessary to subscribe to a ‘conspiracy theory’, for instance, in order to accept that media reporting ideologically frames stories to favour and represent the views of dominant groups. Any text, any use of language, represents the world in particular ways, whether these serve the vested interests of a multinational corporation, the perspectives of an independent publication, or an individual journalist. An example is the way processes of globalisation are presented as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’ by, for example, the US network, CNN. Moreover, the North American and European-dominated media industries impose a particular view. As Fairclough observes:

Despite their global pretensions, the version of the world which appears on the screen is an extremely parochial one – one indication of this is that ‘global news’ on for instance CNN consists largely of US news, including items which would seem to be of interest mainly within the USA (e.g. scandals affecting US politicians). The parochialism of these channels includes their language. What people see world-wide is predominantly ‘North Atlantic’ discourses of advertising, news, politics, sport, fashion, and so on. These channels contribute to a globalization of a ‘North Atlantic’ (and centrally US) way of life and way of language. (Fairclough 2001: 205)

Language moulds people's identities, but this process can be and is resisted

In our daily lives we are constrained by 'subject positions' (e.g., Fairclough 2001) – our social roles are created for us through language. However, this does not mean that we are automatons or passive dupes. Imposed identities and statuses can be and constantly are being discursively negotiated, contested and resisted. This dynamic view is evident in every chapter. For example, Chapter 2 on 'Language and Organisations' describes how this process of contestation takes place in institutional contexts, such as that of welfare claimants in the USA. Both here, and in Chapter 4 on 'Language and Youth', 'resistance' is explored as an active process. It is articulated in many different ways and is every bit as complex as 'power'.

Resistance is not simply a matter of articulating oppositional discourses

We need to bear in mind that resistance does not always take the form of open challenge and opposition, but can be enacted more subtly through, for example, strategic practices of accommodation in talk. Chapter 4 discusses how this operates in an educational setting. In order to progress academically, African American Vernacular-speaking students opt to 'rent' the language of institutional power (Standard American English) in class but return to speaking their own variety outside this context. Their critical language awareness in merely 'leasing' SAE (as opposed to 'owning' it) enables them to distance themselves socially from mainstream American English and, at the same time, articulate their commitment to their own community language and culture. We also need to be aware of forms of counter-resistance. For many men, for example, recent transformations in the social relations between men and women pose a huge challenge. Chapter Three concentrates on patterns of gendered behaviour in modern societies, where the hegemonic status of traditional roles is no longer secure. As Cameron (1998) points out in one of the extracts provided as a reading, it is in such societies that claims about 'male-female miscommunication' are articulated. A miscommunication model of date rape, for instance, can be heard in courtrooms; it provides men accused of rape with a resource to challenge the accusation: an assertion that the 'signals ... between men and women are not being read correctly' (Ehrlich 2001: 121). Since rape trials in criminal courts are contestations of sexist practices, this resource is used as a form of counter-resistance to social changes effected by feminism. Another focus in Chapter Three is on the predicament of violently abusive men, whose partial recognition of their need to change leads to a rhetoric of denial and justification.

Power is the central dynamic of language change

Language changes, like other forms of social change, take place in the context of conflicting interests. As far as multilingualism is concerned, for example, the principal dynamic which determines the status of any given language is that of

power. This view contrasts with early work in the sociology of language, which tended to see bilingual or multilingual communities as characterised by a neat, consensual and stable distribution of two or more languages according to norms of ‘appropriacy’. However, more recent work shows that multilingualism and **diglossia** are much more fluid phenomena in relation to which groups and individuals act out their conflicting interests against the historical backdrop of the circumstances in which they find themselves. Susan Gal, for instance, wrote of her study of a Hungarian-speaking minority in Austria:

A few weeks of observation in Oberwart made it clear that no single rule would account for all choices between languages. Statements to the effect that one language is used at home and another in school-work-street, would be too simplistic. (1979: 99)

A new orientation developed which had its origins partly in what is sometimes described as the ‘sociolinguistics of the periphery’, a reference to contexts in which the researchers themselves were committed to resisting the domination of a ‘minority’ language by a more powerful one. Some of the most prominent of these researchers in the 1970s were Catalan sociolinguists in Franco’s Spain committed to saving the Catalan language from disappearance (see, for example, Martin-Jones 1989). Chapter 5 on ‘Multilingualism, Ethnicity and Identity’ illustrates the issues involved through discussion of aspects of language planning and policy and attitudes towards language in a number of contexts, including Hong Kong, the USA and, indeed, the case of Catalan in Spain.

ACTIVITY

At the time of writing, a controversy is building in the UK concerning the possible introduction of ‘identity cards’ and this is attracting some international attention, not least because of the UK government’s attitude to linguistic aspects of the controversy.

A member of a civil rights group, writing in *The Guardian* of 1 July 2002 said:

There can be little doubt that the government is seduced by the idea of ‘entitlement’ cards as spin doctors now wish to call them. So worried are they about the possible scale of parliamentary opposition, adverse media coverage and public backlash, that the term ‘ID card’ has been removed from the New Labour lexicon.

The main Spanish daily, *El País*, was critical and blunt about such language engineering by New Labour (2 July 2002):

Following this government’s golden rule of playing with words in order to confuse the public, they use the term ‘entitlement card’ rather than ‘national identity card’. (author’s translation)