

LANGUAGE & SYMBOLIC POWER



Pierre Bourdieu

Language and Symbolic Power

Pierre Bourdieu

*Edited and Introduced by
John B. Thompson*

Translated by Gino Raymond and
Matthew Adamson

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Preface

Most of the material in this volume appeared in French in a book entitled *Ce que parler veut dire: l'économie des échanges linguistiques* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982). However, this English volume differs in certain respects from the original French book; two short essays have been left out, and five other pieces have been added. Hence *Language and Symbolic Power* is to some extent a new volume which does not have a direct counterpart in French. The original French book is itself a collection of essays, some of which are slightly modified versions of articles which had been published previously. Full bibliographical details of each chapter are given below.

- 1 'The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language', written in summer 1980, was originally published as 'La production et la reproduction de la langue légitime', in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 23-58.
- 2 'Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits', written in summer 1980, was originally published as 'La formation des prix et l'anticipation des profits', in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 59-95.

Appendix to Part I, 'Did you say "Popular"?', was originally published as 'Vous avez dit "populaire"?', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 46 (March 1983), pp. 98-105.

- 3 'Authorized Language: The Social Conditions for the Effectiveness of Ritual Discourse' was originally published as 'Le langage autorisé. Note sur les conditions sociales de l'efficacité du

- discours rituel', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 5–6 (November 1975), pp. 183–90, and reprinted in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 103–19.
- 4 'Rites of Institution' (transcript of a lecture given at a conference on 'Rites of Passage Today' at Neuchâtel in October 1981) was originally published as 'Les rites d'institution', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 43 (June 1982), pp. 58–63, and reprinted in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 121–34.
 - 5 'Description and Prescription: The Conditions of Possibility and the Limits of Political Effectiveness' was originally published as 'Décrire et prescrire. Note sur les conditions de possibilité et les limites de l'efficacité politique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 30 (May 1981), pp. 69–74, and reprinted in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 149–61.
 - 6 'Censorship and the Imposition of Form' was originally published as 'Censure et mise en forme', in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 167–205. This text is a revised version of two sections of a long article originally published in 1975 under the title 'L'Ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 5–6 (November 1975), pp. 109–56. The entire article was subsequently revised and expanded by Bourdieu and published as a short book bearing the same title: Pierre Bourdieu, *L'Ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Minuit, 1988), published in English as *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, translated by Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). A number of minor alterations have been incorporated into the essay which appears in this volume.
 - 7 'On Symbolic Power' was originally published as 'Sur le pouvoir symbolique', *Annales*, 32/3 (May–June 1977), pp. 405–11. An English translation of a slightly different version of this essay was published as 'Symbolic power', translated by Colin Wringe, in D. Gleeson (ed.), *Identity and Structure: Issues in the Sociology of Education* (Driffield: Nafferton Books, 1977), pp. 112–17. The essay has been retranslated for this volume.
 - 8 'Political Representation: Elements for a Theory of the Political Field' was originally published as 'La représentation politique. Éléments pour une théorie du champ politique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 36–37 (February–March 1981), pp. 3–24. Some of the illustrative material in the original French article has been deleted from the English version that appears here.

- 9 'Delegation and Political Fetishism' (based on a lecture given to the *Association des étudiants protestants de Paris* on 7 June 1983) was originally published as 'La délégation et le fétichisme politique', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 52–53 (June 1984), pp. 49–55.
- 10 'Identity and Representation: Elements for a Critical Reflection on the Idea of Region' was originally published as 'La force de la représentation', in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 135–48. This text is a modified version of an earlier essay, 'L'Identité et la représentation. Éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l'idée de région', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 35 (November 1980), pp. 63–72. In this translation, the earlier title has been retained.
- 11 'Social Space and the Genesis of "Classes"' was originally published as 'Espace social et genèse des "classes"', *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 52–53 (June 1984), pp. 3–12. An abridged version of this text was presented as the *Vorlesungen zu den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften* at the University of Frankfurt in February 1984; a slightly different version appeared in English under the title 'The social space and the genesis of groups', translated by Richard Nice, *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), pp. 723–44.

The 'General introduction' and the introductions to parts I and II were first published in *Ce que parler veut dire*, pp. 7–10, 13–21 and 99–101 respectively.

The 'General introduction', the introductions to parts I and II and chapters 1–6 were translated by Gino Raymond. Chapters 7–11 were translated by Matthew Adamson.

J.B.T.
Cambridge, June 1990

Language and Symbolic Power

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Editor's Introduction

As competent speakers we are aware of the many ways in which linguistic exchanges can express relations of power. We are sensitive to the variations in accent, intonation and vocabulary which reflect different positions in the social hierarchy. We are aware that individuals speak with differing degrees of authority, that words are loaded with unequal weights, depending on who utters them and how they are said, such that some words uttered in certain circumstances have a force and a conviction that they would not have elsewhere. We are experts in the innumerable and subtle strategies by which words can be used as instruments of coercion and constraint, as tools of intimidation and abuse, as signs of politeness, condescension and contempt. In short, we are aware that language is an integral part of social life, with all its ruses and iniquities, and that a good part of our social life consists of the routine exchange of linguistic expressions in the day-to-day flow of social interaction.

It is much easier, however, to observe in a general way that language and social life are inextricably linked than it is to develop this observation in a rigorous and compelling way. The contemporary intellectual disciplines which are particularly concerned with language have been illuminating in this regard, but they have also suffered from a number of shortcomings. In some branches of linguistics, literary criticism and philosophy, for instance, there is a tendency to think of the social character of language in a rather abstract way, as if it amounted to little more than the fact that language is, as Saussure once put it, a collective 'treasure' shared by all members of a community. What is missing from such perspectives is an account of the concrete, complicated ways in which linguistic

practices and products are caught up in, and moulded by, the forms of power and inequality which are pervasive features of societies as they actually exist. Sociologists and sociolinguists have been more concerned with the interplay between linguistic practices and concrete forms of social life; but in their work there is a tendency – though this is by no means without exception – to become preoccupied with the empirical details of variations in accent or usage, in a way that is largely divorced from broader theoretical and explanatory concerns. When social theorists have turned their attention to language they have not neglected these broader concerns, but all too often they have run roughshod over the specific properties of language and language use in the interests of developing some general theory of social action or the social world.

One of the merits of the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is that it avoids to a large extent the shortcomings which characterize some of the sociological and social-theoretical writing on language, while at the same time offering an original sociological perspective on linguistic phenomena which has nothing to do with abstract conceptions of social life. In a series of articles originally published in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bourdieu developed a trenchant critique of formal and structural linguistics, arguing that these disciplinary frameworks take for granted but fail to grasp the specific social and political conditions of language formation and use. He also began the task of elaborating an original, innovative approach to linguistic phenomena, an approach that aims to be both theoretically informed and sensitive to empirical detail. The theory that informs Bourdieu's approach is a general *theory of practice* which he has worked out in the course of a long and prolific career, spanning more than thirty years and twenty volumes of research and reflection.¹ Armed with the key concepts of this theory, Bourdieu sheds fresh light on a range of issues concerned with language and language use. He portrays everyday linguistic exchanges as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies, in such a way that every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce.

The material brought together in this volume includes Bourdieu's most important writings on language, as well as a set of essays which explore some aspects of representation and symbolic power in the field of politics. My aim in this introduction is to provide an overview of this material and to outline the theoretical framework which

guides Bourdieu's approach. For his critical analysis of orthodox linguistics, and the alternative account of linguistic phenomena which he offers, are effectively an application to language of a range of concepts and ideas elaborated elsewhere. I shall begin by summarizing briefly his critique of formal and structural linguistics, as well as his appraisal of the theory of speech acts developed by Austin. I shall then discuss some of the main concepts and assumptions of Bourdieu's own theoretical framework, focusing on those aspects which are most relevant to the analysis of language use. In the third section I shall broaden the discussion to consider Bourdieu's views on the nature of politics and political discourse, which are the concern of the final set of essays in this volume. My aim is to provide a sympathetic exposition of some themes in Bourdieu's work, not a critical analysis of his views. There are, of course, various aspects of Bourdieu's work which could be questioned and criticized, and indeed which have been questioned and criticized in the literature, sometimes in ways that are thoughtful and probing, at other times in ways that display more than a hint of wilful incomprehension.² But these are issues which I shall not pursue here.

I

As a thinker whose formative milieu was the Paris of the 1950s and early 1960s, Bourdieu is more aware than many of the intellectual impact of certain ways of thinking about language. Bourdieu followed closely the development of Lévi-Strauss's work and incorporated some features of Lévi-Strauss's method – in particular, his emphasis on the analysis of relations and oppositions – in his early ethnographic studies of kinship structures and matrimonial strategies among the Kabyle of North Africa.³ But Bourdieu became increasingly dissatisfied with Lévi-Strauss's method, which gave rise to insoluble theoretical and methodological problems.⁴ He was also somewhat sceptical of the fashionable trend called 'structuralism', which was rapidly gaining ground among Parisian intellectuals in the 1960s and which reflected, in Bourdieu's view, an overly zealous and methodologically uncontrolled application of the linguistic principles worked out by Saussure and others. The misadventures of structuralism alerted Bourdieu at an early stage both to the inherent limitations of Saussurian linguistics and to the dangers of a certain kind of intellectual imperialism, whereby a particular model of language

could assume a paradigmatic status in the social sciences as a whole.

Hence, when Bourdieu undertakes a critique of the linguistic theories of Saussure and others, he is seeking *also* to counteract the influence of linguistic models in other domains of social and cultural analysis. Bourdieu is adamantly opposed to all those forms of 'semiotic' or 'semiological' analysis which owe their inspiration to Saussure: these forms of analysis are purely 'internal', in the sense that they focus exclusively on the internal constitution of a text or corpus of texts, and hence ignore the social-historical conditions of the production and reception of texts. Moreover, such forms of analysis commonly take for granted the position of the analyst, without reflecting on this position, or on the relation between the analyst and the object of analysis, in a rigorous and reflexive way. As a result, semiotic or semiological analyses may express, to a significant but largely unexamined extent, the position of the analyst in the intellectual division of labour.

It is important to emphasize that, in distancing himself from the various kinds of internal analysis which are commonly employed in the study of literary texts and cultural artefacts, Bourdieu is not seeking simply to *supplement* these kinds of analysis with an account of the social-historical conditions of production and reception: his position is both more radical and more original than this. Unlike authors such as Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, who took over certain concepts originally developed in the sphere of linguistics and sought to apply them to phenomena like myths and fashion, Bourdieu proceeds in an altogether different way. He seeks to show that language itself is a social-historical phenomenon, that linguistic exchange is a mundane, practical activity like many others, and that linguistic theories which ignore the social-historical and practical character of language do so at their cost.

Bourdieu develops this argument by examining some of the presuppositions of Saussurian and Chomskyan linguistics. There are, of course, many important differences between the theoretical approaches of Saussure and Chomsky – for instance, Chomsky's approach is more dynamic and gives greater emphasis to the generative capacities of competent speakers. But there is, in Bourdieu's view, one principle which these theoretical approaches have in common: they are both based on a fundamental distinction which enables language to be constituted as an autonomous and homogeneous object, amenable to a properly linguistic analysis. In the case of Saussure, the distinction is that between *langue* and *parole*, that is, between 'language' as a self-sufficient system of signs

and 'speech' as the situated realization of the system by particular speakers. Chomsky draws a somewhat similar distinction between 'competence', which is the knowledge of a language possessed by an ideal speaker-hearer in a completely homogeneous speech community, and 'performance', which is the actual use of language in concrete situations.⁵

Bourdieu's objection to this kind of distinction is that it leads the linguist to take for granted an object domain which is in fact the product of a complex set of social, historical and political conditions of formation. Under the guise of drawing a *methodological* distinction, the linguist surreptitiously makes a series of *substantive* assumptions. For the completely homogeneous language or speech community does not exist in reality: it is an idealization of a particular set of linguistic practices which have emerged historically and have certain social conditions of existence. This idealization or *fictio juris* is the source of what Bourdieu calls, somewhat provocatively, 'the illusion of linguistic communism'. By taking a particular set of linguistic practices as a normative model of correct usage, the linguist produces the illusion of a common language and ignores the social-historical conditions which have established a particular set of linguistic practices as dominant and legitimate. Through a complex historical process, sometimes involving extensive conflict (especially in colonial contexts), a particular language or set of linguistic practices has emerged as the dominant and legitimate language, and other languages or dialects have been eliminated or subordinated to it. This dominant and legitimate language, this *victorious* language, is what linguists commonly take for granted. Their idealized language or speech community is an object which has been *pre-constructed* by a set of social-historical conditions endowing it with the status of the sole legitimate or 'official' language of a particular community.

This process can be examined by looking carefully at the ways in which particular languages have emerged historically as dominant in particular geographical locales, often in conjunction with the formation of modern nation-states. Bourdieu focuses on the development of French, but one could just as easily look at the development of English in Britain or the United States, of Spanish in Spain or Mexico, and so on.⁶ In the case of French, much of the historical groundwork was carried out by Ferdinand Brunot in his monumental study, *Histoire de la langue française des origines à nos jours*.⁷ Bourdieu draws on Brunot's work to show how, until the French Revolution, the process of linguistic unification was bound up with

the construction of a monarchical state. In the central provinces of the *pays d'oïl* (Champagne, Normandy, Anjou, Berry), the languages and dialects of the feudal period gradually gave way, from the fourteenth century on, to the dialect of the *Ile de France*, which was developed in cultivated Parisian circles, promoted to the status of official language and used in a written form. During the same period, regional and purely oral dialects were relegated to the status of *patois*, defined negatively and pejoratively by opposition to the official language. The situation was different in the *langue d'oc* regions of southern France. There the Parisian dialect did not take hold until the sixteenth century, and it did not eliminate the widespread use of local dialects, which existed in written as well as oral forms. Hence a situation of bilingualism developed, with members of the peasantry and lower classes speaking local dialects only, while the aristocracy, bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie had access to the official language as well.

As Bourdieu shows, the members of the upper classes had everything to gain from the policy of linguistic unification which accompanied the French Revolution. This policy, which was part of Condillac's theory of the purification of thought through the purification of language, would give the upper classes a *de facto* monopoly of political power. By promoting the official language to the status of the national language – that is, the official language of the emerging nation-state – the policy of linguistic unification would favour those who already possessed the official language as part of their linguistic competence, while those who knew only a local dialect would become part of a political and linguistic unit in which their traditional competence was subordinate and devalued. The subsequent normalization and inculcation of the official language, and its legitimation as the official language of the nation-state, was not just a matter of political policy: it was a gradual process that depended on a variety of other factors, such as the development of the educational system and the formation of a unified labour market. The production of grammar books, dictionaries and a corpus of texts exemplifying correct usage is only the most obvious manifestation of this gradual process of normalization. Perhaps more importantly, with the establishment of a system of educational qualifications possessing a standardized value independent of regional variations, and with the unification of a labour market in which administrative positions depended on educational qualifications, the school came to be seen as a principal means of access to the labour market, especially in areas where industrialization was weak. Thus, by the combined

effect of various institutions and social processes, people speaking local dialects were induced, as Bourdieu puts it, 'to collaborate in the destruction of their instruments of expression'.⁸

If linguistic theories have tended to neglect the social-historical conditions underlying the formation of the language which they take, in an idealized form, as their object domain, so too they have tended to analyse linguistic expressions in isolation from the specific social conditions in which they are used. In the work of Saussure and Chomsky, the isolation of linguistic analysis from the social conditions of use is closely linked to the distinctions drawn between *langue* and *parole*, competence and performance, and hence Bourdieu presses his critique further by asking whether these distinctions do justice to what is involved in the activity of speaking. In the first place, it seems clear that speaking cannot be thought of, in the manner suggested by Saussure, as the mere realization or 'execution' of a pre-existing linguistic system: speaking is a much more complex and creative activity than this rather mechanical model would suggest. In the case of Chomsky's theory, however, the issues are more complicated, precisely because Chomsky sought to take account of creativity by conceptualizing competence as a system of generative processes.

Bourdieu's objection to this aspect of Chomsky's theory is that the notion of competence, understood as the capacity of an ideal speaker to generate an unlimited sequence of grammatically well formed sentences, is simply too abstract. The kind of competence that *actual* speakers possess is not a capacity to generate an unlimited sequence of grammatically well formed sentences, but rather a capacity to produce expressions which are appropriate for particular situations, that is, a capacity to produce expressions *à propos*. Bourdieu's argument does not require him to deny that competent speakers possess the capacity to generate grammatical sentences; his main point is that this capacity is *insufficient* as a means of characterizing the kind of competence possessed by actual speakers. For actual speakers have a *practical competence*, a 'practical sense' (a notion to which we shall return), by virtue of which they are able to produce utterances that are appropriate in the circumstances; and this practical competence cannot be derived from or reduced to the competence of Chomsky's ideal speaker.⁹ Thus actual speakers are able to embed sentences or expressions in practical strategies which have numerous functions and which are tacitly adjusted to the relations of power between speakers and hearers. Their practical competence involves not only the capacity to produce grammatical

utterances, but *also* the capacity to make oneself heard, believed, obeyed, and so on. Those who speak must ensure that they are entitled to speak in the circumstances, and those who listen must reckon that those who speak are worthy of attention. The recognition of the right to speak, and the associated forms of power and authority which are implicit in all communicative situations, are generally ignored by the linguist, who treats the linguistic exchange as an intellectual operation consisting of the encoding and decoding of grammatically well formed messages.

It is with this limitation of Chomskyan linguistics in mind that Bourdieu turns to a different body of writing on language, namely, to Austin's work on speech acts. In some respects, Bourdieu's approach to language is quite similar to that developed by Austin and other so-called 'ordinary language philosophers' in the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁰ Consequently, Bourdieu's appraisal of Austin's work is more sympathetic than his analysis of Saussure and Chomsky. In singling out a class of 'performative utterances', such as 'I do' uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony or 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' uttered while smashing a bottle against the stem of a vessel, Austin stressed that such utterances are not ways of reporting or describing a state of affairs, but rather ways of acting or participating in a ritual; that they are not strictly true or false but rather 'felicitous' or 'infelicitous'; and that for such utterances to be felicitous they must, among other things, be uttered by an appropriate person in accordance with some conventional procedure.¹¹ This implies, according to Bourdieu, that the efficacy of performative utterances is inseparable from the existence of an *institution* which defines the conditions (such as the place, the time, the agent) that must be fulfilled in order for the utterance to be effective. Bourdieu is using the term 'institution' in a way that is both very general and active (a sense conveyed better by the French term *institution* than by its English equivalent). An institution is not necessarily a particular organization – this or that family or factory, for instance – but is any relatively durable set of social relations which *endows* individuals with power, status and resources of various kinds. It is the institution, in this sense, that endows the speaker with the authority to carry out the act which his or her utterance claims to perform. Not anyone can stand before a freshly completed ship, utter the words 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*' while flinging a bottle at its stem, and thereby succeed in *naming* the vessel: the person must be *authorized* to do so, must be vested with the requisite authority to carry out the act. Hence the efficacy of the performative