

DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE

BOYD H. DAVIS

Dimensions of Language

BOYD H. DAVIS

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Dimensions of Language

Preface

The selections in *Dimensions of Language* present language as one of the most interesting of human activities. *Dimensions* may, on first glance, resemble other anthologies about language; however, it has several distinguishing features.

Who Writes About Language?

Who writes about language? This is a rhetorical question, for essays, columns, squibs, and diatribes crop up in every publication, every profession, and every discipline. This collection makes room for the student voice. It includes writings by well-known scholars and teachers of language and by professional writers. It also includes writings by persons who may not be professional language scholars, but who are very interested in looking at how language is used in a variety of settings. *Dimensions of Language* invites students to join the discussions, and to add to them.

The "Ordinary" Uses of Language

Many of the selections look at specific uses of language in persuasion, for example, or argument, in advertising, or the media. However, the dailiness of language, its ordinary uses in familiar situations, is just as interesting, and just as important. This is one of the three reasons that *Dimensions of Language* includes articles and essays on the familiar: everyday conversation, letters, and journals.

Students must discover a variety of voices to use in different situations. It is sensible, then, to call their attention not only to language itself, but also to those uses that are so familiar, students scarcely notice them. Yet it is in those familiar uses that students have already developed one or more voices, which they bring with them to the classroom.

We who teach may be more interested in distinctions between public and private uses of language, or transactional and expressive writing, or other features of talk and text. We need to draw on those distinctions to help students discover what experience, what voices, they bring to a topic or a situation.

Finally, because many of us think that people learn by connecting new knowledge with knowledge they already have, it is important to help students discover what they *do* have, what they *do* know. Too often,

they neither question nor appropriately value what they have. To help students discover what they bring to text and talk, several chapters explore language play, or suggest writing and reading and language case studies. The full collection moves students to discover, classify, and analyze the information and assumptions they already have about many aspects of language use. With the familiar in hand, the students may voyage to the unfamiliar with more confidence.

Emphasis on Inquiry

Dimensions of Language assumes that inquiry, questioning, analysis, and research are important—and daily—actions. The topics for discussion and writing assume a reflective or inquisitive stance on the part of the reader, and they reinforce that stance in several ways.

The first thing the student may notice about the topics that follow a specific article is that they are long. The topics do not rehash a specific point, or ask the student to find it; instead, topics apply a concept or an idea or a term or a principle of organization and ask the student to incorporate it by using it. Discussion or writing topics—called Connections—are set up to guide students through individual essays, and additional sets of topics—called Juxtapositions—ask students to look at common themes throughout a particular chapter.

The second feature that students may notice is that the topics for discussion and writing are suitable for both talking and writing. Talk leads to writing; writing to talk, just as drafting, revising, and editing are recursive and interconnected. Some of the topics suggest a particular rhetorical approach as being appropriate; others can be substituted, of course. Our talk, our writing uses them all. The task for the writer and the talker is to match a rhetorical choice to the purpose, the audience, the topic, and the constraints on the production of text and talk. To do this requires the student to bring or to develop a range of reading and interpretive abilities; many of the topics request re-reading, with prompts, guidelines, and suggestions that help the student focus.

What Teachers Will Notice

The Connections in *Dimensions of Language* point the students to research, keyed to readily available sources, which they may already know how to use. Telephone calls and online library searches via the Internet confirmed that any campus, whether two- or four-year college or research institution, maintains certain research tools as a matter of course. These include a metropolitan newspaper, a telephone directory with Yellow Pages, several kinds of dictionaries from the desk or student version to the unabridged, historical compilations, and indexes to period-

ical and newspaper articles, either bound in volumes or in database/CD-ROM formats.

Connections, in initial chapters, present the students with ways to identify research tools and ways to use the tools effectively. In many instances, the current subject headings are presented, and if a particular kind of source or a specific journal might not be available on every campus, an example of that source is summarized and cited in the Connection itself. Neither the instructors nor the students need be frustrated by topics that blithely assume students have both access to unlimited resources and mastery in their use. Instead, the Connections guide students through the inquiry process from topic to text.

There is an additional reason for using familiar, easily available research tools beyond the obvious ones of equality and ease of access. Students often think of research as a frantic search for a magic list of titles, which they can cut and paste and cobble into a patchwork. Beginning with the humble, ordinary tools that they use frequently—and think they know how to use well—starts them from a base of confidence, draws on the ordinary uses of language, and pushes them to discover new depths in what they thought they knew.

Composing Processes

The Connections also offer the instructor room to experiment with additional teaching voices, strategies, or styles. Instructors interested in working with writing-to-learn approaches will find them here, with the stages and steps built into the Connection itself. Different facets of composing processes are represented in the Connections, particularly revision. The longer prompts are typically reserved for the more challenging selections, where the Connection functions as coach.

Some of the selections are challenging; others invite controversy. The Connections tell the students directly that a particular selection or its topic is provocative or challenging and guide the students to look more closely at the rationale for such a claim. Some issues are not simple, and those that involve language policy or language manipulation can be especially complex. I hope *Dimensions of Language* will enable students to identify complexities, untangle competing issues, and develop a perspective on language grounded in thought.

Acknowledgments

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B.H.D.

To the Student

Somewhere in your life, you acquired language. *Dimensions of Language* asks you to look more closely at one of your most interesting features: the ways you use language, for reading, writing, talking; the ways you organize or analyze, describe or tell tales; the ways you play with language; the ways you respond to languages, the varieties of uses presented by other people, and many different situations; the different languages or dialects or special features in your own language repertoire.

The selections in this anthology are written by people from many fields or disciplines, though there is a plurality representing the perspectives of the liberal arts. The arts and sciences, like the professional and technical disciplines, prize communication. The topics for writing and discussion in each chapter assume you already know this, and they assume you bring knowledge as well as curiosity, a habit of inquiry, to new situations for talk or writing. The selections ask you to remember, to research, to reflect, and to respond: to learn about some of the ways you use and have used language, something about what it is, and some ways in which language affects you directly as well as indirectly.

B.H.D.

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1

The Ways We Communicate

We use language to make sense out of the world: we speak, we sign, we read, we write, we fall silent. We talk to ourselves, to each other, to people we cannot see or have not met. We use multiple channels for communicating, and a variety of mediums. This section looks at some of those channels, and some of those mediums. You will explore how people communicate with each other, or with animals, or with machines; you will look at how people work with systems that allow them to record what they think or feel, say or count. Underlying all the selections are certain common questions: What is language? Is it used only by humans? How do we acquire it? How do we share it?



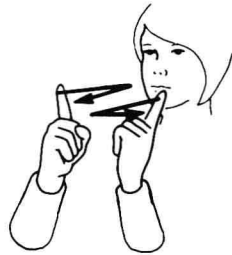
Speak

Four shape RH palm left. Move in and out from mouth.



Speech

S shape RH. Change to bent V. palm in and circle at mouth.



Talk

Place index tips on mouth alternately, moving back and forth.

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