

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power* (John B. Thompson, ed.; transl. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson) Cambridge: Polity Press, 37-42.
“Introduction” (37-42)

Sociology can free itself from all the forms of domination which linguistics and its concepts still exercise today over the social sciences only by bringing to light the operations of object construction through which this science was established, and the social conditions of the production and circulation of its fundamental concepts. The linguistic model was transposed with such ease into the domain of anthropology and sociology because one accepted the core intention of linguistics, namely, the *intellectualist philosophy* which treats language as an object of contemplation rather than as an instrument of action and power. To accept the Saussurian model and its presuppositions is to treat the social world as a universe of symbolic exchanges and to reduce action to an act of communication which, like Saussure's *parole*, is destined to be deciphered by means of a cipher or a code, language or culture.¹

In order to break with this social philosophy one must show that, although it is legitimate to treat social relations – even relations of domination – as symbolic interactions, that is, as relations of communication implying cognition and recognition, one must not forget that the relations of communication *par excellence* – linguistic exchanges – are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers or their respective groups are actualized. In short, one must move beyond the usual opposition between economism and culturalism, in order to develop an economy of symbolic exchanges.

Every speech act and, more generally, every action, is a conjuncture, an encounter between independent causal series. On the one hand, there are the socially constructed dispositions of the linguistic habitus, which imply a certain propensity to speak and to say determinate things (the expressive interest) and a certain capacity to speak, which involves both the linguistic capacity to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct discourses, and the social capacity to use this competence adequately in a determinate situation. On the other hand, there are the structures of the linguistic market, which impose themselves as a system of specific sanctions and censorships.

This simple model of linguistic production and circulation, as the

relation between linguistic habitus and the markets on which they offer their products, does not seek either to challenge or to replace a strictly linguistic analysis of the code. But it does enable us to understand the errors and failures to which linguistics succumbs when, relying on only one of the factors involved – a strictly linguistic competence, abstractly defined, ignoring everything that it owes to the social conditions of its production – it tries to give an adequate account of discourse in all its conjunctural singularity. In fact, as long as they are unaware of the limits that constitute their science, linguists have no choice but to search desperately in language for something that is actually inscribed in the social relations within which it functions, or to engage in a sociology without knowing it, that is, with the risk of discovering, in grammar itself, something that their spontaneous sociology has unwittingly imported into it.

Grammar defines meaning only very partially: it is in relation to a market that the complete determination of the signification of discourse occurs. Part (and not the least) of the determinations that constitute the practical definition of sense comes to discourse automatically and from outside. The objective meaning engendered in linguistic circulation is based, first of all, on the distinctive value which results from the relationship that the speakers establish, consciously or unconsciously, between the linguistic product offered by a socially characterized speaker, and the other products offered simultaneously in a determinate social space. It is also based on the fact that the linguistic product is only completely realized as a message if it is treated as such, that is to say, if it is decoded, and the associated fact that the schemes of interpretation used by those receiving the message in their creative appropriation of the product offered may diverge, to a greater or lesser extent, from those which guided its production. Through these unavoidable effects, the market plays a part in shaping not only the symbolic value but also the meaning of discourse.

One could re-examine from this standpoint the question of style: this ‘individual deviation from the linguistic norm’, this particular elaboration which tends to give discourse its distinctive properties, is a being-perceived which exists only in relation to perceiving subjects, endowed with the diacritical dispositions which enable them to make *distinctions* between different ways of saying, distinctive manners of speaking. It follows that style, whether it be a matter of poetry as compared with prose or of the diction of a particular (social, sexual or generational) class compared with that of another class, exists

I would like to suggest that you read and react to the “Introduction” by Bourdieu in the form of your **Essay No. 3** (the June essay). You might comment on the following questions.

Bourdieu does not refer to the “language of scholarship”; yet what he says might be applied to it.

- How would you understand this?
- Why does he criticize the “object construction” of language (with reference to Saussure)?
- How does he understand “the linguistic habitus”?
- Who are the agents of the linguistic market?
- Why does Bourdieu say that it is not language which circulates, but discourses?
- How can rituals (p. 41) be applied to our topic of scholarly English?

only in relation to agents endowed with schemes of perception and appreciation that enable them to constitute it as a set of systematic differences, apprehended syncretically. What circulates on the linguistic market is not ‘language’ as such, but rather discourses that are stylistically marked both in their production, in so far as each speaker fashions an idiolect from the common language, and in their reception, in so far as each recipient helps to *produce* the message which he perceives and appreciates by bringing to it everything that makes up his singular and collective experience.

One can extend to all discourse what has been said of poetic discourse alone, because it manifests to the highest degree, when it is successful, the effect which consists in awakening experiences which vary from one individual to another. If, in contrast to denotation, which represents ‘the stable part, common to all speakers’,² connotation refers to the singularity of individual experiences, this is because it is constituted in a socially characterized relation to which the recipients bring the diversity of their instruments of symbolic appropriation. The paradox of communication is that it presupposes a common medium, but one which works – as is clearly seen in the limiting case in which, as often in poetry, the aim is to transmit emotions – only by eliciting and reviving singular, and therefore socially marked, experiences. The all-purpose word in the dictionary, a product of the neutralization of the practical relations within which it functions, has no social existence: in practice, it is always immersed in situations, to such an extent that the core meaning which remains relatively invariant through the diversity of markets may pass unnoticed.³ As Vendryès pointed out, if words always assumed all their meanings at once, discourse would be an endless play on words; but if, as in the case of the French verb *louer* (to rent, from *locare*) and *louer* (to praise, from *laudare*), all the meanings it can take on were totally independent, all plays on words (especially of the ideological sort) would become impossible.⁴ The different meanings of a word are defined in the relation between the invariant core and the specific logic of the different markets, themselves objectively situated with respect to the market in which the most common meaning is defined. They exist simultaneously only for the academic mind which elucidates them by breaking the organic solidarity between competence and market.

Religion and politics achieve their most successful ideological effects by exploiting the possibilities contained in the polysemy inherent in the social ubiquity of the legitimate language. In a differentiated society, what are called ‘common’ nouns – work,

family, mother, love, etc. – assume in reality different and even antagonistic meanings, because the members of the same ‘linguistic community’ use more or less the same language and not several different languages. The unification of the linguistic market means that there are no doubt more and more meanings for each sign.⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us that, in revolutionary situations, common words take on opposite meanings. In fact, there are no neutral words: surveys show, for example, that the words most commonly used to express tastes often receive different, sometimes opposite, meanings from one social class to another. The word *soigné* (neat, clean, conscientious), for example, used approvingly by the petits bourgeois, is rejected by intellectuals for whom, precisely, it evokes everything that is petit-bourgeois, petty and mean-spirited. The polysemy of religious language, and the ideological effect of the unification of opposites or denial of divisions which it produces, derive from the fact that, at the cost of the *re-interpretations* implied in the production and reception of the common language by speakers occupying different positions in the social space, and therefore endowed with different intentions and interests, it manages to speak to all groups and all groups speak it – unlike, for example, mathematical language, which can secure the univocal meaning of the word ‘group’ only by strictly controlling the homogeneity of the group of mathematicians. Religions which are called *universal* are not universal in the same sense and on the same conditions as science.

Recourse to a neutralized language is obligatory whenever it is a matter of establishing a practical consensus between agents or groups of agents having partially or totally different interests. This is the case, of course, first and foremost in the field of legitimate political struggle, but also in the transactions and interactions of everyday life. Communication between classes (or, in colonial or semi-colonial societies, between ethnic groups) always represents a critical situation for the language that is used, whichever it may be. It tends to provoke a return to the sense that is most overtly charged with social connotations: ‘When you use the word *paysan* (peasant) in the presence of someone who has just left the countryside, you never know how he is going to take it.’ Hence there are no longer any innocent words. This objective effect of unveiling destroys the apparent unity of ordinary language. Each word, each expression, threatens to take on two antagonistic senses, reflecting the way in which it is understood by the sender and the receiver. The logic of the verbal automatism which insidiously lead back to ordinary

and with a good chance of success, to utter what is right, i.e. what ought to be. Those who, like Max Weber, have set the magical or charismatic law of the collective oath or the ordeal in opposition to a rational law based on calculability and predictability, forget that the most rigorously rationalized law is never anything more than an act of social magic which works.

Legal discourse is a creative speech which brings into existence that which it utters. It is the limit aimed at by all performative utterances – blessings, curses, orders, wishes or insults. In other words, it is the divine word, the word of divine right, which, like the *intuitus originarius* which Kant ascribed to God, creates what it states, in contrast to all derived, observational statements, which simply record a pre-existent given. One should never forget that language, by virtue of the infinite generative but also *originative* capacity – in the Kantian sense – which it derives from its power to produce existence by producing the collectively recognized, and thus realized, representation of existence, is no doubt the principal support of the dream of absolute power.

usage, with all its associated values and prejudices, harbours the permanent danger of the ‘gaff’ which can instantly destroy a consensus carefully maintained by means of strategies of mutual accommodation.

But one cannot fully understand the symbolic efficacy of political and religious languages if one reduces it to the effect of the misunderstandings which lead individuals who are opposed in all respects to recognize themselves in the same message. Specialized discourses can derive their efficacy from the hidden correspondence between the structure of the social space within which they are produced – the political field, the religious field, the artistic field, the philosophical field, etc. – and the structure of the field of social classes within which the recipients are situated and in relation to which they interpret the message. The homology between the oppositions constitutive of the specialized fields and the field of social classes is the source of an essential ambiguity which is particularly apparent when esoteric discourses are diffused outside the restricted field and undergo a kind of automatic universalization, ceasing to be merely the utterances of dominant or dominated agents within a specific field and becoming statements valid for all dominant or all dominated individuals.

The fact remains that social science has to take account of the autonomy of language, its specific logic, and its particular rules of operation. In particular, one cannot understand the symbolic effects of language without making allowance for the fact, frequently attested, that language is the exemplary formal mechanism whose generative capacities are without limits. There is nothing that cannot be said and it is possible to say nothing. One can say everything in language, that is, within the limits of grammaticality. We have known since Frege that words can have meaning without referring to anything. In other words, formal rigour can mask *semantic free-wheeling*. All religious theologies and all political theodicies have taken advantage of the fact that the generative capacities of language can surpass the limits of intuition or empirical verification and produce statements that are *formally* impeccable but *semantically* empty. Rituals are the limiting case of situations of *imposition* in which, through the exercise of a technical competence which may be very imperfect, a social competence is exercised – namely, that of the legitimate speaker, authorized to speak and to speak with authority. Benveniste pointed out that in Indo-European languages the words which are used to utter the law are related to the verb ‘to speak’. The right utterance, the one which is formally correct, thereby claims,