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Power

In anthropology today, the constitution of social reality is itself considered a central form of power. Within this view, the power of language lies in its reality creating capacity. In linguistic anthropology, three different ways of conceptualizing the site of this reality creating have emerged during the twentieth century. All of these are still with us, and I will deal with each of them in turn. I suggest that all three are needed for a complete anthropological understanding of the relationship between language and power.

The first and oldest view is that the reality-constituting capacity of language is located in the structure of the language itself, most specifically in the lexical and morphological semantic structures of all languages. The idea that the language a group speaks entails a culturally distinctive worldview came into the United States from Germany with Franz Boas in the late nineteenth century. It has been developed through the work of Edward Sapir, Benjamin Lee Whorf, Ward Goodenough, and others still working on the relation between language and cognition. However, it is important to note that while the reality-constituting role of language structure has been clearly articulated, that reality-creating capacity has not been represented as a form or expression of power in this tradition.

The second vision of language as fundamental to the creation of social realities, which emerged in the 1960s, located this creation in the process of discourse in face-to-face interaction, in the speech of human actors. At least three versions of this vision, each of which entails a somewhat different theory of the power of language, have been articulated over the past thirty years.

In the earliest politicized work focusing on discourse, power was understood as something that some people have more of than others. So some people have more control over and determination of the nature of social realities that get constituted through face-to-face interaction than others do, primarily by virtue of being able to exert control over the production of discourse. Thus teachers, doctors, and lawyers have more reality defining

Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 9(1–2):194–196.

power than students, patients, and witnesses, by virtue of their control over turn allocation in classrooms, examination rooms, and courtrooms. To the degree that members of the dominant white culture in the United States occupied bureaucratic positions associated with control over turns at talk more than ethnic minorities, white people are able to define the social realities of Blacks, Indians, Hawaiians, and Mexican Americans in situations where they co-interact. Men have more power than women in defining social realities by virtue of their control over turns at talk, topics, and their deployment of linguistic devices that direct attention to the certainty and reliability of their assertions.

More recently, primarily in the last decade, two other ideas have emerged that still envision reality creating in discourse as a form of power yet do not focus attention on the haves and the have-nots of power. One idea is that reality-creating power lies in discourse itself, so that all of us are dominated by discourse and subordinated to it, and individual human agency is relatively inconsequential in the face of this power. Michel Foucault bears significant responsibility for this vision, which has deeply penetrated cultural and linguistic anthropology. However, the linguistic anthropological concept of entextualization can be seen as a variant of this view. Entextualization refers to the process through which the content and form of particular texts become fixed in varying degrees in performance. Fixed texts entail more power than context-dependent texts because of the way in which they culturally and ideologically reproduce the same ideas over and over.

The flip side if this view is reflected in the second idea of reality-creating in discourse to emerge in the last decade, which envisions ALL interactants as having the power to shape a continually emerging reality through the process of taking turns at talk in conversation. Both the so-called powerful and the powerless, the dominated and the subordinated, the high status and the low have this power merely by virtue of their involvement in the communicative process. And they have it whether they are participating in relatively entextualized or scripted kinds of discourse, or in relatively open-ended kinds of interactions. This model of how the power of language works offers us a way to recognize and conceptualize agency at the level of individual actions, and to sort out one individual's agency from that of another by conceptualizing their agentive contributions as turns at talk. Those espousing this view have clearly been influenced by conversation analysis, and particularly Harvey Sacks's early contributions to it, notably his emphasis on the way in which every single turn at talk transforms the meaning of all that has gone before it. But conversation analysis, like the theories of the worldview or cognitive structure to be found in the structure of language, lacks an explicit theory of power. It has been left to others to conceptualize the emergent meaning in talk as a form of power.

So far I have considered the reality creating power of language as cited in language structure and in discourse. The third current theoretical locus for the reality-creating power of language is in very large-scale, power-laden social historical processes that both shape and are shaped by the power of language. In this framework, the reality-creating role of language is theoretically conceptualized as serving the production of relatively abstract

relations of domination and subordination. These abstract power relations include those of a global political economy, the historical processes of European colonialism, and the emergence of nation states. In this framework, talk about talk, or language ideologies, are shown to play an important role in the European colonial defining and management of colonized populations and in the maintenance of state hegemony through ideologically diverse discourses of state institutional complexes engaged in the production of nationalist ideologies.

In anthropological theory about the relation between language and power, then, the creation of social realities through the deployment of language structures in discourse is the process through which broader sociohistorical power relations are sustained and transformed through time.

(See also *conflict, control, functions, gender, ideology, indexicality, participation, relativity, space, turn, vision, voice*)

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