

Nikoli Daigneault

### Stance, Position, and Enculturation in “From Silence to Words”

In “From Silence to Words,” Min-Zhan Lu describes her experience growing up in the 1950s China to parents who taught her English language and literature, despite its reputation as the language of the bourgeoisie at the time. Lu’s essay deeply considers the politicization of language that makes using one come with adopting a political stance, whether the user wants it to. The differing stances of Lu’s languages: English and Standard Chinese, lead her to struggle to balance writing in them at home and at school, but she believes this “helped me to grow as a reader and writer” (Lu 437). Lu’s story is an example of how the way we are unconsciously enculturated through language is something we should strive to consciously realize, which can improve our use of language like it did for Lu.

In addition to being spoken languages, English and Chinese are also *discourses*, which Gee defines as “identity kits” that come with the language patterns and behaviors needed to fit into a social community (Gee 51). Gee notes that these discourses are “inherently ‘ideological.’ They involve a set of values and viewpoints” (52). That is, they take a *stance*. Lu discovers in grade school that her discourses take stances just in their use, potentially unrelated to what she says. For example, she mentions that at home, in English, the word *love* describes how she feels for her mother, while at school it becomes the Chinese word for her love for her country (Lu 441). This inseparability of language and stance becomes a struggle for Lu as she learns to use and think in the Standard Chinese of her school, which is in political conflict with the English spoken at her home. English is considered “Rightest” and therefore undesirable by her school and social institutions, while at her home her parents tell her that English is important to one’s livelihood, as her father gains employment through his English knowledge (438). []

Someone's social *position* is the set of circumstances and identities that they hold in relation to their social environment, shaping how they experience the world. Like stance, Lu becomes aware of her position at an early age, that of the Intellectual class under the New China, which her teacher disdains. Her awareness that her position affects her stances is exemplified in her experience of writing an essay about a literary character's internal conflict. She realizes that this was an unsuitable stance for submission in school, as it was taken as a result of her home position.; However, the fact the she was moved by the character in a highly politicized communist text was also unsuitable at home, leading her to believe each discourse "could not be free from interference from the other" (443). She desperately wanted to separate them and her inability to do so leads her to shy away from writing anything in general for a while.

The found awareness of stance and positionality is a striking realization for Lu, an awareness that her discourses come from her position and using them takes a stance. The emotional burden of this comes from the fact that she did not choose to acquire her positions, and therefore her discourses, as she did not choose her parents or place of birth; no one does. She wished to rid each discourse of their interactions with the other and their stance-taking, as her parents and teachers pushed her to do. But she describes a sense of self-silencing from her failure to do so (446). Her argument that teaching this conflict, teaching students to explore discourse by "negotiating through these conflicting voices" (447) allows students like her to avoid feeling silenced.

In addition to being inherently ideological, Gee writes that discourses can be "acquired," or learned by implicit exposure from others in the surrounding social order (Gee 57). This combination of acquiring language and positions and stances with it leads to what I will call *enculturation*. Lu is enculturated by her parents in a discourse with a set of values differing from

those of the broader social order that she is also enculturated in at school. Her struggle stems from this difference but leads her to believe that it improved her writing. Our ability to become conscious of how we are enculturated, even though the process happens unconsciously, can benefit all of us on our paths to become better at using language.

Becoming conscious of our enculturation means gaining an awareness of our positions, the discourses they lead us to using, and the stances those discourses take, the way Lu did. Lu even argues for bringing in conflicting discourses into the classroom to this end, as she writes that most people live somewhere between the “purified world of the classroom” and the complexity she experienced as a child (Lu 447). Students exist and in and are acted upon by culture, and ignoring this in favor of an education clean of conflicting discourses serves to advance only those discourses already heavily represented in the classroom setting.

At the end of her essay, Lu writes that the complexity of her upbringing made her constantly aware of the “effort and choice” that comes with reading and writing in a discourse (447). This is something we can lose sight of when we are so firmly grounding in our discourses through enculturation, but gaining awareness of the source of our language and how it communicates beliefs and values is a step towards improving ourselves and readers, writers, and thinkers.

### Works Cited

- Gee, James Paul. "What Is Literacy?" *Negotiating Academic Literacies*, edited by Vivian Zamel and Ruth Spack, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle." *College English*, vol. 49, no. 4, National Council of Teachers of English, Apr. 1987, p. 437