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My Evidence and I: Lessons in Academic Writing

We use language to communicate in all aspects of our daily life. We receive news, talk with friends, listen to lectures, and write up papers. However, we often overlook how language changes our perception of the world—our ideology, our common sense—and changes the power dynamics in society. Our Introduction to Academic Writing section, *Language and Power,* discusses the aspects of power in society: how authority uses power, and how language can legitimize or delegitimize such power. We focused mainly on African-American Civil Rights speeches from Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Lyndon Johnson. These readings offer insight into how different style and rhetoric influences the ideology of the reader. The class also teaches us the toolbox of academic writing so that we can effectively use language to communicate in academic settings. In the course, I learned concepts of writing such as arguable thesis, evidence sandwich, and concision. Among these, I consider evidence something I have learned the most from.

Evidence should take precedence over feeling. This sounds obvious, but it is a problem I have a hard time getting over. When I come up with my thesis, that the language in Lyndon Johnson’s “Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights*”* is attacking Malcolm X’s ideology of Black Nationalism, I often wonder whether it will be supported by the evidence. Looking back in history, Johnson seems to support African American civil rights. Johnson signs the Civil Rights Bill in 1964 which promises black equal treatment in public spaces. He also signs the Voting Rights Bill in 1965 which effectively gives African Americans access to exercising their voting rights. Because he made such advancement in civil rights legislation, it seems to me that Johnson will never attack a civil rights movement. That is just what I think. That is just my feeling, but I hold on to it for a long time without carefully examining my sources. When I get over my feelings and start looking into the sources, that is, when I use the text rather than my assumption as evidence, I see that my thesis is actually well supported. I become confident in my thesis.

Evidence never supports the sub-claim and thesis by itself. Claims require proper analysis, something I often neglect. For example, I quote Johnson’s *Remarks* that, “we can understand—without rancor or hatred—how this [inequality and civil rights struggle] all happened.” Then, I abruptly claim that “*The Remarks* prompts the reader to see segregation and struggle of Black people as being natural” (Santichaivekin, 11/5/2017, 3). The first sentence does not naturally lead to the second. However, I had faith in the reader that they would feel the same as me and use that faith to advance my claim. This does not work. In order to attach the thesis and the evidence together, we need analysis. This insight makes my writing more comprehensible and complete.

To understand the role evidence plays to support the thesis, we must first understand the role the thesis plays in the essay. An arguable thesis is subjective. It is subjective because if it were objective, then no one would debate it, rendering it non-arguable. I made the mistake of trying to prove my thesis to be mathematically, logically true. But no matter how hard I try, I fail to prove my thesis that way. To undeniably prove that Johnson’s language attacks black nationalism, he might have to say, “Malcolm X, you are uneducated and unreasonable. Your ideas are worthless.” He never said that, at least not in our sources. How, then, can I be sure that my thesis is correct? After thinking carefully, I understand that there is no correct thesis; there is no proven thesis, but only well-supported thesis. In this light, evidence is only supportive and suggestive, but never authoritative.

Clear understanding of evidence and its functions allows me to leave behind my feelings and refuse to make leaps of faith in my writing. I become aware of my argument and make sure that it is well-supported, not by emotion or intuition, but by evidence. I now believe in my thesis, not that it is objectively true, but that it is evidence-based. I am sure that this insight will follow me beyond this class, beyond academic writing, and into my understanding of reason.

Johnson’s “Remarks” Against Black Nationalism

Since the abolition of slavery, people of color was treated as a second-class citizen in the United States. They were denied access to public spaces and to voting, were abused and oppressed because of their race, and were not given equal justice under law. The Civil Rights Bill of 1964 was enacted to end these problems. The Bill outlawed discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and national origin. Just before signing the bill, president Lyndon B. Johnson gave a speech, referred to as “The Remarks Upon Signing the Civil Rights Bill,” saying, “those who are equal before God shall now also be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories.” Upon reading Johnson’s speech, one might assume that he is promoting the same ideology as the prominent civil rights activists in that era. However, that might not be the case. In order to understand the ideological standpoint of Johnson’s “Remarks,” we compare the “Remarks” with two of Malcolm X’s speeches, both titled “The Ballot or the Bullet.” The two Malcolm X’s speeches were delivered in Cleveland and Detroit. In his speeches, Malcolm X set forth the idea of Black Nationalism and encouraged the Black community to fight oppression and secure freedom by themselves. “The Ballot and the Bullet” and the “Remarks” promote different ideologies and portray the civil rights struggle in different ways. We use the theory presented in Simpson and Myar’s *Language and Power* that “[Different] narrative possibilities privilege certain standpoints over others – often reflecting and reinforcing certain ideological positions while suppressing each other” (6). Observed from such perspective, the language in the “Remarks” undermines Malcolm X’s ideology of Black Nationalism and struggle for power by appealing to national unity, trivializing the struggle of Black people, and excluding the Black community from the enforcement of law.

Malcolm X’s ideology of Black Nationalism is founded on the exploitation of Black community due to racial bias of the white community. In “The Ballot or the Bullet,” Malcolm X defined Black Nationalism as the economic, political, and social development of the Black community (Detroit). He claims that black people should control their own politics and economy (Detroit). However, such control and development is impossible due to the suppression from the white community. Malcolm X says, “all of us have suffered here […] political oppression at the hands of white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man” (Cleveland). This suggests that such misery is unavoidable for the Black community because they cannot change the color of their skin. The inevitability creates a sense of necessity for change, and for action. Black Nationalism is framed as “self-help program,” which suggests a strong sense of necessity (Malcolm X Detroit). Malcolm says that “we’re going to be *forced* either to use the ballot or the bullet” (Cleveland). Because these phrases are ordered after the suffering the Black community faces, it suggests that necessity from the oppression from white people give rises to the action-based ideology of Black Nationalism and their aspiration for freedom, even by force.

The freedom promised by Black Nationalism ideology comes through separation rather than integration. “The Ballot or the Bullet” taps on national and historical separation, in additional to racial separation. In his Cleveland speech, Malcolm X compares the Black community’s lack of civil rights with the status of European immigrants and says, “I’m not an American.” This implies that the “real” Americans are people of European ancestry while Black people are not Americans. It separates the national identity of the two groups. Their identity is further separated in the Detroit speech where Malcolm says, “you wouldn’t be in this country if some enemy hadn’t kidnapped you and brought you here. On the other hand, some of you think you came here on the Mayflower.” This statement reminds the Black community that Black history is slavery, while the white history is founding a country, which further deepens the separation of the two identities. But how will such separation of identity help with their movement? In talking about going into action, Malcolm X says that “[Africa and Asia are] getting [civil rights] through nationalism,” and “it will take Black Nationalism to bring about the freedom of twenty-two million Afro-Americans here in this country where we have suffered colonialism for the past four years” (Detroit). Africa and Asia did not gain independence through integration, but through force. Their independence means the obliteration of any connections from the colonist—a separation forever. By using Africa and Asia as model for nationalism, the language in “The Ballot or the Bullet” suggests that the way to gain civil rights is through separation, not national unity.

Johnson’s language in his “Remarks” undermines the concept of separation in Black Nationalism by employing the language of national unity. Throughout the “Remarks,” both Black and white people are regarded collectively as “any American,” “our generation,” or “Americans of any race and color” (Johnson). The speech does not include any instance of the word “Black” or “white,” but instead it uses the word “many,” “most,” and “some.” (Johnson) Comparing it to Malcolm X’s speech where white people are regarded as “enemy” with a different historical and national identity, we see that the language in the “Remarks” blurs the line between the Black community and the white community (Detroit). It creates a colorblind notion of the American people. The “Remarks” also says that “Americans of every race and color have worked to build a nation of widening opportunities.” The sentence is phrased as if Black people and white people work together in the same standing. However, Black people did not work voluntarily and were treated as property. They were slaves, and white people were their masters. In the language of “The Remarks,” there is no oppressor; there is no entity for the Black people to fight against. There is no oppressed group; there’s no entity which will fight with them.

Johnson’s language in the “Remarks” also trivializes the struggle of Black people. When Johnson introduces the idea that all men are equal and talks about the struggle of race in America, he claims that “the reasons are deeply imbedded in history and tradition and the nature of man. We can understand—without rancor or hatred—how this all happened.” This prompts the reader to see segregation and struggle of Black people as being natural, rather than being forced upon them by white people. The phrase “understand—without rancor or hatred” gives an emotional amnesty to the oppressing agent and further hides the oppressor’s identity by removing all agents from the sentence. Furthermore, the struggle of Black people is termed as “this all.” This obscures all oppressive actions and trivializes the struggle of Black people. The same struggle is portrayed in “The Ballot or the Bullet” as “twentieth-century slave” and with visual words such as “hang” (Malcolm X Detroit). This implies that the problems Black people are facing is insignificant, which attacks the idea of frustration and necessity that Black people have to strive for economic and political independence.

Lastly, Johnson’s language in the “Remarks” seems to suggest the exclusion of the Black community from enforcement of the law. When talking about the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, Johnson says that he is “asking appropriate officials […] to promote greater understanding of law.” He further says that the Act “relies first on voluntary compliance, then on the efforts of local communities and States.” In doing so, he only allows the officials of the government and the states to execute the law. This is problematic because these people are the ones who play “a political con game” and use “trickery” to prevent Black people from voting, according to Malcolm X (Cleveland). Malcolm X suggests a different system of law enforcement. He claims that “a segregationist is a criminal” (Cleveland). Furthermore, he claims that “when a man has the audacity to put a police dog on you,” the Black people should “kill that dog” (Cleveland). In doing so, he suggests that the Black community must enforce the law themselves because others fail to do so. By excluding Black people from implementing the Civil Rights Act, Johnson’s language in the “Remarks” maintains the status quo and fails to give Black people political control over their own community.

In the language of Black Nationalism, the “Remarks” is essentially closing the Black people’s eyes to unsee the separation and struggle that have prompted them to take action against the government and fight for freedom. The “Remarks” promote desegregation, but an unfair one which maintain the status quo of white people and does not give the Black people control over their own community. This casts doubt on Johnson’s agenda that he might be pushing forward desegregation with minimal civil rights for Black people, while erasing the ideology of Black Nationalism. The Black community eventually got the ballot a year later, but whether that ballot means great economic, political, and social control and development is highly doubtful.

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