

**Review Article**

## **AN INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP AMONG LANGUAGE, SOCIETY AND POWER: A DISCURSIVE APPROACH**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study outlined why the topics of language, society and power might be worth studying, and why in this paper we are assuming that the three topics are related. Several ways of thinking about, or ‘modeling’, language have been offered and some of the kinds of variations in language we might encounter have been commented on. The study was concluded by looking at some of the ways language, power and society are related. The study of language is worthwhile, we believe, because it is such an important part of all our lives. We also believe that by studying it we can learn a great deal about how society is structured, how society functions, and what are the most widespread, but sometimes invisible, assumptions about different groups of people. Some people find that this knowledge is valuable because it contributes to their understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. Knowledge about language, society and power may enable people to make choices in their language use which make them feel better about themselves. People can also find knowledge about the areas discussed in this book valuable because it can be used to challenge what they perceive as unfairness in society.

**Keywords:** *Discursive Approach, Identity, Language Diversity, Power, Society*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Each language can be considered a unique and arbitrary system of representation which ‘cuts up reality’ in different ways. The resources of each language allow for different discourses, which can reflect and reinforce the ideologies of the groups they are used by. Thus, ‘language is not used in a context-less vacuum’ but ‘in a host of discourse contexts which are impregnated with the ideology of social systems and institutions (Simpson, 1993). It follows, therefore, that socially powerful groups can use language to perpetuate their ideologies. Because we do not always interrogate language use, assuming it instead to be a ‘natural, obvious’ medium of representation, we can become normalized to the ideological perspectives that discourses encode, seeing them instead as ‘common sense’. Indeed, this is what Carol Cohn experienced when she stated that integration into the Nuke speaking community made it increasingly difficult to think outside of the worldview embodied in the discourse. Thus, since language can be used to naturalize us into accepting certain ideas about ‘the way things are and the way things should be’ (Simpson 1993), we must learn to challenge its representations and, as Sapir once stated, fight its implications.

Language is used differently when it addresses different age groups in various contexts. As Hudson (1980) pointed out, we make a very subtle use of the language variability that is available to us. It allows us as speakers to locate ourselves in a multidimensional society and as hearers to locate others in that society as well. Age, like gender, profession, social class and geographic or ethnic origin, has been studied as one of the factors that age-related differences in vocabulary are often the ones most easily noticed by people, but there are other slightly less obvious linguistic differences between age groups as well.

According to Stockwell (2002), there is another aspect to the language and age issue. Language is a fundamental human activity through which we communicate our particular representation of the world. It is primarily through language that cultural values and beliefs are transmitted from one member of a society to another and from one generation to the next. Thus, we can often see within the structure of language reflections of the way that a particular culture views the world, and the kinds of distinctions that are held to be important. Age distinctions are frequently reflected in the world’s languages.

## **Review Article**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### *Language as a System*

There are several different ways of thinking about language; which way we think about it depends on which aspect of language we are interested in. One of the obvious ways of thinking about language is as a systematic way of combining smaller units into larger units for the purpose of communication. For example, we combine the sounds of our language (phonemes) to form words (lexical items) according to the ‘rules’ of the language(s) we speak. Those lexical items can be combined to make grammatical structures, again according to the syntactic ‘rules’ of our language(s). Language is essentially a rule-governed system of this kind, but there are other ways of thinking about how language works and what we do with it.

We usually assume that we use language to say what we mean. However, the processes by which we create meaning are actually very complicated indeed, so we’re going to begin with some ‘models’ of meaning.

As Lakoff (2000) holds, one model for explaining meaning is to assume that every group of sounds or letters which make up a word has a one-to-one relationship with a meaning. And for every meaning you can think of, there is a corresponding group of sounds (a spoken word) and letters (a written word). For the meaning ‘stop’ we have a red traffic light. For the meaning ‘go’ we use a green traffic light. An amber light on its own tells you to stop, and that the next light to show will be the red one on its own. In Britain, red and amber lights showing together mean that you should stop, but that the next signal to follow will be green for ‘go’. One of the reasons why language is actually a far more complicated entity than traffic lights is that we can use it to create new meanings.

Hooten (2002) assumed that there are expressions which we can remember hearing or seeing for the first time, but which we had no trouble understanding in their contexts. Perhaps you use some of these expressions yourself, or perhaps they strike you as archaic or peculiar. It’s difficult to think of examples of language being used creatively, because successful new uses get adopted very quickly and become just a normal part of everyday language. However, what you can probably still see is that words can be used in new ways to mean new things, and can be instantly understood by people who have never come across that word before. This ability is one of the things that set human language apart from the kind of communication that goes on, for example, between birds which can only convey a limited range of messages.

Another important dimension of language is the very different purposes we use language for all the time. In the course of a day you will probably use language referentially, affectively, aesthetically and phatically.

#### *Language Diversity*

Another aspect of language is the aspect of who speaks what language, and what variety of that language **they speak**. If we travel to France, we probably expect to be spoken to in French. Language boundaries and national boundaries frequently coincide, but of course the picture is more complicated than that. In many places which are not England or France, English or French is spoken (in India, Canada and many African countries for example). Moreover, in different countries, different versions of English or French are spoken. Indian English is different in some of its grammatical structures from British English, as well as in its pronunciation.

Languages do not vary only between countries; they also vary within countries. Schools in large cities are often attended by children who between them speak many different languages. Not only are many different languages spoken within primarily English-speaking countries such as Britain and the United States: there is also a great deal of variation within English itself. People often have very strong attitudes towards different languages and different varieties of language.

Watts (2002) Contended that language is a system, or rather a set of systems (a system of sounds, a system of grammar, a system of meaning); variations in usage are often systematic as well. Within these systems, there is scope for creativity and invention. How individuals use the systems available to them

## Review Article

varies according to who the speakers are, how they perceive themselves and what identity they want to project. Language use varies also according to the situation, whether it's public or private, formal or informal, who is being addressed and who might be able to overhear.

Walters (2002) was largely concerned with two functions of language: its referential function and its affective impact. These two functions are the ones most clearly associated with power. The referential function is the one associated with what objects and ideas are called and how events are described (i.e. how we represent the world around us and the effects of those representations on the way we think, as the letter above about the language of Ofsted reports highlighted). The affective function of language is concerned with who is 'allowed' to say what to whom, which is deeply tied up with power and social status. For example, 'It's time you washed your hair' would be an acceptable comment from a parent to a young child, but would not usually be acceptable from an employee to their boss.

### Power

Power is a complex and abstract concept, and an infinitely important influence on our lives. Power is defined in *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (1999) as: 'The ability of its holders to exact compliance or obedience of other individuals to their will' (p. 678). The *Dictionary* then quotes the eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau: 'The strongest man is never strong enough always to be master unless he transforms his power into right and obedience into duty' (p. 678). Language has a key role in transforming power into right and obedience into duty.

Some scholars would go further and say that language is the arena where the concepts of right (both in the sense of entitlement and in the sense of what is morally acceptable) and duty are created, and thus language actually creates power, as well as being a site where power is performed. In other words, the values and beliefs we hold which seem to be 'normal' and 'commonsense' are in fact constructs of the organizations and institutions around us, created and shared through language. It is more effective and efficient for a system to control our behavior by controlling our perception of reality than it is to control us with force (such as the police, prisons and the military).

We also find power at work in our everyday use of language. Discourse structures create power relations in terms of how we negotiate our relative status through interaction with others. Power can also be played out in other ways in ordinary conversation, and we all have experience of this; indeed it is probably true to say that power is a dimension of every single conversation we have, in one way or another.

### Saussure's View on Language as a Representational System

Saussure theorized that speakers of different languages engage in an arbitrary division of reality; that is, that 'different languages cut up reality in different ways' (Andersen, 1988). Thus, every language can be said to be a particular system of representation that mirrors, and indeed so reinforces, the 'world' of its speakers. The mental links that speakers make between concepts or perceptions and the labels used to 'name' them, is made at the level of *langue*, which is 'our [innate] knowledge of the systematic correspondences between sound and meaning which make up our language (including the knowledge of what utterances are possible . . . and what utterances are not)' (Andersen, 1988).

As soon as you hear or read these, you 'know' what concepts they refer to. You also know, again without explicit explanation, that they are acceptable English words – their sound or letter combinations (in speech and writing respectively) are all possible. Furthermore, you are able to make such judgments with words you have never heard before, or don't know the meaning of, such as *gleek* or *xng*. You would probably rate the former as a possible English word, but not the latter, which does not conform to English sound combinations.<sup>2</sup> And finally, you would also know, without instruction, that *I hope to see an elephant standing under that tree tomorrow*. is an acceptable English construction, while *\*hope standing an to elephant see under that I tomorrow*. is not.

### The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The work of Edward Sapir in particular, and that of his student Benjamin Lee Whorf, gave impetus to the theory that 'culturally based "ways of speaking" ' exist: a concept that would form the basis of what is known today as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. The hypothesis comprises two parts, linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism.

## Review Article

Linguistic relativity theorizes that the languages of different cultures comprise distinct systems of representation which are not necessarily equivalent. Linguistic determinism proposes that a language not only encodes certain ‘angles on reality’ but also affects the thought processes of its speakers. More specifically, Whorf’s position seems to have been that language is linked to ‘**unconscious habitual thought**’ and that there is ‘at least some causal influence from language categories to nonverbal cognition’ (Gumperz and Levinson, 1996).

### *One Language, Many Worlds*

Simpson (1993) defined **ideology** as ‘the taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs and value-systems which are shared collectively by social groups’. According to Simpson (1993), the transitivity model, used in the analysis of utterances to show ‘how speakers encode in language their mental picture of reality and how they account for their experience of the world’. Utterances potentially comprise three components: (1) *process*, which is typically expressed by a verb; (2) *participants* in the process: the participant who is the ‘doer’ of the process represented by the verb is known as the *actor*; the *goal* is the entity or person affected by the process; (3) *circumstances* associated with the process: in utterances such as *she cried loudly* or *he jumped from the cliff*, the underlined components provide extra information about the process, and can in fact be omitted.

Here, the foregrounding of the actor makes their involvement perceptually important. In passive voice, on the other hand, it is the goal which becomes foregrounded, and the actor is moved to the end of the utterance.

### *What is meant by ‘Politics’?*

Orwell (1946) claimed that ‘in our age there is no keeping out of politics. He contended that all issues are political issues’, and politics is concerned with power: the power to make decisions, to control resources, to control other people’s behavior and often to control their values. Even the most everyday decisions can be seen in a political light.

You make political decisions when you decide whether or not to buy recycled paper goods, organically grown vegetables or genetically modified food. When food is imported from countries with political regimes or particular policies opposed by people in your country, you will be lobbied not to buy goods from those countries, as was the case with the boycott on South African produce during the apartheid era. There is no avoiding political decision, even in the most domestic, everyday areas. Political language is in use all the time, all around us.

### *Politics and Ideology*

**Politics** is inevitably connected to **power**. The acquisition of power, and the enforcement of your own political beliefs, can be achieved in a number of ways; one of the obvious methods is through physical coercion. Many events regarded as significant in history involve the imposition, by force, of the rule of one group of people on to another group. This is what, in essence, most wars are about. Under dictatorial regimes, and military rule, those in power often control people by using force. In democracies, physical force is still used legally, for example to restrain people accused of criminal activity.

Other kinds of coercion are implemented in a democracy through the legal system. For example, there are laws about where you can park your car, about not destroying other people’s mail, about where and when you can drink alcohol. If you break these laws, you can be fined, or even arrested and imprisoned. These are all examples of political ends achieved by coercion. However, it is often much more effective to persuade people to act voluntarily in the way you want, that is, to ‘exercise power through the manufacture of consent or at least acquiescence towards it’ (Fairclough 1989: 4), instead of continually having to arrest them for wrongdoing. To secure power, it makes sense to persuade everyone else that what you want is also what they want. By encouraging citizens to embrace his or her goals of their own accord, any cost-conscious ruler is able to save money on armed forces and police officers. To achieve this, an ideology needs to be established: one which makes the beliefs which you want people to hold appear to be ‘common sense’, thus making it difficult for them to question that dominant ideology.

The concept of ideology was first introduced by followers of Karl Marx, notably Louis Althusser (1971). Althusser’s structural Marxist approach links the subject closely to ideology: the individual becomes an

### **Review Article**

ideological subject through a process of interpellation whereby discourses appeal to the individual as a subject. Althusser (1971) defines ideology as a system of representations that masks our true relations to one another in society by constructing imaginary relations between people and between them and the social formation. According to Althusser, all aspects of the social are controlled by ideology, which functions through ‘the repressive state apparatus’ (e.g. the police) and ‘the ideological state apparatus’ (e.g. the mass media). Althusser wondered how the vast majority of people had been persuaded to act against their own best interests, since they worked long hours at laborious tasks and lived in poverty, while a very small number of people made enormous amounts of money from their labor, and enjoyed lives of luxury. In order to explain why the impoverished majority didn’t just refuse to work in this system and overthrow the rich minority, Althusser reasoned that the poor had been persuaded that this state of affairs was ‘natural’, and nothing could be done to change it.

Today, ‘ideology’ tends to be used in a wider context, to refer to any set of beliefs which, to the people who hold them, appear to be logical and ‘natural’. ‘Ideology’ is not necessarily a pejorative term, because it can be argued that virtually everything we know and think is in fact an ideology. People can question the ideologies of their culture, but it is often difficult. Not only can it be a challenging intellectual task, but it can also result in social stigma. People who question the dominant ideology often appear not to make sense; what they say won’t sound logical to anyone who holds that ideology. In extreme cases, people who ask such questions may even appear to be insane. So, while it is possible to question the dominant ideology, there is often a price to be paid for doing so.

#### *Language as Thought Control: Newspeak and Political Correctness*

If we look at linguistic determinism within the context of politics and ideology, we can see that it might be possible to use language to manufacture an ideology which could steer the way people think. Politicians throughout the ages have owed much of their success to their skilful use of rhetoric, whereby they attempt to persuade their audience of the validity of their views by their subtle use of elegant and persuasive language.

Language can be used not only to *steer* people’s thoughts and beliefs but also to *control* their thoughts and beliefs. If we accept that the kind of language we use to represent a concept, it can alter the way in which it is perceived, and then you might wonder whether, by controlling the discourse, one can control how another person thinks. A totalitarian society of the future has Ingsoc (English Socialism) as the dominant political system. The system is enforced by the mandatory requirement for all citizens to use a language called Newspeak, a radically revised version of the English language from which many meanings available to us today has been removed.

Orwell explains that ‘the purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible’ ([1949] 1984). The principles of Newspeak are therefore grounded in the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis: that language determines our perception of the world.

One of the goals of politicians must be to persuade their audience of the validity of their basic claims. This can be achieved in political discourse by: presupposition and implicature. These tools can lead the hearer to make assumptions about the existence of information that is not made explicit in what is actually said, but that might be deduced from what was said. In addition, implying rather than baldly asserting an idea leaves speakers with a ‘get out clause’, since they didn’t actually state *X* but merely implied it. The use of implicature and presupposition is an integral part of all human communication. However, it is particularly useful in advertising and political discourse because it can make it more difficult for the audience to identify and (if they wish to) reject views communicated in this way, and can persuade people to take something for granted which is actually open to debate (Trimble, 2002).

This presupposes that the government does not have control of the situation.

#### *Implicature*

Like presuppositions, implicatures lead the listener to infer something that was not explicitly asserted by the speaker. However, unlike presuppositions, implicatures operate over more than one phrase or sentence and are much more dependent on shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer and on the

## Review Article

surrounding context of the discourse. Oliver Letwin, a Conservative MP, addresses a question to David Blunkett, the Labour Home Secretary, concerning the government's plans to institute a system of national identity cards:

This issue is too important an area of our national life, too central to the protection of society against fraud, and too fundamental to the preservation of our liberties, for us to accept such obscurity and spin. Will the Home Secretary assure the House that in the coming days and weeks he will make it clear what he is actually asking us to debate?

Although in some respects implicature is more indirect than presupposition, what Letwin was implying was clearly not lost on the Home Secretary:

There appears to be a presumption by the Opposition that if they mention the word 'spin', the whole world will believe that someone has been spinning. Although I specifically instructed all those around me not to spin, appeared on no programmes – unlike the right hon. Gentleman – and kept away from saying anything about this over the last few days, I am accused of spin. I will tell the House what I am spinning. I am spinning the right of the British people to decide over the next six months whether they want a sensible way of confirming their own identity (Hansard, 2002).

### *Persuasive Language – the Power of Rhetoric*

Rhetoric is the skill of elegant and persuasive speaking, perfected by the ancient Greeks. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it more precisely as 'the art of using language so as to persuade or influence others; the body of rules to be observed by a speaker or writer in order that he may express himself with eloquence'. Politicians often adopt identifiable habits of speech and observe a broader 'body of rules' which govern the linguistic structures and devices which they use to increase the impact of their ideas.

### *Metaphor*

Basically, metaphor is a way of comparing two different concepts. A distinction is often made between metaphor and simile in that a metaphor asserts that something is something else, e.g. 'The mind is but a barren soil', and while a simile only asserts that something is similar to something else, e.g. 'The mind is like barren soil'. However, in both cases the mechanism is similar. As listeners or readers we know that the mind is not literally barren soil. Rather, the speaker or writer is inviting us to understand the mind in terms of barren soil. One of the challenges politicians face is that they often have to talk about abstract concepts in ways that make them seem more concrete, partly so that they can be more easily grasped, and partly to avoid boring their audience. Examples for metaphor about the word "economy" are economy as a machine, the *economic motor*, *engine of the economy* (Harris, 2003).

Personification is a special type of metaphor that entails giving human characteristics to inanimate objects or abstract ideas. In political discourse, it is frequently used when referring to *countries*. Sometimes this is done largely for poetic effect, as in US President Lyndon Johnson's address on the assassination of Martin Luther King: '*Once again the heart of America is heavy.*' At other times, the goal is more clearly ideological. For example, various British television news broadcasts during the 1990s referred to Germany's strong and influential position in the European Union with the metaphor '*Germany is the bully in the playground.*'

### *Euphemism*

A **euphemism** is a figure of speech which uses mild, inoffensive or vague words as a means of making something seem more positive than it might otherwise appear. Euphemisms are commonly used when talking about taboo subjects, such as death or sex. We might talk about *passing away* instead of *dying*, or *making love* rather than *sexual intercourse*. It is a device which can help to make what might actually be seen as questionable ideas or issues more palatable and 'normal' and is a potentially useful tool for politicians when engaging in what Orwell called the 'defense of the indefensible'.

The use of euphemism is particularly extensive when discussing military matters. Two of the examples, '*surgically clean strikes*' and '*clean bombs*', achieve their effect in part from the positive connotations of *clean* and the associations that exist in everyday discourse between *clean* and *healthy*.

In the 1990s Slobodan Milosevic, President of the former Yugoslavia, embarked on a programme of what he termed '*ethnic cleansing*'. In reality, this referred to the forcible removal of the non-Serbian

## **Review Article**

civilian population in an attempt to redesign Yugoslavia along purely ethnic lines. He did this by bombarding towns with heavy artillery, besieging villages and massacring civilians. The term *ethnic cleansing* could be seen as an attempt not only to ‘hide’ these details from public discourse but also to present them in a positive light. We might consider the term *ethnic cleansing* to be a prime example of euphemism, although the degree to which it fooled anyone for very long is highly debatable.

### *Media, Language and Power*

One of the most important and interesting aspects of the potential power of the media from a linguistic point of view is the way that people and events get reported. Since the early 1970s, linguists have been interested in the relationship between how a story gets told, and what that might indicate about the point of view that it gets told from (Lee, 1992; Simpson, 1993; Montgomery, 1996). This level of language use is called linguistic representation (how linguistic structures can determine the way events are represented, and this leads to different versions, or views, of the same event. If we analyze the language used in newspaper articles, we find contrasts in how the story was told in each newspaper, and what the implications of this event might be. Looking at the linguistic choices made in the two texts means asking: what kinds of words or phrases are being used to refer to people or places or events, what kinds of actions are involved, and who is responsible for them? These choices are part of the process of representation in discourse. By examining the way events are represented, we can begin to see more clearly how different points of view, or ideologies, are constructed linguistically. We use the media for many different purposes; for information, for entertainment and for education, through a range of programmes for schools as well as university broadcasts. We listen to the news on radio and television for information about local, national and international events; many people spend hours every week being entertained by a variety of programmes from regular soap operas to weekly quizzes and chat shows. Sometimes, the boundaries become blurred between information and entertainment, and a new term has been coined to refer to programmes which serve both functions: ‘infotainment’. Wildlife programmes, docudramas and the growing number of talk shows could all be described as having a dual role: to entertain as well as to inform. There is also an ongoing debate about what television is for, often centered on the quality of programmes such as the popular ‘reality TV’ series *Big Brother*. This kind of television gives us another kind of viewing experience, seen positively by some people as an interesting social and psychological media experiment, negatively by others as being voyeuristic and banal. The mass media provide the means of access to much information and represent a potentially powerful force in our society. This is partly due to the fact that the media can select what counts as news, who gets into the papers and on to television and radio and, most importantly for linguists, the way that stories about people and events get told and the frameworks in which people get to appear and talk.

### *Commonsense Discourses*

The attribution of a source is also important to the level of ‘factuality’ that can be claimed for a story. The tendency to represent people, situations and events in regular and predictably similar ways results in the linguistic choices that are used in these representations becoming established in our culture as the most usual, prevailing ways of talking or writing about types of people and events. Once something has been represented in a particular way, it becomes more difficult to talk ‘around’, or outside that representation, to find an alternative way of describing a social group X, or a political event Y. These prevailing choices in representation are called **commonsense** or **dominant discourses** (Fairclough, 1989).

### *The Power to Change?*

If the **media** are powerful as a site for producing and maintaining dominant discourses, they can also be a possible site for change. One of the most publicly discussed changes in recent years has been the move to use non-sexist language, and to encourage **symmetry** in the representation of men and women. Sometimes the press can be seen to be trying to adopt grammatical forms which are neutral, such as the **third person pronoun** ‘they’ or ‘them’ as a non-specified-gender **pronoun**.

### *Variation in Register*

Media are constantly shaping our expectations about the way different kinds of information are transmitted, and these conventional formats can play an important part in the way we interpret the

### **Review Article**

messages they contain. Language plays a central role in structuring these conventions through the association of particular registers with specific types of programme, such as the language of documentaries, where voice-over commentaries can often produce an effect of authority and objectivity in their account of events on the screen (Fairclough, 1995).

#### *Public Participation in the Media*

Programmes which involve audience participation, such as *Oprah Winfrey* and *Donahue* in the United States, *Kilroy* and *Esther* in Britain, have been growing in popularity and number, and achieve very high viewing ratings. There is some disagreement about whether these programmes provide the opportunity for more democratic debate in the media, or whether they in fact depoliticize important issues by presenting them in this format. Some theorists (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994) have argued that these programmes open up access to an important public domain for people whose voices and opinions are not usually heard on television, and that talk shows provide a powerful space for the voices of ordinary, lay members of the public to be privileged over the voices of institutional representatives and experts whose opinions and views usually predominate elsewhere in other media genres. Others (e.g. Fairclough, 1995) have argued against this view, saying that audience participation programmes are structured in such a way that the discourse of the expert's and the institution is still the framing, dominant discourse, while the discourse of lay participants is always mediated and constrained within the institutional format.

#### *Language, Society and Virtual Power*

Computer mediated communication (CMC) can take a variety of forms, from email exchanges to synchronous (real-time) interaction in chat rooms and MUDs (Multi-User Dimensions), to asynchronous (postponed-time) interaction in newsgroups and bulletin boards. David Crystal (2001) provided a comprehensive overview of the linguistic features of CMC, and the language we use to communicate on the web. This has been given various names including 'netspeak', 'netlish', 'weblish', 'wired-style' and 'cyberspeak', and some of the words and expressions first coined in this context have now become part of the language we use every day. Crystal gives examples of terms such as 'multi-tasking', 'dot.com', and 'he's 404' (2001: 19) which are used 'offline' as well as 'online'. But many of the questions we ask in this book about how language can be powerful apply to social relations in virtual realities just as much as they do to social relations in 'real' life (IRL).

#### *Social Identity*

In the early days of discourse analysis, it was thought that this new medium would result in more democratic communication, because a person's social identity (their gender, ethnicity, age) can be hidden in the virtual world. In cyberspace, people can also play with identity and present themselves in different personas, so the internet would be a place where social hierarchies become leveled out, and people could encounter each other in a more equal way. However, this has turned out to be not quite so simple. As Nancy Deuel found in her study of virtual sex interactions, stereotypical interpretations of gendered behavior still prevail. So while it may be possible to disguise your identity on the Net, the people you interact with will still make assumptions about which you are based on what you say and how you say it. Van Dijk (1993) maintained that social inequality, at the societal level, is not simply or always reproduced by individual (speech) acts such as commands. This may be obvious from commands appropriately and legitimately executed in relationships of more or less accepted everyday power relations, such as those between parents and children, between superiors and subordinates, or between police officers and citizens. Hence, special social conditions must be satisfied for such discourse properties to contribute to the reproduction of dominance.

#### *Turn Construction and Interruption*

It appears that men interrupt women more than they interrupt other men, far more than women interrupt men, and more than women interrupt other women (Coates, 1993; James and Clarke, 1993). The finding that men interrupt women so frequently is often argued to indicate that men act as if they have more right than women to speak in mixed-sex conversations, and that women act as if they had less right to speak than men. The research in this area also discovered that women, particularly in single-sex conversations, are more likely to overlap one another's talk than men are. This overlapping talk differs from

## Review Article

interruptions because two or more speakers can continue talking at the same time on the same topic without any apparent sense of their right to speak being violated. Women value cooperation and collaboration very highly in their conversations, while men perhaps feel uncomfortable with the degree of intimacy that overlapping talk involves.

### *Back Channel Support*

Research suggests women are often more active than men in supportive roles in conversation. It appears that women give more back channel support than men do. Back channel support is the verbal and non-verbal feedback listeners give to speakers. Listeners can give feedback by saying things like *mmm, uhuh, yeah, by nodding, smiling, frowning and by other body language including gestures and body posture*. People who have written on this include Zimmerman and West (1975), Fishman (1983), Coates (1989) and Jenkins and Cheshire (1990). Not only do the studies suggest that women give more back channel support than men, some studies suggest that women's sense of when it is appropriate to give back channel support is more 'finely tuned' than men's so that speakers really feel they are being listened to.

### *What is Ethnicity?*

For some ethnic group belongingness seemed to be based on skin color and/or apparent 'race' classification, or on the place (they thought) the person was from. *Ethnic* is ultimately derived from the Greek *ethnos* or 'nation'; and a nation is defined as a community which has a common history, cultural tradition and language. Since we each have cultural, historical and linguistic affiliations, we each also have an ethnic identity, in terms of which we can be (and often are) labeled. In contexts where ethnic majorities and minorities co-exist, the former term typically refers to a group which shares a socially dominant culture and the latter, to a group which shares ethnic affiliations that are socially marginalized.

In many contemporary settings, the ethnic majority has been established for a longer period of time and the minority groups are the more recent products of migration, although it must be noted that this is not always the case. In addition, majorities and minorities do not necessarily entail a significant numerical difference. The one thing that all instances of co-existing majorities and minorities have in common however, is the fact that the socio-cultural dominance of the former group establishes their ideologies, or 'assumptions, beliefs and value systems' (Simpson, 1993), as norms which, it is typically assumed, 'everyone' shares.

### *Language Use as a Marker of Ethnic Identity*

A perception of, and angle of telling on, an ethnic group's 'otherness' creates, for some members of that group, a desire to acculturate to what is considered mainstream. This 'desire' is often fed by an association of mainstream cultural norms with social success. However, for many members of that group, the pull of the mainstream is not a straightforward affair – there is often a tension between acculturation to wider norms (both culturally and linguistically) and the maintenance of individual ethnic identity. Thus, members of ethnic minorities continue to participate in cultural, religious and linguistic practices which mark them as distinctive.

In terms of language use, this can mean preserving or revitalizing a mother tongue different from that utilized and made official by the ethnic majority. Such choices are not always perceived favorably by members of majorities, who have the power to curtail and obstruct them. It would seem that difference, particularly in relation to ethnicity, is sometimes seen as threatening to the majority, but important to the minority. However, since the former group typically has the social power to enforce their position, the maintenance of cultural and linguistic distinctiveness for the latter group remains a difficulty. This representation in turn reinforces the perception of these groups as different and, sometimes, as threateningly distinct from the norm. To diminish the threat, accommodation to the norm on every practical level, including language use, is therefore encouraged or imposed by the majority. At the same time, however, minority groups do try to maintain their distinctiveness from a norm which ostracizes them, and to express positive in-group solidarity. One of the ways in which they do this is through language use: in attempting to reclaim abusive terminology and in preserving their native tongues in the face of opposition, they are rejecting the labels and norms imposed by the majority and 'taking power back' (Andersen, 1988). Speakers in certain regions of Britain might use the word *bairn* as opposed to

## **Review Article**

*child*, while American speakers of English are likely to use *diaper* where a British speaker would use *nappy* (Trudgill, 1990).

In spoken language, a dialect is often associated with a particular accent, so a speaker who uses a regional dialect will also be more than likely to have the corresponding regional accent. This does not always work the other way around though. While it is rare for someone who uses regional grammar and vocabulary to do so without a regional accent, it is very common for a speaker to have a regional accent but use grammar and lexis that are not associated with a particular geographical area, as not all dialects and accents are regional. Both Britain and the United States have standard varieties of English and these varieties are also dialects, albeit prestigious ones. As prestigious dialects they are social rather than regional; that is they are preferred by particular (usually higher) social groups, and in particular (usually more formal) social situations. Prestige variety is the variety which society associates with education and high social standing.

### *Does Social Class Really Affect Language?*

People in certain social positions will speak in certain ways, but is it the case that social class affects language in reality, not just in our expectations or in literature? In other words, is it really true that the higher a person is on the social scale, the more their speech will reflect prestige norms? Well, it seems that the answer to this is 'yes'. Those of you who live in Britain may have observed that people who belong to the highest social classes tend not to have a particularly 'broad' regional accent and dialect, or, at least, they don't have a variety that can be easily identified as belonging to a particular region. Dialect leveling is a process whereby differences between regional varieties are reduced, features which make varieties distinctive disappear and new features appear and are adopted by speakers over a wide geographical area.

When we talk about being 'higher' or 'lower' on the social scale, or about 'higher' and 'lower' social classes, we are making the assumption that society can be stratified according to class. Stratification means dividing something into hierarchical layers so that one layer is above or higher up than another one. People on each layer have similarities with each other and are considered equals, but they are different from, and not equal to, the people on the other layers. In the case of social class, we commonly talk of 'upper', 'middle' and 'lower' or 'working' class stratification.

Here the discussion is on the relationship between regional and social variation and the connection that holds between a linguistic variety and social class. This connection might be perceived (based on prevailing attitudes regarding linguistic norms) or based on a more reliable assessment of a speaker's social class, calculated by a variety of different means. We have looked at the difficulties in objectively determining the social class of speakers and at the way in which linguists have approached this problem in their investigations into linguistic variation. The results of such investigations suggest that the higher a person's social class, the closer their linguistic variety is to prestige norms. In addition, speakers change their speech, adopting more or less prestigious styles, in accordance with the perceived demands of a given situation.

### *Power and Linguistic Imperialism*

A sense of cultural identity is often centered on a particular language, and speakers' perceptions of the connection between the languages they use and that identity is well documented (Gumperz, 1982a; Alladina and Edwards, 1991; Gal, 1998). Language rights and recognition are often important issues in socio-political conflicts all around the world. Maintenance of a minority language within a majority culture is often associated with the maintenance of a minority's values and with the continuation of its unique cultural identity. Loss of a language can also be associated with a loss of cultural identity. Languages can be lost for a variety of reasons. For example, speakers may choose to shift from one language to another as social conditions change, or one language may be imposed and another suppressed by a dominant power.

### *Whole Languages*

Fasold (1984) gave a summary of the academic research into people's language attitudes around the world, showing, for example, how bilingual or multilingual speakers may regard one language as more

## **Review Article**

suitable to a particular topic than another, or may regard one language as aesthetically more pleasing than another, or have clearly expressed feelings about their languages in relation to their social and cultural identities. In Britain, although many languages are in daily use, only English has official recognition. For the English especially, multilingualism is viewed with suspicion and as a threat to national unity. Attitudes towards English in the United States have an association with national unity similar to that found in Britain – multilingualism is seen as threatening and subversive and opposed to images of the ideal society as a homogeneous one. Homogeneity and national unity, therefore, mean getting rid of linguistic differences. The promotion of English, both in Britain and in the United States, leads to the marginalization of the other languages which exist there. Popular attitudes may on the surface see them as less useful or expressive than English, even as unintelligible. On another level, minority languages and their speakers may be seen as divisive, even dangerous, and a threat to political, social or economic stability; expressions, such as *right, like, you know, see you later also come* in for negative treatment. Some of these expressions may be associated with certain groups and may function as identity markers.

### *The Effects*

We have seen that attitudes to languages and language varieties can be related to social and cultural identity, to power and control, to notions of prestige and solidarity, and that our attitudes are often influenced by conventionally held stereotypes of language forms and their speakers. Our ability to respond to different types of language is not always negative. Giles and Coupland (1991) also talk about our perceptions being related to ‘uncertainty reduction’. When you meet someone for the first time, you try to work out what the other person is like so that you know how to respond to them and how to behave appropriately. Listening to the way they talk is one of the factors you can use in forming an impression about them and the formality of the social situation, and you can adapt your behavior, including your linguistic behavior (your speech style) to match theirs. It’s also useful to be able to manipulate your speech styles in other situations; for example you may want to give an impression of status by adopting a more prestigious style when you want to make a complaint about goods or services.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this study, we looked at the way our attitudes to language can be focused on any level of language use. As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, our attitudes to language are far from trivial and we have seen how they may be influential in our assessments of the characteristics of individuals and social groups. These assessments can then be carried over into the decisions that are made in important areas of our lives such as law and order, employment, education and equality of opportunity. Awareness of how attitudes might be formed or manipulated may not make us immune to them, but it may help us to evaluate their influence on our own practices. One of the most fundamental ways we have of establishing our identity, and of shaping other people’s views of who we are, is through our use of language. Because language is so important in the construction of individual and social identities, it can also be a powerful means of exercising social control. Identifying yourself as belonging to a particular group or community often means adopting the linguistic conventions of that group, and this is not just in relation to the words you use, but also in relation to the way that you say them. The way those conventions are defined and maintained is usually controlled by the group rather than the individual.

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