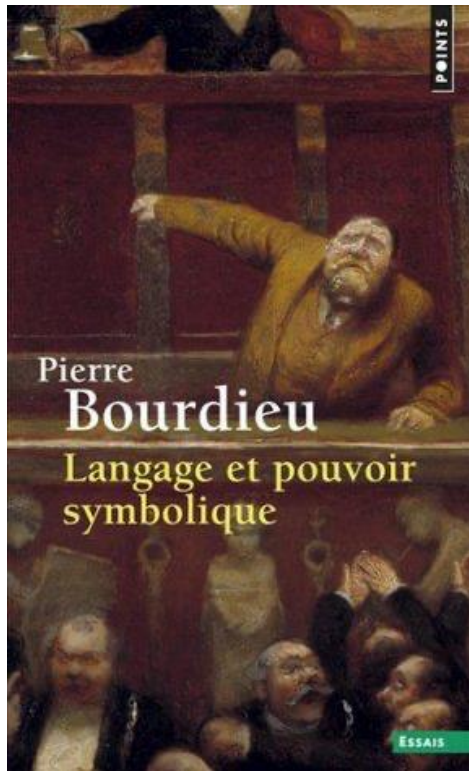


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Bourdieu's Language and Symbolic Power

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The concept of symbolic power was first introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to account for the tacit, almost unconscious modes of cultural/social domination occurring within the everyday social habits maintained over conscious subjects. Symbolic power accounts for discipline used against another to confirm that individual's placement in a social hierarchy, at times in individual relations but most basically through system institutions, in particular education.

Bourdieu's work was primarily concerned with the dynamics of power in society, and especially the diverse and subtle ways in which power is transferred and social order maintained within and across generations. In conscious opposition to the idealist tradition of much of Western philosophy, his work often emphasized the corporeal nature of social life and stressed the role of [practice] and embodiment in social dynamics.

Bourdieu was insistent that he did not "do theory." He constantly warns us against the seductions of pure conceptual disquisition and the dangers of "theorizing," which so easily veers into scholasticism. (Around 1989, he turned down an invitation by Jeffrey Alexander, apostle of neo-functionalism, to hold a sort of "world summit" of social theory with Jürgen Habermas, simply because that agenda just did not make sense to him, to say nothing of the casting.) So the seminar strives to pay attention to how Bourdieu forges and uses concepts, what he does with them and what he makes them do, rather than how he defines them or whom he derives them from. Knowing the 13 – or is it 26? – different definitions of habitus one can quickly cull from texts spanning nearly a half-century tells you little about when, why, and how to deploy the notion to gear in the

genetic mode of thinking that it encapsulates. (For an elaboration on this point, see my “ Concise Genealogy and Anatomy of Habitus,” Wacquant, 2016.)

Bourdieu the “reproduction theorist,” when his first three books were about the cataclysmic transformation of a colonial society at war; Bourdieu who “ignores agency,” when the very purpose of habitus is to repatriate the inventive agent at the heart of social analysis; Bourdieu who “didn’t theorize the linkages between fields” when one of his most distinctive concepts, field of power, is designed especially for that; or Bourdieu who is “blind to ethnicity,” when he wrote extensively on cultural gradations of (dis)honor and was himself an “ethnic” in French society, and so on.

To define a concept, however, is not proof of its analytic potential, and it remains to be shown how much Bourdieu is able to get out of such a restricted definition, one that may eventually entrap him in exactly the kind of subjectivist position he rejects: the reduction of relations of domination to sheer relations of signification. The French social theorist will have to go well beyond issues of nomination and classification if, as I believe, his scheme is to contribute decisively to class analysis. For the state does considerably more than assign titles and impose taxonomies: it also manages a gigantic web of bridges between fields (legal, political, economic, social, cultural) whose boundaries, barriers to entry, and specific stakes it can easily alter, by force if need be, thereby greatly affecting the structuration of classes. The question arises, then, as to whether state power constitutes a species of capital sui generis and state institutions a field quintessentially different from other fields. (“Symbolic Violence and the Making of the French Agriculturalist: An Enquiry into Pierre Bourdieu’s Sociology,” Wacquant, 1987, pp. 79-80).

Bourdieu develops a forceful critique of traditional approaches to language, including the linguistic theories of Saussure and Chomsky and the theory of speech--acts elaborated by Austin and others. He argues that language should be viewed not only as a means of communication but also as a medium of power through which individuals pursue their interests and display their practical competence.

Drawing on the concepts which are part of his distinctive theoretical approach, Bourdieu maintains that linguistic utterances or expressions can be understood as the product of the relation between a linguistic market and a linguistic habitus. When individuals produce linguistic expressions, they deploy accumulated resources and they implicitly adapt their expressions to the demands of the social field or market. Hence every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant they may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce. Bourdieu’s account sheds fresh light on the ways in which linguistic usage varies according to considerations such as class and gender. It also opens up a new approach to the ways in which language is used in the domain of politics.

Through his text *Language and Symbolic Power*, French linguist Pierre Bourdieu introduces a market metaphor in order to explain the ways that communicative exchanges relay both messages contained in words and nonlinguistic information about a person’s social status. He explains that in the process of “linguistic exchange,” speakers are able to gain “symbolic profit” and ultimately, societal advancement. Within this metaphor, Bourdieu coins the terms “linguistic competence,” a person’s ability to anticipate the requirements of and communicate effectively in certain contexts, along with the term “legitimate language,” which is the language of the elite and powerful.

Bourdieu highlights “their especially keen sensitivity to the tension of the market, and by the same token, to linguistic correction in themselves and others” (Bourdieu 509). Bourdieu seeks to convey that the *petits bourgeois* are able to adapt their language so that they can achieve maximum symbolic profits from a linguistic exchange.

The connections between literacy and social positioning can be analyzed through the different forms of capital – economic, cultural (i.e. knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications), symbolic (i.e. accumulated prestige or honor), etc., which can be accumulated through family or social institutions (Menard-Warwick & Dabach, 2004).

Central to the discussion are the two concepts 'linguistic market;' and 'linguistic habitus' that are considered as "sites of struggle and competition where individuals or agents strive to maintain or alter their position and where their capacity to compete is determined by the volume of capital they possess" (Riagáin, 1997, p.

Linguistic capital, together with other forms of capital, defines position of an individual within the social hierarchy (Riagáin, 1997). Bourdieu also speaks of a linguistic market competence as capital. His extensive use of the language of economics (e.g., markets, profit, price, investment), according to Riagáin (1997), implies that individual adopts linguistic strategy that contributes to a realization of desirable outcome like profit that symbolizes prestige.

Social dynamics will then contribute to the understanding of the role of education. For Bourdieu, literacy learning involves interrelated aspects of complex individual, social, and cultural contexts. This multidisciplinary perspective allows us to increase our knowledge and deepen our understanding of concepts and ideas that might form social groups. In the academic field, the habitus provided educators with a different way of viewing social institutions where students and teachers act and react analytically based on their practices, perceptions, and attitudes already in place.

Teachers and students are viewed to have socially structured resources and competencies that enable them to use language in dealing with and understanding relationships, hierarchies, and literacy practices (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000). "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" (Bourdieu , 1991, p. 37).

The use of language through the power of media is also associated to the fields of politics and social sciences. Bourdieu's dynamic model of the relationship between society and politics explains how language is used in political systems that affect social conditions.

In addition, Bourdieu also explains through the concepts of habitus, symbolic power, religious capital, and field the occurrence of social movements within institutions like religious groups. For example, the introduction of women's ordination movement in the Catholic Church (Stone, 2001). It is therefore important to consider Bourdieu's concepts of 'linguistic habitus' and linguistic market, as well as the different capitals in analyzing discourse social, political, and economic processes and changes because language should not only be viewed in the traditional perspective but also in the different context to maximize the use and functions of language in specific fields of study and practice.