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Language and Symbolic Power by Pierre Bourdieu; John B. Thompson; Gino Raymond;  
Matthew Adamson

Review by: John Heritage

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cities and were themselves a dominating culture now come to ruin, is a fine place to begin.

**Language and Symbolic Power.** *Pierre Bourdieu* (John B. Thompson, ed.; Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991. 312 pp.

JOHN HERITAGE

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The diverse but overlapping essays in this volume, written between 1975 and 1984, range over topics in language, ritual, symbolism, and classification, and their relation to political power. In the first two essays, Bourdieu makes a frontal assault on linguistic models and metaphors—which, from Saussure on, have focused exclusively on the internal structure of languages, and which, through the fictions of a homogeneous speech community populated by ideal speaker-hearers, have disconnected the study of language from social relations, social class, and power. He illustrates the sociological deficiency of this perspective by pointing to the ways in which it ignores and naturalizes the process through which the “linguistic communities” of Europe have been created. This process—closely tied to the formation of nation-states—has involved the imposition of elite-based official languages through education and the standardization of written forms. The creation of a “standard language” inaugurates an environment of differential access to socially valued linguistic forms and of socially disvalued dialects and regional and class-based variations, while establishing a context for conflict and competition involving interrelated linguistic and social differentiation.

In his theoretical elaboration of this view (ch. 2), Bourdieu argues that particular linguistic practices derive value from their association with prestige groups and institutional authority. This value emerges and is profited from in relation to particular markets. For example, formal discourse provides a context in which standardized accents, vocabulary, and grammar are highly valued, though they can also, on occasion, be exploited through “strategies of condescension” (pp. 68–69). The members of a linguistic community share a knowledge of and commitment to the relative values of particular linguistic practices that is cultivated in schools and the public institutions of society. But each member is also the carrier of a set of such practices—preconceptually ingrained in the individual’s vocal and

conceptual routines as a linguistic “habitus”—that represent a stock of linguistic “capital” which will further, or hinder, the person’s social and linguistic projects.

In subsequent essays, Bourdieu focuses on symbolism and ritual. Radicalizing Austin on felicity conditions, he points to the wide range of extralinguistic institutional constraints on performatives, with a particular focus on the powers of delegates and spokespersons as the users of the symbolic capital of social groups. In a related essay (ch. 4), Bourdieu considers the role of investitures and credentializing as means of creating and conferring symbolic capital. Shared recognition of and commitment to the value of these symbols is a precondition for their effectiveness. The topic of challenges to this recognition emerges in “Description and Prescription” (ch. 5), which deals with the strategies of struggle between the agents of “heretical” discourses (which relativize and problematize these symbols and the classifications on which they rest) and those of dominant groups that attempt to render such discourses transparent and natural.

Part 3 of this volume develops Bourdieu’s analysis of symbolic power in relation to political institutions. Here the central focus of his discussion concerns the separation, within a representative democracy, between the general public and political professionals that has reduced the public to the status of “consumers” (p. 172). This separation, he argues in “Political Representation,” is one that leaves professionals with the cultural capital to create political products, programs, and campaigns, but to do so within a limited set of options. Entry into the professional field is limited by rites of institution that confer cultural capital while also creating a “political habitus”—a skill in and a commitment to the “rules of the game.”

Underlying Bourdieu’s particular arguments is a general conception of social organization as a set of partially integrated social spheres—economic, political, religious, intellectual—each of which is characterized by differential access to valued resources. In these spheres, the participants act through symbols and systems of representation that are themselves contested. Competitive action and its outcomes in any particular sphere cannot be reductively viewed as the product of positions in others, and Bourdieu is generally critical of most forms of Marxist analysis. Instead, this book represents an important effort to rethink issues of language, symbolism, and legitimacy in the context of a flexible conceptualization of social class and its potentials. Rooted in distinctively European (and French) preoccupa-

tions with political centralization and social class, Bourdieu's topics, as Thompson notes in an exemplary introduction, raise innumerable issues for more concrete and focused empirical research. In this context, it is disappointing that he makes so few connections with micro-sociological concepts—for example, that of “face”—which offer direct avenues for linking his macrosociological themata to more directly documentable aspects of human conduct. Nonetheless, this book offers an important and stimulating macrosociological vision in the analysis of language, symbolization, and classificatory processes that connects them to social relations in ways that demand more detailed investigation. It is a vision whose distinctiveness and distinction places all of us in Bourdieu's debt.

**Power in Family Discourse.** *Richard J. Watts.* Contributions to the Sociology of Language, 63. New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1991. 316 pp.

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This book advances efforts to explain how verbal behavior establishes, consolidates, and renegotiates power in small human groups. Watts offers a penetrating sociolinguistic synthesis of conversation analysis and social network theory that focuses on power dynamics in families. Using audiotapes of home life in some British families as data, he clarifies the relationship between language use and social structure.

The book succeeds on three levels. First, it provides cogent integrative reviews of key concepts necessary for coming to grips with power relations in families (i.e., power, status, network, turn-at-talk, floor, and conversational topic). The reviews are multidisciplinary and show sound judgment in the evaluation and clarification of the concepts. The material on interruptions is the most comprehensive available anywhere. Second, the book effectively integrates concepts from diverse literatures. Especially noteworthy is an elegant synthesis that elucidates how the structure of conversation on the one hand, and social networks on the other, are inherently involved in the production of power and status in small groups. Third, the analysis introduces important new principles that are demonstrated in detailed transcripts and effective diagrams.

At the core of the book is a relentlessly diligent analysis of the talk of an extended family

group. The data consist of ten hours of talk at family gatherings collected over a three-year period (some recordings of radio talk shows are used for special purposes). The methods of conversation analysis are applied to dozens of detailed transcriptions of members of the family in routine home settings (e.g., family dinners). The family includes the author, his mother, stepfather, sister, aunt, uncle, brother-in-law, and two nephews. By virtue of blood ties and socialization, Watts was a special participant-observer with an insider's perspective. A risk in this approach is that objectivity is lost. The author, however, seems to avoid this pitfall.

An important ongoing concern of the book is the social significance of conversational interruptions. Watts uses the considerable prior work on this phenomenon and his own contributions to address this phenomenon, which is endemic to family talk. Many assumptions about interruptions in several disciplines (e.g., psychology) may need to be reevaluated in light of Watts's analysis. Simultaneous talk may be interruptive or supportive. Watts provides a trenchant analysis of the conditions under which simultaneous talk is interruptive and “face threatening.”

A valuable concept, “emergent networks,” is introduced. This refers to relationship links that are created during a strip of conversation. The network concepts of centrality and density are applied to emerging networks as an element of social power. Watts provides illuminating second-by-second transcripts and diagrams that demonstrate how emergent networks develop and how the power of each participant grows or wanes depending on the course of the conversation. Quantitative measures presented could prove to be very useful in psychology, sociology, and family therapy.

This is a fascinating book to read and it avoids distracting technical jargon. Readers should be cautious, however, not to be misled by the book's title. Indeed, almost all the data were collected at family gatherings by a family member, and thus represent “family discourse.” But, the book does not analyze family relationships, as such, or kinship. The “family” aspects of the discourse examined here are not the primary concern. The author focuses, instead, on power processes that are applicable to any close-knit human group. The success of this analysis invites the application of these concepts and methods to such areas as parent-child relations and to similar processes in other cultures.