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“Students’ Right,” English Only, and Re-imagining the Politics of Language

Bruce Horner

The past few years have brought increasing signs of renewed interest among NCTE members in *Students’ Right to Their Own Language*, the controversial resolution on language rights adopted by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in April 1974. For example, in “A Usable Past: CCC at 50,” the first of its two fiftieth-anniversary issues, the journal *College Composition and Communication* leads with Geneva Smitherman’s essay “CCCC’s Role in the Struggle for Language Rights,” which provides a fascinating account of the history of debate leading up to and following the resolution and the publication of the “Background Statement” to the resolution (together, hereafter SRTOL). In the recently published *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students’ Right to Their Own Language*, Stephen Parks provides a detailed history of the “movement” culminating in the resolution and its aftermath. Richard Marback and Patrick Bruch are planning a collection of published and new essays devoted to “The Past, Present, and Future of *Students’ Right to Their Own Language*.”

However, readers familiar with recent public debate on English Only¹ legislation but new to SRTOL will be surprised to discover that despite its title, SRTOL has literally nothing to say about such matters. (In 1988, in response to the English Only movement, CCCC did pass a “National Language Policy” resolution advocating what is sometimes described as a policy of “English Plus.” But unlike SRTOL, this attracted little attention [see Smitherman 366ff.].) While it would be easy enough to attribute SRTOL’s neglect of language legislation to changes in historical circumstances—recent

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shifts in patterns of immigration to the U.S. and the effects of these on U.S. college student demographics, say, or the shifting power of various national interest groups—I will argue that this lack is indicative of a pervasive, tacit policy of “English Only” in composition and of a constellation of assumptions about languages, and language users, that continues to cripple both public debate on English Only and compositionists’ approaches to matters of “error.” Against these I proposed an approach to language and “error” informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the relation of language to power and his typology of forms of capital. My broader argument is that dominant approaches to language and “error” have failed to understand language as material social practice, and so have persistently produced strategies at odds with the realities teachers, students, writers, and the public confront daily in their interactions with one another.

John Trimbur has traced the roots of a tacit policy of English Only in the origins of the American university English and foreign languages departments and in the demise of the traditional classical college curriculum. In place of the classical curriculum’s focus on the mastery of at least two languages, and, through two-directional translation, its implicit principle of bilingualism, study of languages other than English came to be restricted to learning to read—but, significantly, not write—foreign-language texts. No attention was given to gaining spoken fluency in a second language. Thus, Trimbur argues, languages other than English were effectively “archived”: treated as dead, to be approached only as codified in writing, something to be studied but not something that students might use or participate in. In a complementary move, languages other than English were identified as “foreign” despite their prevalent use in the U.S. press and in the daily speech of thousands of persons living in the United States at the time (most prominently German, but also, among many others, French, Yiddish, Chinese, Italian, and Native American languages). More significantly, while study in English composition quickly became a universal college requirement, study in “foreign” languages did not. Thus a tacitly monolingual policy of English Only became the curricular norm in colleges, a norm that continues today.

I. ENGLISH ONLY IN SRTOL

That same tacit privileging of English Only accounts for the absence of any discussion of languages other than English in SRTOL.² Both the Resolution and the Background Statement to the Resolution use “dialect” and “language” interchangeably, but they do so not to challenge the distinctions between languages and dialects but because their focus is strictly on dialect differences *within* English: that is, by “language,” they by and large mean “dialect” and, more specifically, refer to dialects of English. This elision of other languages, and the speakers of other languages, is evident even in their attempt to account for the different levels of prestige associated with particular language varieties. The Statement claims that “[w]hen the early American settlers arrived on this con-

continent, they brought their British dialects with them” (5), surely a surprising claim to be made about early (non-British) immigrants. The statement thus presents a history and account of language use in the United States that denies this nation’s long-standing and continuing multilingual tradition and the diverse national origins of its immigrants (see Kloss).

Of course, these criticisms can be seen as so much carping about what is, when all is said and done, a resolution and document aimed at encouraging respect and tolerance for racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity among English teachers and at countering the sort of linguistic snobbery, racism, and damaging handbook grammarism that has long plagued U.S. culture generally and English teaching in particular. But my contention is not so much with SRTOL itself but with the still dominant approaches in linguistics and in U.S. culture generally to language study with which SRTOL is, not surprisingly, aligned (on this alignment, see Hornberger 20). For finally, from the perspective of English Only debate, the assumptions about language and language users informing SRTOL are more significant, if less obvious, than the simple absence in SRTOL of any acknowledgment of language diversity other than dialect differences. These assumptions, I subsequently show, are the same ones that prevail in debate on English Only legislation, and on both sides of the issue. They are assumptions that ultimately support a status quo, *laissez-faire* approach to language that helps to maintain the dominance of some languages and language users over others. And they are assumptions that have impeded compositionists’ approach to “error.”

Briefly, SRTOL treats languages and language users as individually homogeneous, static, discrete, politically neutral yet tied indelibly to ethnicity. This claim may seem a gross misreading of SRTOL to readers familiar with it, and so it merits explanation. Although SRTOL quite explicitly acknowledges, and addresses, diversity and change within language and thus in one sense treats language not as homogeneous but as heterogeneous, each “variety” of (the English) language is treated as in itself discrete and homogeneous. The picture that emerges of English (and, by implication, of languages generally) is an archipelago dotted with a variety of what Mary Louise Pratt has termed “linguistic utopias”: discrete, autonomous, essentially static communities of language uses and users, each associated with a particular sociocultural identity, each at least ideally neither superior nor inferior to the others in any way, but each sovereign within the sphere of its own community: a place, in other words, for every language, and every language in its place (see Pratt 49–51). It is acknowledged that individuals may “travel” from one sphere to another, like island hoppers, and develop fluency in the languages of a variety of these communities, but it is also assumed that these individuals will retain their fluency in and primary identification with the language of their “home” community: people, too, have their place.

The treatment of varieties of language as discrete is perhaps most evident in the notion that students, and others, have their “own” language. Rather than seeing language

as inevitably social—in the sense of being an ongoing product and process of social interaction circumscribed by and producing history—the Background Statement describes each dialect/language as belonging to “a group” with “shared regional, social, or cultural perspectives” (3). While it is acknowledged that an individual may use more than one dialect, the statement explains how and why one chooses to use one dialect versus another as a matter of “communication needs” that require different uses for different situations (3). Again, the demands of the situation are seen as fixed and to be met with a single dialect. Drawing on the authority of linguists, it asserts that “no dialect is inherently good or bad” (5), and that preference for one dialect over another depends “on social attitudes and cultural norms” (6), but also that “attitudes may be most clearly conveyed in the dialect the writer finds most congenial” (8). Thus, on the one hand, the Statement posits an idealist picture of the possibility of perfect translation of the information to be communicated in any one dialect and, on the other hand, a picture of meaning as integrally related to and inhering in the particular dialectal form of its expression, untranslatable. The sense of dialects and languages as by and large discreet obtains even in the Statement’s recognition that different dialect patterns and words from other languages are regularly incorporated into the “standard” (15–16). On the relation of language to sociocultural identity, the Statement is quite clear:

Since dialect is not separate from culture, but an intrinsic part of it, accepting a new dialect means accepting a new culture; rejecting one’s native dialect is to some extent a rejection of one’s culture.

Therefore, the question of whether or not students *will* change their dialect involves their acceptance of a new—and possibly strange or hostile—set of cultural values. (6)

This seemingly insurmountable ethical dilemma of changing one’s language practices, or asking others to change theirs, stated so unequivocally here, is finessed in two ways. First, the differences between dialects are said to be merely “surface” differences and thus unworthy of attention. And, second, writing is treated largely as a matter of the transcription of speech. EAE (Edited American English) is treated in the statement both as a dialect, or an instance of writing in dialect, and as a universal norm transcending dialectal differences. “[I]f speakers of a great variety of American dialects do master EAE,” it observes, “there is no reason to assume that dialects such as urban black and Chicano impede the child’s ability to learn to write EAE while countless others do not. Since the issue is not the capacity of the dialect itself,” it assures us, “the teacher can concentrate on building up the students’ confidence in their ability to write”—here, apparently, in EAE (8). On the one hand, for example, the Statement suggests that “Philip’s mother is in Chicago” is a legitimate way to write “Philip mother in Chicago” (7; it is unclear whether the reverse is true). On the other hand, the Statement encourages teachers to have students experiment with acquiring “the fundamental skills of writing in their own dialect” (perhaps to write “Philip mother in Chicago”?) but also to

treat spelling, punctuation, and usage as “less important than content,” the “*least* serious aspects of writing” (8), thus acknowledging but downgrading the significance of differences in the two ways of notating the Philip sentence. “[V]ividness, precision, and accuracy can be achieved in any dialect,” it claims (12). But, apparently, particular ways of “writing” that dialect are irrelevant to achieving these qualities. Thus EAE forms of notation both do and do not matter (at least in or to theory, as opposed to people); they are claimed both as neutral conduits for any dialectal form and as constituting a specific dialectal form in their own right into which meanings can be translated. And thus, writing itself, “in” any dialect, is imagined not in the specifics of physical marks and conventions of notation, agreed to or not, but in the abstract.

Both the general assumptions about language and language use and some of the contradictions in those assumptions found in SRTOL mirror dominant approaches to English and other languages in the debate over ESL literacy and over English Only. In an analysis of the explicit and implicit theoretical assumptions of linguists informing much ESL pedagogy, Judith Rodby identifies two dominant perspectives on ESL literacy practices. Those Rodby terms “ethnicists” oppose ESL literacy practices as inevitably resulting in the oppression of non-English speakers (34). For the ethnicists, “the mother tongue constitutes the identity of a people—their ethnicity”; hence, any use of English by speakers of other languages constitutes a betrayal of that identity (34). This would appear to be in accord with the Statement’s warning that “accepting a new dialect means accepting a new culture.” Those Rodby terms the “universalists,” on the other hand, hold “English literacy,” but not other forms of literacy, as “a kind of universal language that will recreate understanding” (31). Like at least one of the views held by proponents of EAE underlying SRTOL, universalists, ignoring the history of colonialism, imagine English as a neutral medium that enables individuals to transcend ethnic and other barriers to community (Rodby 31; see also Pennycook 7–11).

However, Rodby notes, there is, in fact, significant overlap in the thinking of most of those concerned. As she observes, “Many writers and educators seem to struggle with antonymous impulses—to promote both linguistic diversity and uniformity, monolingualism and multilingualism, univocality and polyphony. For many this double vision of ethnicity and universalism creates a discourse that appears ridden with contradictory, competing claims” (39). As suggested by my analysis of the SRTOL presented above, the same may be said of its writers, for SRTOL wants both to herald linguistic diversity and assuage those worried that this would mean the degradation of EAE, to acknowledge differences between the language practices of groups of language users and to claim that these differences are simply “surface” differences obscuring an underlying sameness, and, implicitly, to promote, in general, forms of linguistic diversity within the overriding circumscriptions of a tacit English Only policy.

The differences between the ethnicists and the universalists, like the opposing impulses of SRTOL, obscure their shared assumptions. Despite their opposed attitudes

toward English, both ethnicists and universalists, and the SRTOL, approach language in ways that ignore or elide language as material social practice: that is, as ongoing practice both shaped by and shaping users' social location and material historical conditions. Languages and the social identities of their users are seen as a collection of discrete, reified entities, with English, or EAE, despite its history, sometimes invoked as a linguistic common currency transcending the differences among these by providing neutral translations of their semantic values. Or writing is seen as a reification/codification of one's language and social identity, rather than as a site for the mediation of both, as illustrated by the contradictory claims about the relation of writing to spoken dialect in SRTOL cited above.

II. VIEWS OF LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH ONLY DEBATE

Those same shared assumptions can be found in the arguments regarding English Only legislation, on both sides. Arguments for English Only legislation draw on both ethnicist and universalist views of language. On the one hand, they frequently invoke a reified view of U.S. sociocultural identity and English and understand the relation between the two as indelible. For example, a political advertisement funded by the American Immigration Control Foundation against current immigration policies that ran in the *Des Moines Register* during the last Iowa presidential caucuses links language and sociocultural identity quite explicitly. In the advertisement, a statement superimposed in bold white letters on a black-and-white photograph of a classroom full of children of apparently different ethnic backgrounds pledging allegiance reads, "Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance together isn't as easy as it used to be because many students cannot speak English." Below the photograph appears the explanation:

"One nation; under God; indivisible" just doesn't work anymore. Because of mass immigration, we're becoming many nations. Under many gods. And very divided. . . . [S]ome [immigrants] don't even care about our heritage. So, they don't speak our language, and they create their own countries within ours . . . take jobs and social services from our poorest citizens. . . . Expand our welfare rolls. And divide our nation. (American)

As always, the pronouns are telling. There is "our" language, which the members of "our" nation and "our" heritage speak, and the others. Those not speaking English, because they don't speak English though they are living within the United States, are assumed to "create their own countries within ours." Even the patriotism of immigrants is suspect: they cannot recite the Pledge of Allegiance because they cannot speak English. It takes a single language to produce and maintain a single, undivided nation: every place for a language and every language in its place. The facts that the United States has always had a multilingual population as part of its "heritage," that students can and do patriotically recite the "Pledge" in a host of languages, and that many of "our poorest citizens" are those who speak languages other than English are all ig-

nored, both out of xenophobia and out of the ethnicist assumption of an indelible relation between a fixed sociocultural identity and language. What constitutes English itself is assumed to be self-evident rather than in need of definition or struggle (on the difficulty of defining “a” language, see Pennycook 26–30). At the same time, arguments for English Only legislation also frequently invoke universalist assumptions about English as a neutral “common currency” of exchange both within the United States and, increasingly, globally. U.S. English, one of the organizations most prominent in advocating English Only legislation, notes in a fund-raising brochure, “As much by accident as by design, that language [uniting the nation] is English. Given our country’s history . . . , it might have been Dutch, or Spanish, or German. . . . English is a world language, which we share with many other nations. It is the most popular medium of international communication” (143–44).³

But ethnicist and universalist assumptions also pervade arguments opposed to English Only. In Susannah MacKaye’s analysis of public editorial commentary on California’s Proposition 63, she notes that both its opponents and advocates share the assumption that monolingualism is necessary to national unity (138; for other analyses of such measures, see Castro, Haun, and Roca; Dyste; Woolard; and Zentella). Instead, what chiefly distinguishes their positions is the degree to which they perceive English monolingualism to be at risk and the appropriateness of Proposition 63 as a means of insuring its hegemony. In arguments against English Only, multilingualism, if encouraged at all, is understood to mean one language spoken by all and additional languages spoken by some (139). By contrast, those promoting Proposition 63 understand a bilingual or multilingual community to be one in which some members speak one language and some another language and only a few speak both (MacKaye 139). When encouraged, bilingualism is claimed to be a way of preserving ethnic diversity, on the assumption that language is the only bond and reliable cue to ethnicity. For example, Carlos Montaner invokes ethnicist notions of an indelible relation between a reified language and a reified sociocultural identity in arguing that “matching of word and message comes solely in the mother tongue. . . . We cannot do without our own tongue without brutally mutilating our individual consciousness, without being left without blood” (164; see also MacKaye 140). Unfortunately, this assumption also plays into the hands of those arguing for English Only, who, no less contradictory than their opponents, herald English as the only means of ensuring the unity of “our” American cultural identity (MacKaye 139–40; Schiffman 271–72), as the advertisement cited above illustrates. Multilingualism is sometimes encouraged for the advantages it offers to businesses (and, sometimes, national security), invoking universalist assumptions about language as neutral currency, with the currency to be used determined not by questions of sociocultural identity but by instrumentalist considerations. But these universalist arguments in support of multilingualism can also play into the hands of English Only advocates, particularly as English comes increasingly to be recognized as the

avored currency of international exchange, and as English continues to be the dominant “currency” of domestic exchange. In MacKaye’s terminology, these claims, made by both proponents and opponents of Proposition 63, take language to function as “access,” the sole means to achieving freedom and prosperity (143–44). And thus, again, they understand language in reified form, rather than working in conjunction with shifting specific material social circumstances.

The reliance on overlapping, if sometimes contradictory, assumptions in arguments by those both advocating and opposed to English Only legislation accounts in part for the general success of English Only advocates in persuading the public and for the poor showing of those promoting the alternative of “English Plus.” Both positions ignore the role of power relations in determining language practice and thus, through an effectively *laissez-faire* political stance, support the status quo of those power relations and the status quo—that is, the hegemonic—view of language and sociocultural identity as reified rather than historical and therefore as subject to change. Missing from all these arguments is recognition of, let alone support for, the changes to language, culture, and identity that arise from the ongoing cross-relations and contact between and among languages and peoples and the material means by which such changes occur and are effected (for example, as Hornberger notes, apropos of the debate on English Only legislation, “Specific information on how English-only legislation would be implemented is decidedly lacking. What is available instead in abundance are opinions on what the implications of the ELA [English Language Amendment] would be” [22]). The assumption that what is and is not English is in no need of definition both illustrates and supports this absence of consideration of what the material implementation of any English Only legislation would involve). And so existing power relations are allowed to go unchallenged, leading to the effective maintenance of a monolingual policy and the continuing invocation of vague linguistic standards to denigrate the less powerful. Both the vision of everyone speaking their own language, and everyone speaking some king’s English, are utopian and speak to a totalizing vision of hegemony: either, in the latter vision, one must succumb fully to it, or, in the former (bourgeois) fantasy, hegemony does not exist, and everyone is king of their own country. What is missing from either picture is the sense of hegemony not as static but as lived process, and accompanying that process the inevitability of struggle between and among groups and of change (Williams 112).

III. SOCIAL VIEWS OF LANGUAGE AND ERROR

We can see in the literature on basic writing—and, in particular, research on and theoretical understandings of “error”—the same set of reified assumptions about language, language users, writing, and sociocultural identity that have limited debate on English Only. As David Bartholomae has observed, basic writing represents “the nec-

essary institutional response to the (again) overwhelming politics and specifics of difference,” and “basic writers are produced by our desires to be liberals—to enforce a commonness among our students by making the differences superficial, surface-level, and by designing a curriculum to both insure them and erase them in 14 weeks” (“Tidy House” 12). By extension, one might say that the “liberal” position on the English Only debate produces “immigrants” as individuals who will, in a short amount of time, and with enough patience and good will (on “our” part) and training (on “theirs”), come to be just like an “us,” their differences superficial and easily (and rightly, naturally) erased. Developmentalism, of course, has provided some powerful models for that process (“Tidy House” 15) by making basic writers, like immigrants, somehow undeveloped, beginners at joining the (academic) citizenry, and by making teachers into mothers (hence deserving of both saintly status and, therefore, low pay).

Although the “cognitivist” view supporting developmentalism remains powerful in both public and “professional” thinking and practice in the teaching of basic writing and in the understanding of error, I take as a given that for many composition theorists it has largely been eclipsed by the “social” view: that is, rather than viewing differences between student and “expert” writing to be evidence of students’ lack of cognitive development, these are now often understood as evidence of social difference: a difference in perspective and concern, in interpretive or discourse communities, in cultural attitudes to texts (for one of the earliest and clearest articulations of the differences between cognitivist and social views of writing, see Bizzell; examples of investigations on error informed by a “social” perspective include Horner; Hull; Hull et al.; Lees, “Proofreading” and “Exceptionable Way”; and Lu). But although in many ways this shift has been salutary in erasing the stigma of cognitive deficiency from such differences, it has often been limited in its practicability. Just as SRTOL has had little or no effect on teaching practices, so, too, the emergence of the “social” view of “error,” for example, has often had little impact on pedagogy. And so “error” remains an embarrassment, something for which students continue to be sent off somewhere else (the writing center, say), or to be addressed privately, one on one, in conference (see Harris 85–86; Lu 166–67). This state of affairs results, I would argue, from the dominance of the same reified assumptions about the social view of “error” and about language that have limited debate on English Only. So long as individuals’ social identities are imagined as fixed and tied indelibly to a particular language practice, itself imagined as fixed, and so long as totalized conceptions of hegemony are accepted, then there appear to be few justifiable options available for addressing that practice. Altering students’ existing language practices, so imagined, would be complicit with hegemony, tantamount to altering their social identities and “converting” them to “academic” identities about which the value of many compositionists are at best skeptical. Only two sorts of justifications are tendered for such conversions: either that they are necessary for the economic survival, if not well-being, of the

students, whatever our views of the injustices of the existing economic order (see, for example, D'Eloia 9), or that, although conversion to an “academic” social identity is distinctly middle class, the attributes of middle-class identity are good, even better than others (see, for example, Bloom 655; Rondinone).

What unites all these responses (as well as cognitive perspectives) is their dodging of what Joseph Harris calls “questions about the workings of power in language at their most naked” (86), questions raised by any concern over matters of “correctness.” Either the workings of power in language are denied, and thus power is allowed to operate unopposed, and the ethics of such workings are accepted; or the question of power is pushed to the side as already answered fatalistically, in the negative, as something about which nothing is to be done. Three things are absent from both such responses: first, any acknowledgment of the points of contact between ostensibly different language practices and individuals’ social identities (cf. Leung, Harris, and Rampton 548); second, any acknowledgment of the agency of writers, including student writers—their ability and practice with working on and with language, and themselves, through their writing; and third, an acknowledgment of the contingency of the value of any particular language practice. Note, for example, that the question is usually posed in terms of the ethics of what teachers are to do with students: to convert or not, to abandon or not. The students’ own agency in attending classes and writing however they write—that is to say, their power—is ignored. So, too, are the permeability of the borders distinguishing students from the academy and the frequent contact between and change to the social identities and language practices of students (and teachers). This is perhaps most evident in the classification and placement of students into courses. As Bartholomae has observed, “[O]ur definition [of basic writing] is predetermined by a prior distinction, by a reflex action to sort students into two groups (groups that look ‘natural’ or ‘right’).” Thus, in spite of the fact that “the borderlines between our work and [that of basic writers] are not as clear as we like to assume. . . . [w]e do not see ourselves in what they do” (“Writing” 67, 69; P. Bhaskaran Nayar notes a parallel tendency in the common theoretical and institutional distinctions between ESL and non-ESL, as well as between ESL and EFL, students [21, 12]). As Mary Soliday has noted, dominant assumptions that student and academic ways are inherently different and in conflict often blind teachers to “the generative points of contact between the life and language of school and that of work, family, church, and so forth,” preventing us from imagining “different kinds of relations between school life and minority cultures” (270; see also Zamel 343). Not only do such assumptions blind us to overlappings in identities and language practices, but they also blind us to the changes in those practices and identities effected by the contact. That is, they prevent us from acknowledging about basic writers, as Rodby, drawing from Achebe, has said of ESL writers, that “the writer has not only the ability but the right to ‘do unheard of things with [English]’” (47).

As an alternative to either the universalist or ethnicist positions on ESL literacy, Rodby proposes a “dialectical” theory according to which “[t]he relationship among the writer, the mother-tongue, the English-language communities, and English itself is dynamic. Literacy is a human practice through which self, nation, community, and language are defined simultaneously, in a mutually dependent manner” (47–48). Such a theory—equally applicable to all writers, ESL and non-ESL, student and nonstudent—productively counters reifications of the writer’s social identity and of language practices, or communities, as homogeneous entities to which writers either do or do not belong, and grants agency to writers in defining, or rather, redefining and revising, themselves, their communities, and their languages. However, as Rodby later warns, this does not mean writers can “imagine away the material realities of social and economic boundaries” (63). In other words, we should not trade in a utopian archipelago of writers and language users for a bourgeois fantasy of unbounded freedom of self, language, and community definition transcending material social history, which would, again, dodge the question of power. But, on the other hand, we should also not trade in either of these for a dystopia of unrestrained hegemony. What is needed, instead, is a theory and pedagogy of language and power that accounts for the interplay between writing, agency, social identity, and power: that takes writing as material social practice.

Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the relation of language to power and his typology of capital and analysis of the contingencies of its valuation suggest one way to address writing and, pertinent to this discussion, “error,” as material social practice. Admittedly, Bourdieu’s work often seems to reiterate, however complexly, fatalistic perspectives on the relation of language to power discussed above. For example, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu observes,

The competence adequate to produce sentences that are likely to be understood may be quite inadequate to produce sentences that are likely to be *listened to*, likely to be recognized as *acceptable* in all the situations in which there is occasion to speak. Here again, social acceptability is not reducible to mere grammaticality. Speakers lacking the legitimate competence are *de facto* excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required, or are condemned to silence. (55)

What Bourdieu argues against, here and elsewhere, is the bracketing of the social conditions of the production and use of language from the study of language effected in the structural linguistics of Saussure and Chomsky, as well as in speech-act theory (see Thompson 8–10; Bourdieu 32–33). But although his insistence on the role of such conditions in determining the significance of any utterance may give a deterministic cast to his argument, it also, paradoxically, makes the determining power of such conditions by definition—as *conditions*—contingent in character. In short, for Bourdieu, the value of the symbolic capital of an utterance is contingent on a host of material social conditions, rather than being fixed by its linguistic form. “Social

acceptability,” as he warns, “is not reducible to mere grammaticality.” Or, as Bartholomae has put it, “[basic writers] are not the only ones who make mistakes. . . . Mainstream freshmen, senior English majors, graduate students, our colleagues may all produce work that is naive, wrong, or off the track. The issue, then, is not who misses the mark but whose misses matter and why.” And so, Bartholomae advises, to understand the significance of “error,” we need to “return attention to institutional processes of selection and exclusion” (“Writing” 68).

In a critique of both Freirean and “genre” approaches to power in literacy pedagogy, Allan Luke uses Bourdieu’s conceptualization of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital and the production and conditions of exchange between their various forms within and between different sociocultural sites to argue for a pedagogy that “offers social and cultural strategies for analysing and engaging with the conversion of capital in various cultural fields . . . build[ing] for students a critical *social* theory of [literacy] practice” (Luke 332; emphasis added). What Bourdieu’s analysis enables literacy educators to see, Luke argues, is that “[t]he cultural capital generated in literacy training can only be realised and articulated through a series of contingencies which arise in the cultural and social field.” Thus, “possession of cultural and symbolic capital [like that identified with literacy training] is neither necessary nor sufficient for economic and social power” (330). Rather, the value of such capital, even the need for it, is contingent on the social capital of the speaker/writer, which itself may be contingent on his or her possession of other forms of capital and the degree to which that capital is recognized as legitimate.

Not only does this provide a significant counter to the common equation of literacy, or certain forms of literacy (e.g., EAE) with power, and hence the common justification for teaching particular language practices, or particular languages (e.g., English), as equivalent to giving full “access” to all the benefits of academic or national citizenship. It also provides a model for understanding, and a basis for critiquing, the shifting status and effectivity of specific language practices, and thus, at least by implication, it provides a pedagogy that confronts and directly engages the workings of power in language. Luke’s called-for pedagogy might at first glance seem to be one employing Bourdieu’s categories of capital in order to impress upon students the intractability of the current socioeconomic order and the irrelevance of literacy training to altering that order. Only those with capital, it can seem, can and do acquire additional capital, in whatever forms. But first, this ignores the dependency of the valuation of particular forms of capital on *recognition*, and second, it presupposes a particular definition of literacy at odds with what Luke has in mind. As John Thompson explains, for Bourdieu, “symbolic power requires, as a condition of its success, that those subjected to it believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it” (23). Thus, for Luke, in questions of literacy, the issue is “who in the modern state will have a privileged position in specifying what will count as literacy” (309). And for

Luke, a suitable definition of literacy would indeed have to include an understanding of the contingent value of literacy itself as cultural capital, in its relations to other forms of capital: an understanding of “why and how some discourses, knowledges and texts ‘count’ more than others,” and working out “grounds for deciding which knowledges, which texts and which discourses should and will ‘count’ for which consequences in larger social and institutional settings” (309, 312). Counter-hegemonic literacy training would focus both on how the literacy training of some groups is not recognized and on how to withhold recognition, or question the recognition—and concomitant valuation—of the cultural capital of the literacy of dominant groups. As Luke notes, “ultimately, capital is only capital if it is recognised as such; that is, if it is granted legitimacy, symbolic capital, within a larger social and cultural field” (329).

This is a double-edged insight. On the one hand, it gives due weight to the degree to which those already in possession of significant capital—cultural, symbolic, social, economic—are empowered by that capital to determine the value of the capital of others by recognizing, or refusing to recognize, its value as capital. On the other hand, the capital of those who possess significant capital is also vulnerable to not being recognized: “The weight of different agents depends on their symbolic capital, i.e., on the *recognition*, institutionalized or not, that they receive from a group” (Bourdieu 72). The school is the site where the double edge to this insight is negotiated, for it “has the monopoly in the large-scale production of producers/consumers, and therefore in the reproduction of the market without which the social value of the linguistic competence, its capacity to function as linguistic capital, would cease to exist” (57). Ordinarily, of course, schools do simply reproduce particular recognitions, encouraging students to be complicit in recognizing, and thus assuring the capitalization of, certain literacy practices, even when it is against the interests of those students. But the fact that the value of that capital depends on such recognition makes it vulnerable as well. Readers and writers, by questioning the inherent “legitimacy,” or value, of particular forms and styles of writing, and thereby withholding recognition of that value, can undermine its legitimacy.

To return to the question of specific language practice and literacy pedagogy, this does not mean that particular language practices—such as EAE, or what passes for it—should in themselves be abandoned because of the history of being granted “legitimacy” due to the social position of their users; nor does it mean we should elevate those language practices heretofore denigrated because of the lack of social capital of their users (Bourdieu 94–95). To do so would be to again hypostasize linguistic forms, as opposed to continuously weighing and challenging the material social conditions under which specific linguistic forms are reified, elevated, and demoted. Nor does it mean invoking a spurious equality among language practices, as the SRTOL suggests at least some of the time, thus occluding the relation of language to power. Instead, it means always questioning and challenging the workings of power in any

particular instance of language use, under what conditions, when uttered by whom, to whom, and listened to how, in what relation to one another. It means, in other words, redeeming the labor involved by all actors—writers and readers both—and acknowledging also the role of social relations in producing the meanings and effects too often attributed solely to a commodified language practice.

The development of “donut” shops by Cambodian immigrants in California and the subsequent association, by some, of Cambodians with “donuts” illustrate the dynamics of such workings of power with language. These shops initially advertised “donuts” instead of “doughnuts” because of insufficient economic capital: fewer letters meant a shorter, and thus cheaper, sign (Ng). But these Cambodian donut shops are distinct not just by their spelling but by the fact that, in addition to offering donuts, they also, at different times of the day, sell hamburgers and Chinese food in order to capitalize on consumers’ taste for donuts at breakfast, hamburgers at lunch, and Chinese food at dinner (Ng). Thus a “Cambodian donut shop” has recently come to mean, at least in areas such as Fresno, a shop offering this particular array of foods. But it has come to mean this only now that a host of such shops exist, and only in those areas, and only for those familiar with the shops. (For example, in Iowa, a “Cambodian donut shop” would at present probably only mean either a shop selling doughnuts that was owned, or patronized by, immigrants from Cambodia, or a shop selling a food item that had come to be called “Cambodian donuts,” and no association is commonly made between Cambodians and either donuts or doughnuts.) The ability of Cambodian immigrants to make “donut shop” signify these versatile eating establishments and to link Cambodian ethnic identity with such shops in the minds of many, and so to redefine Cambodian ethnic identity, is contingent on the numbers of shops they are able to open and the success of the shops themselves, which is contingent on a host of material social factors—restaurant competition, ethnic and racial hostilities, the collective and individual economic capital of members of the Cambodian immigrant community and of prospective patrons of the donut shops, the cultural cachet associated with California pop cultural knowledge about Cambodian donut shops, and so on. Rather than working simply to transmit EAE to students, teachers can ask students to consider examples like the term “donut shops” to think through the dynamics and conditions of what makes such language practices accepted or not, by whom, when, and how.⁴ Or, rather than tell students that there is no real material difference between “Philip’s mother is in Chicago” and “Philip mother in Chicago,” or that each is appropriate in its own place, we can ask students to investigate the acceptability of either set of notations, by whom, under what conditions, when written by whom in what sort of text, and also to challenge the shifting acceptability and unacceptability of both of these phrases.

Mike Rose, in a powerful critique of many of the cognitive theories that have been proposed to account for differences in the writing of students, has reminded us that

these theories have largely “*assumed rather than demonstrated*” a link between cognitive processes and the production of writing, and that they “avert or narrow our gaze from the immediate social and linguistic conditions in which the student composes: the rich interplay of purpose, genre, register, textual convention, and institutional expectation” (294, 295). In these theories, students and others have been placed at some stage of development or in some specific classification of cognitive style—a concrete operational style, or an “oral” cultural orientation to language, or a left- or right-brain hemisphere pattern of thinking. Thus identified, students’ writing has been understood as directly reflecting these classifications. Work by scholars of “everyday cognition” is now calling into question the utility of imagining cognition outside the specific contexts of its use (see Lave; Zuboff), thus suggesting the “sociality”—broadly construed—of the cognitive.⁵ Generally put, such work demonstrates the crucial mediating role of the material act of writing on cognition from which cognitive theories of writing had averted scholars’ gaze. But those following the “social” turn, often in response to earlier cognitive views of writing, also risk relegating individual writers to specific, fixed orientations, if not defined in terms of cognitive stage or style, then in terms of a fixed sociocultural identity. And, like the cognitivists, they can be tempted to assume an undemonstrated, unarticulated “link” between such identifications and the production of written discourse, through invoking a notion of writing as simple reflection or expression (or betrayal, distortion) of that sociocultural identity, rather than the material mediation of identity through writing. Thus “the immediate social and linguistic conditions in which the student composes” can, once again, be ignored, as can the work students perform in and through their writing. The explicit impetus of SRTOL was to make an institutional, public grant—in the sense of both giving and acknowledging—students’ rights, rights that presumably had been denied—either not given, or not recognized. It thus finessed the role of recognition in the exercise of any such “rights.” I have been arguing instead for a pedagogy that engages students in the question of and struggle over recognition of anyone’s use of language, for in making the SRTOL’s gesture, what has often been overlooked is students’ already existing potential and active agency—students’ power—as writers, to work with, within, and through language, in their own and others’ use of language, to respond to and against the material social conditions of the place in which they find themselves, in order to better that place.

NOTES

1. Although proponents of “English Only” claim that they are calling not for restricting language use to English but for making English the “official” language of the United States, their actions suggest otherwise (see Crawford, *Language*).

2. I find only five references to languages other than English in the Background Statement: a reference to “the various languages spoken by the immigrants who followed [immigrants from Britain]” (5); a

reference to different terms for “milk” (*leche, lait*) to demonstrate the arbitrary relation between a word and what it represents (15); a reference to English “borrowing” terms from other languages (15–16); a reference to the phonemic distinction between *pero* and *perro* to illustrate the difficulties posed by phonemic differences (16); and a reference to the development of Spanish and French from “camp-Latin” (18).

3. In a further illustration of Rodby’s point that conflicting assumptions and competing claims govern most debate on language, the same brochure also remarks that the eloquence of English, “shin[ing] in our Declaration of Independence and in our Constitution . . . is the living carrier of our democratic ideals,” reinforcing the belief that such ideals are indelibly tied to the language in which readers of the brochure are most familiar with finding them stated (U.S. English 143–44).

4. For other examples of new inflections given to various languages and social identities by their users, see Leung, Harris, and Rampton 547–48. For pedagogies aimed at explicitly addressing the dynamics of appropriating and giving new uses and forms to language, see Lu; Rodby chapter 5.

5. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole conclude from their study of Vai and other literacies in Liberia that “social organization creates the conditions for a variety of literacy activities, and that different types of text reflect different social practices. . . . The [intellectual] consequences of literacy that we identified are all highly specific and closely tied to actual practices with particular scripts. . . . [T]here is no evidence that writing promotes ‘general mental abilities.’” (69).

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