10
CRITICAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS:
APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND POWER

10.1 INTRODUCTION
To date, there is no comprehensive theory of sociolinguistics that attempts to provide an account of language and society that ties in the rich but diverse findings and approaches of the sort discussed in this book. One book carrying the title *Sociolinguistic Theory* (Chambers 2003) limits itself to synthesising and explaining the findings of a single branch of the subject, variation theory (discussed in Chapters 2–4 above). The author sees variation theory as the core area of sociolinguistics and pushes other topics into the disciplines of sociology (e.g. bilingualism, the use of honorifics) and political science (e.g. language planning). This is a rather extreme position which paradoxically tries to exclude as much of the social as possible from the realm of ‘sociolinguistics’.

It is not surprising that, with such restrictions, even the account of language variation that Chambers gives is one-sided. Essentially, the theory propounded within this view of sociolinguistics is that language reflects society, as witnessed by the close correlations between aspects of language and social hierarchies (see Chapter 3). Chambers (2003: 250) argues further that language variation follows a biological instinct concerned with establishing and maintaining a social identity: ‘we must mark ourselves as belonging to the territory, and one of the most convincing markers is by speaking like the people who live there’. Differences that exist are to a large extent explainable in terms of status and gender differences among speakers.

Critics of the ‘language reflects society’ position in sociolinguistics point to the following:

- Society and language are so closely intertwined that society cannot be said to be ‘out there’ independent of a language whose task it is to reflect it. As Roger Fowler (1985: 62) puts it, ‘language is a reality-creating social practice’.
- Rather than reflecting society, there is a sense in which language misrepresents (or distorts) the key social relations within a community.
The school of sociolinguistics that stress this more ‘problematised’ view of language has come to be known as ‘critical linguistics’ and more recently ‘critical discourse analysis’. The title of this chapter is meant as a cover term for these two approaches as well as that of others, for example the work on symbolic power by Bourdieu in section 10.6. One of the chief concerns of a critical sociolinguistic approach is the analysis of samples of language to reveal the way language creates, sustains and replicates fundamental inequalities in societies. This approach is much more open to insights from sociology concerning social organisation, inequality, power and conflict. Such a conflict model of society is not a point of departure that the majority of sociolinguists are comfortable with. This stems partly from their own political beliefs. A second reason is that sociolinguists, especially variationists, find it less easy to ‘operationalise’ (that is, to analyse and rework) sociolinguistic data within the framework of a critical sociology than within consensus models of society.

We therefore begin this chapter with a study that is accepted by both ‘critical’ and ‘non-critical’ linguists, insofar as it examines in detail a phenomenon of everyday speech in many societies that shows the effects of power. Thereafter, we summarise the key approaches to power in modern sociology. Efforts to harness such approaches in sociolinguistics are then presented, especially that of the British linguist, Norman Fairclough. Examples from within this framework – critical discourse analysis – are presented, mainly in terms of the analysis of media language. A case study of propaganda and powerful language in Nazi Germany is presented. Thereafter, we consider cases of resistance to such powerful language. Finally, we discuss the main ideas in a model of domination by the use of language and other symbols espoused by the French theorist, Pierre Bourdieu.

### 10.2 POWER

**Face and Power in Sociolinguistics**

The use of honorifics, especially the second-person pronoun forms, was discussed in Chapter 6. Many languages of medieval Europe had two forms for the second-person pronouns for example French *tu* and *vous*, which forms the basis for the distinction between ‘T and V’ forms in sociolinguistics. In explaining the dynamics of this pronoun distinction, R. Brown and Gilman (1960) explicitly referred to ‘power’. They defined this as the ability of one individual to control the behaviour of another: ‘Power is a relationship between at least two persons, and it is non-reciprocal in the sense that both cannot have power in the same area of behaviour’ (1960: 255). This non-reciprocal relationship showed up in language:
superiors used T and received V. The terms ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ are of course defined with reference to societal bases of power (the state, church, army, wealth, the family), but also to other factors like age, gender and physical strength. As noted in Chapter 6 this distinction applies in many modern languages, in pronoun distinctions, use of honorific suffixes, titles and so on.

According to Brown and Gilman, an independent distinction developed in Europe which made the system of signalling relative power more complicated. The outcome of this change was to associate reciprocal T with solidarity and reciprocal V with non-solidarity in most modern European languages that have the T/V distinction. Brown and Gilman defined solidarity in terms of personal relationships and degree of friendliness. Essentially, this means that differences of power and status are less likely to determine the choice of T or V. Rather, it is whether relations of solidarity hold between the participants. When relations are (or become) ‘solidary’, T is usually exchanged irrespective of status. Where relations are not solidarity, V is exchanged. However, it cannot be assumed that the linguistic expression of power and status has been completely diminished in favour of the variable of solidarity in western Europe. Some theorists argue that power has been somewhat redistributed and diffused, but also to some extent disguised. Despite the western distaste for the face-to-face expression of differential status, residues of the old power hierarchy exist in, for example, the right to initiate reciprocal T (where reciprocal V might have been previously appropriate) in a relationship between two acquaintances. This right still belongs to the more powerful interlocutor. Relative status and power might still be signalled by related linguistic phenomena like the terms of address in British English (*madam*, *sir*, *your ladyship* and so on).

The discussion of ‘politeness’ in Chapter 6, especially P. Brown and Levinson’s discussion of the notion of ‘face’ and ‘face needs’, connects with the more modern use of T and V in Europe. The degree of politeness in interaction between speakers according to Brown and Levinson (1987: 15, 74–80) is dependent on three factors:

- social distance between speaker and addressee;
- the relative power of the one over the other;
- the degree of imposition associated with the interaction (in terms, for example, of goods or services required).

Surprisingly, Chambers (2003: 9) explicitly excludes pronoun choice and related variation from the realms of sociolinguistic theory. This is mainly due to the variationist school’s stress on the vernacular, that is, on ‘equal encounters’ between speakers (for example in relaxed peer-group styles). On the other hand, critical linguists take the opposite view, stressing the insights for sociolinguistics that ‘unequal encounters’ offer. Pronouns,
names, titles and address forms are particularly clear and well-defined subsystems of language that reveal asymmetries of power or solidarity between individuals (and the institutions they might represent). But they are not atypical of the way language is generally intertwined with social institutions and social inequality. Critical sociolinguistics goes a stage further than Brown and Gilman, and Brown and Levinson, in pursuing not just power, politeness and face in discourse but the power behind the discourse as well.

**Power in Sociology**

One of the best-known accounts of the concept of power is arguably that of Max Weber (1947), who regarded power as the fundamental concept in relations of inequality. In general terms, power denotes the probability of persons or groups carrying out their will even when opposed by others. Weber argued that classes, status groups and political parties are all involved in the distribution of power. Power is based on access to resources which might include economic resources, as well as physical force like that of the military. Successful rule involves the legitimisation and acceptance of power. This legitimisation involves the conversion of power to ‘bases of authority’ (for example a monarchy, a legal system, an educational system). David Lockwood (1973: 270) notes that power is often a latent force, involving not just the capacity to realise one’s end in a situation of conflict, but also the potential to prevent opposition from arising in the first place. Power in this view is best realised if the actor can manipulate situations so as to prevent the need for coming to the point of decision at all. Antonio Gramsci (1971) drew a distinction between rule, where the exercise of power is obvious or known, and hegemony, where the exercise of power is so disguised as to involve rule with the consent of the governed. These aspects of power surface in language studies in various degrees. At the macro level, they are involved in matters like language imposition and spread (see Chapter 9). Some of the theorists cited in the rest of this chapter argue that even at the micro level of language structure and use, the effects of power turn up in more areas than is generally acknowledged in linguistics.

**10.3 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

Norman Fairclough, who extended the work of earlier critical linguists like R. Fowler et al. (1979), is the central proponent of an approach that ties in analysis of samples of language (or ‘texts’) with a ‘conflict’ understanding of society. Fairclough (1989: 3) points out that not only are sociolinguists reliant on sociological theory, but also that there is a ‘linguistic turn’ in late
twentieth-century and subsequent social theory. Such a reciprocal relationship has developed not just because language is the primary medium of social control and power, but because it has grown dramatically in terms of the diversity of functions to which it is applied in modern society. For Fairclough, ideology is pervasively present in language, and the ideological nature of language should therefore be one of the major themes of modern social science. Fairclough was particularly interested in the ideological complexities of certain language functions in politics, news broadcasting, advertising and so on.

Critical discourse analysts draw on language theorists and sociologists whose writings are rather abstruse and not well known in mainstream linguistics. We therefore present some of their key ideas that relate to language before presenting Fairclough’s model of language use.

**Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses**

In sociology, two related uses of the term ‘ideology’ occur. The first refers to the systems of ideas, beliefs, speech and cultural practices that operate to the advantage of a particular social group. Classical Marxist scholars view ideology as a system of ideas and practices that disguise (or distort) the social, economic and political relations between dominant and dominated classes. As noted in Chapter 1, in the original model of social organisation, Marx and Engels analysed ideology as part of the superstructure rather than the economic base. The neo-Marxists whose ideas we present here, on the other hand, see ideology as more fundamental, stressing the dynamic relation between the base–superstructure–ideology triangle.

Louis Althusser (1971) stressed the relative autonomy of ideology from the economic base, and the significant role played by ideologies in reproducing or changing economic and political relations. Althusser also put forward the view that ideology works through putting (his term is usually translated as ‘interpellating’) individuals into ‘subject positions’. The ambiguity of the word ‘subject’ here captures both claims about ideology – the illusion it creates of active and free human agents (e.g. the subject in a sentence) – and the relationship of being subject or subordinate to some power (e.g. the Queen’s subjects). Ideological processes take place within various organisations and institutions such as the church, the legal system, the family and, most of all, the educational system. Althusser terms these **ideological state apparatuses** (in short, ISAs). Nicos Poulantzas (1973) went further in dividing the state system into a repressive apparatus (army, police, tribunals and sometimes even a government and its administration) and an ideological apparatus (church, political parties, unions, schools, mass media and the family). The latter is concerned with the promotion and naturalisation of certain values and beliefs rather than the use of force.
Signs of Struggle

More explicitly embedded in linguistics is V. N. Voloshinov’s characterisation of ideology via language. Voloshinov was a Soviet scholar prominent in the 1920s, whom many analysts believe to have been actually Mikhail Bakhtin, forced to adopt a pseudonym to publicise his unorthodox ideas. (We continue to refer to their works separately, since not everyone agrees that the two authors are in fact one person.) Central to Voloshinov’s work is a critique of the purely structural emphasis placed by Saussure upon the fundamental unit of language, the sign. As we noted in Chapter 1, Saussure’s important insight was that the linguistic sign (a combination of signifier and signified) was arbitrary. The ‘signifier’ spelt d-o-g clearly has no inherent link with the concept ‘dog’ that it names. The same object (or ‘signified’) could be called something else (like inja in Zulu, chien in French). The relationship between a ‘concept’ and the ‘word for it’ (Saussure’s work makes it clear that these notions are themselves problematic) is not a necessary one. Rather, it is agreed upon by a kind of social contract within a speech community. Saussure’s characterisation of society was a general and abstract one, without any particular interest in subgroups within. For critical linguists who take seriously social arrangements and divisions within a society, the notion of language as a system of socially neutral signs is implausible.

In contrast to Saussure, Voloshinov and Bakhtin stressed the ideological nature of the sign. For Voloshinov (1973: 21, originally written in 1929), ‘the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction’. Furthermore, ‘sign becomes an arena of the class struggle’ (1973: 23). In other words, the linguistic sign is open to different orientations and evaluations in the social world. Though Voloshinov’s interest was in class inequalities, his formulation can be extended to other struggles over language and struggles within language, like those of gender and minority rights. This is what Bakhtin (1981) referred to as ‘heteroglossia’ – the coexistence and interplay between several ‘voices’ or linguistic and social orientations in a speech utterance. Bakhtin suggests that this multiple orientation (or open-endedness of language) is opposed by dominant classes, in whose interests it is to downplay the ‘polyphonic’ semantic and social possibilities of the sign. Instead, dominant classes try to make the sign ‘uniaccentual’.1 Bakhtin’s view emphasises that we enter into human consciousness and social consciousness via our learning of language. To have a subjectivity, to be human, is to have first entered via language into dialogue with others. The ‘self’ is therefore social since it is a collection of various roles, made up of what he terms ‘languages’ or ‘voices’ spoken by others. This ‘construction’ of the self via language has been neglected in sociolinguistics, despite
the agreement that speaking involves making ‘acts of identity’ (see Chapter 5). It is, however, a theme that is being explored with some success in current social psychology – see J. Potter and Wetherell (1987).

**Discourse and Decentred Subjects**

The notion of power being diffused, concealed or buried by the effects of ideology, and therefore requiring an ‘archaeology’ of its own, leads us to a brief characterisation of one of the more important modern thinkers on the subject, Michel Foucault. Foucault is not as influential a figure in linguistics as he is in a variety of disciplines including literary theory and psychology. His work – notwithstanding his difficult style and sometimes obscure approach to a number of topics – has influenced critical linguists. For Foucault, power ‘is everywhere’, it is not a commodity that can be acquired but exists in all kinds of relations including the political, economic and educational arenas. In his early work, Foucault pursued ‘the constitution of the subject’, a theme Althusser had brought up in connection with the effects of ideology. The individual subject (i.e. human being), according to Foucault, was not imbued with a unique consciousness or personality; rather, she or he was an ‘empty entity’, the intersection point of a number of ‘discourses’.

The term ‘discourse’ is used in many different senses in the social sciences. In structural linguistics, ‘discourse’ denotes continuous speech beyond the level of the sentence. ‘Discourse analysis’ of this sort (e.g. G. Brown and Yule 1983) involves a grammatical approach to the topic, examining linguistic relations across sentences in connected speech. There is interest, for example, in certain elements which act mainly as links between sentences. For example, in the sentence *Well, I know that*, the word *well* links with a previous statement and cannot in this usage act as an initiator of discourse itself.

A second meaning of ‘discourse’ concerns what might be called ‘conversational management’. In describing rules for turn-taking and similar interactive phenomena, this type of discourse analysis is more person-oriented than the structural approach (see Chapter 6).

‘Discourse’ in social theory is a rather more slippery concept, denoting different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practices. Discourses are manifested in particular ways of using language and other symbolic systems like visual images. They may be thought of as systems of rules implicated in specific kinds of power relations which make it possible for certain statements and ways of thinking to occur at particular times and places in history. According to James Gee (1990: xix), they are ‘ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles
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by specific groups of people’. Foucault (1972) discusses the example of ‘the discourse of medicine’. Excluded from the medical discourse of the west for a long time, but now beginning to become prominent, are alternative ‘discourses’ like those of homoeopathy and acupuncture. Likewise, the discourse of economics (growth, wealth and development) excluded the space for environmental discourses until the late twentieth century.

Foucault’s notion of speaking subjects being ‘empty entities’ stands in stark contrast to more humanist approaches which see people as individuals having a full ‘command’ over language. The implication of Foucault’s approach is that, to understand the self (or speaking subject), researchers have to study language and discourse. For some critical theorists, there is a sense in which language speaks through people! Potter and Wetherell (1987: 109) comment on this position from a perspective within social psychology that has come to be called ‘social constructivism’ (or the social construction of identity):

In this tradition people become fixed in position through the range of linguistic practices available to them to make sense. The use of a particular discourse which contains a particular organisation of the self not only allows one to warrant and justify one’s actions . . . [as an individual being], it also maintains power relations and patterns of domination and subordination. In constructing the self in one way, other constructions are excluded, hence to use a common phrase found in this tradition, the creation of one kind of self or subjectivity in discourse also creates a particular kind of subjection.

Few sociolinguists would go all the way in accepting Foucault’s idea of completely decentred human subjects. The idea that language controls consciousness amounts to a Whorfian view, which we argued in Chapter 1 to be unconvincing in its ‘strong’ form. Consciousness-raising is itself a viable activity, as feminist and black consciousness movements have shown. That is, discourses are themselves unstable and subject to changes; competing discourses can be found within the same society. It is difficult to comprehend, despite Foucault, how discourses originate without some kind of human agency. It is nevertheless easier to accept that once discourses arise, they may ‘flourish’ via acceptance by an individual child or adult subject.

In his later work, Foucault shifted to the view that individuals are constituted not by discourse but by relations of power, which forms the ultimate principle of social reality (Sarup 1993: 73). Power does not operate in a purely top-down approach, with those ‘in’ power exerting forms of coercion or restraint upon uncompliant subjects. Rather, complex differential power relationships extend to every aspect of our social, cultural and political lives involving different and often contradictory ‘subject positions’. As in Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, power is secured not so much by the threat of punishments as by the internalisation of the norms and values implied by the prevailing discourses within the social order.
Foucault placed less emphasis on the ISAs than Althusser had. He believed that power is much more diffuse than in Althusser’s model, and that the state can only function on the basis of other already existing power networks, like the family, other kinship groups, specialised knowledge and so on. Just as hegemonic practice is often inseparable from what seems attractive and desirable, for Foucault what is ‘socially useful’ is always in some ways involved in ‘power-serving’ purposes. For example, power has become a ubiquitous property of the knowledge and technologies that shape modern institutions in the expanding global economy.

Fairclough brings a more linguistic dimension to the study of discourse than evident in Foucault’s work. Figure 10.1 shows Fairclough’s three-layered model of discourse, which presents discourse as simultaneously involving three dimensions:

1. a language text, which may be spoken, written or signed;
2. discourse practice (involving text production and text interpretation);
3. sociocultural practice (involving wider social and political relations).

To illustrate the three dimensions of this model, we take the example of an interaction between marital partners:

- **Text** – characteristics of the speech exchange in terms of conversational properties like turn-taking, narrative or argument structure, politeness phenomena, specific characteristics of the grammar and accent (including speech accommodation as described in Chapter 5).

![Figure 10.1](image)
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• **Discourse practice** – what are the discourse types that are being employed in the interaction (e.g. ‘pillow talk’, ‘small talk’, ‘argument’, ‘academic or political discussion’ and so on); how does this exchange fit in with the above ‘genres’ or speech events; is more than one genre drawn upon?

• **Social practice** – how does this exchange derive from, reinforce or challenge expected relations between marital partners, the family as an institution and gender relations in the broader society?

Building on Foucault (1981), Fairclough introduces the concept of an ‘order of discourse’ which relates discourse practices to what might be termed ‘the social order’. Not all types of discourse are equally validated in different social and institutional settings. There is often a hierarchy of acceptability. Fairclough (1989: 30) provides the example of the role of conversation as a discourse type. For example, conversation has no ‘on-stage’ role in legal proceedings, but it may have a significant ‘off-stage’ role in informal bargaining between opposing lawyers. In education, on the other hand, conversation may have approved roles not only between classes and during breaks, but also as a form of approved activity within some lessons. The role of conversation on television is again quite different. Particular social settings and institutions may thus have different preferred ‘orders of discourse’. To a large extent, these institutions are defined by their particular order of discourses. The historical shift in many societies from more explicit to more implicit exercise of power means that common-sense notions of language practices (for example in the classroom, or in lawyers’ or doctors’ rooms) become important in sustaining and reproducing power relations. Fairclough stresses a critical approach to language interaction known as ‘critical language awareness’.

### 10.4 CRITICAL LANGUAGE AWARENESS IN ACTION

Analyses within the field of critical discourse analysis often focus on texts drawn from the media: television and newspaper reporting, advertising, and so on. In the rest of this section, we illustrate Fairclough’s view that ideology is promulgated not just by some ISAs but via language itself, in three areas: the media, advertising and propaganda. Each of these areas is worthy of full-length study in its own right, from a variety of perspectives. At high school, students are often given a basic training in analysing the ways in which short texts belonging to these genres are used with persuasive (or ‘emotive’) effect, and to counter this with a critical awareness. Critical linguists go one step further in looking more closely at the social forces behind the linguistic persuasion.
Newspaper Reporting

Foucault’s idea of a decentred human subject placed at the centre of competing discourses applies to the generalised addressee which is the target of media discourse. Fairclough (1989: 49) suggests that media discourse has built into it a subject position for an ‘ideal subject’, and actual viewers, listeners or readers have to negotiate a relationship with this idealised subject. John Downing (1980: 179) has said of the media that ‘their power lies . . . in their capacity to shape public feeling while appearing only to express it’. Fairclough gives the example of two ways in which an event like redundancies in the car industry may be reported: *Thousands are out of work* as against *Company directors have sacked thousands of workers*. The first sentence represents the matter as a state of affairs, without an overt agent, while the second puts the matter more bluntly with a full subject–transitive verb–object sequence. Text analysis thus serves to show how a systematic selection among alternative sentence types represents unemployment as a condition for which no-one is responsible, or alternatively as the consequence of specific agents. Fairclough (1989: 52) argues that it is a form of power ‘to constrain content: to favour certain interpretations and ‘wordings’ of events, while excluding others . . . . It is a form of hidden power, for the favoured interpretations and wordings are those of the power holders in our society, though they appear to be just those of the newspaper.’

Such a deconstruction of media texts by an ‘expert’ is not beyond criticism. Henry Widdowson (1995) points to the rather closed methods of approach taken by CDA. He stresses that texts can be read in different ways at different times and under different circumstances. Fairclough’s approach, on the other hand, appears to be an ‘imposed’ analysis, with the analyst speaking “from above” for the average consumer, rather than attempting a bottom-up approach favoured in sociolinguistics. Until tests are undertaken of the responses of individual readers to the language and content of newspaper reports, the analyses remain subjective. As Fairclough (1992: 89) himself notes elsewhere, studies in the way the media is received by audiences (e.g. Morley 1980) show that people can sometimes be immune to the effects of the ideologies supposedly in the texts. Blommaert (2005) notes three problems with CDA. First, the analysis rests too strongly on the grammatical effects in the texts themselves. As Blommaert (2005: 35) puts it, focusing on texts alone means that ‘analysis stops as soon as the discourse has been produced – while […] a lot happens to language users long after they have shut their mouths’. Second, CDA claims universal validity for its approach, whilst focusing almost entirely on western contexts, which Blommaert characterises as ‘highly integrated, Late Modern, post-industrial, densely semioticised First-World societies’.
Third, Blommaert finds a lack of attention to historical factors in CDA. If the interest is in issues of power, then synchronic analysis of texts (focusing on one moment of time) will not provide an adequate analysis of how power comes into place.

**Ads as an Example of Discourse**

Advertising discourse is an inescapable element of the modern media. Critical discourse analysts see the consumption practices and aspirations promoted by ads as part of the process of forming group and individual identities among ‘subjects’ in westernised societies. Even in societies where the capacity to buy is limited, the desire for commodities is enhanced via the influence of mass advertising and exposure to western films and magazines.

Ads are identifiable as ‘texts’ by features like ‘code-play’ and ‘cohesion’. By ‘code-play’ is meant the frequent use of puns, rhymes, alliteration, parallel statements and other poetic devices. ‘Cohesion’ refers to the link between sentences in forming a unit like a paragraph or stanza formed by some of these forms of code-play. Advertisements also involve outrageous exaggeration (usually relating to the quality of product) and occasional euphemism (usually relating to the customer). Cars are never second-hand, they are pre-owned; detergents no longer come in small, medium and large sizes, but in standard, large and extra-large; potential customers are never choosy, they are discerning. Because ads are usually entertaining, their exaggerations seem excusable and natural to the genre (that is, naturalised within the register). Yet many analysts of the genre find the same ‘licence’ allowed to advertisers as to politicians and media producers, to inculcate what Lord Acton called ‘the atmosphere of accredited mendacity’ (Hughes 1988: 8–9).

Ads show two further characteristics: they are often parasitic (being dependent upon other discourses) and opportunistic (seizing upon whatever powerful idiom is available). Fairclough analyses such features as a more general property of ‘intertextuality’, where one text draws upon, appropriates or comments ironically on another. The notion of intertextuality ultimately relates to Bakhtin’s characterisation of the polyphony inherent in language use. Eve Bertelsen (1997) shows how the discourses associated with the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa in the mid-1990s were soon displaced and appropriated by other discourses:


*Black Like Me* (‘hair relaxer’ product): I’ve made my choice. Perfect Choice. Black like me. Embracing black dignity and beauty. Giving you freedom of choice. *(Spoken in alternate ads by two prominent Black media personalities.)*

*Weigh-less* (slimming company): Changing the Shape of the Nation.
Intertextuality is evident here in the way the discourse of political struggle is incorporated into commercial texts. Such a competition between discourses is itself a feature of key moments in social change. Democracy is being redefined as individual freedom, especially the freedom to consume. Whereas the first post-apartheid government was elected on the democratic ideal of ‘A better life for all. Working together for jobs, peace and freedom’, advertisers effectively erased in their ads the ‘all’ and ‘together’ which had rendered the slogan democratic. Rather, they promoted the individualised, middle-class, consumer subject.

**A Mobile Army of Metaphors: Language of the Superpowerful**

Related to the theme of the shaping of ideology via language is the degree of control and persuasion implicit in media language representing governments, especially the superpowers of today. Again the theme has a pedigree outside sociolinguistics, in media studies, discourse analysis, literary studies, sociology and even other branches of linguistics like semantics. In his book *Language: The Loaded Weapon* (1980), Dwight Bolinger identified three characteristic processes of the semantics of the powerful:

- **euphemism** (downplaying one’s own aggression);
- **dysphemism** (exaggerating the bad qualities of one’s opponents);
- **mystification** (the use of jargon to conceal certain activities).

![Cartoon](https://example.com/cartoon.png)

*On the left: generals during the apartheid era now denying the meaning of their instructions. On the right: their operatives who carried out their instructions.*

Similar examples can be found from proponents of almost any political philosophy. The same strategies were employed in the discourse of the former communist bloc, with its derogation of bourgeois imperialism and capitalist lackeys. As a case study of the language of dictatorship, we turn to Nazi Germany (1933–45).

Propaganda in Nazi Germany
On coming to power, in 1933 the Nazi Party (National Socialist German Workers’ Party – NSDAP) pursued a policy of Gleichschaltung, literally ‘putting everyone in the same gear’. This policy attempted to transform all aspects of German life according to an anti-semitic and nationalistic ideology. A centralised Ministry of Information and Propaganda was set up in 1933 under the leadership of Joseph Goebbels. The ministry quickly gained control over the German mass media, especially press, radio and film. Several studies have shown how ordinary, everyday terms became vehicles for Nazi ideology (e.g. Ehlich 1989).

The major support base for the National Socialists came from the middle classes and the agrarian sector. The urban working classes traditionally voted for the communist and socialist parties, and were particularly resistant to the promises and ideology of National Socialism (Peukert 1987). To include the industrial workforce into the ‘national community’ (Volksgemeinschaft), the Nazis crushed possible opposition from the labour movement. They also used their propaganda machinery to win the support of the workers, which was seen as important for political stability and economic productivity. Part of this propaganda strategy was the semantic manipulation of the terms ‘worker’ and ‘work’, which became soaked with National Socialist ideology.2

Nazi propagandists used the words ‘German’ and ‘worker’ as synonyms: all Germans were defined as being workers. Intellectual workers (Arbeiter der Stirn, i.e. workers of the mind) and physical workers (Arbeiter der Faust, i.e. workers of the fist) together formed ‘the German nation’. The National Socialist ideology of a racially pure and socially harmonious national community (Volksgemeinschaft) became thus linked directly to the concept of ‘worker’.

The Nazi interpretation of ‘worker’ and ‘work’ was directly linked to the party’s racist and anti-semitic ideology. Only Germans were identified as ‘workers’, and ‘work’ as a positive and productive activity was
seen as the domain of German nationals. ‘Jewish work’, on the other hand, was defined not as work, but as robbery and money-grabbing. The ‘honest, national worker’ was juxtaposed not only against the ‘Jewish thief’ but also against the denationalised German worker (*Asphaltprolet*, *Großstadtprolet*), who had been alienated from the national community by Jewish-Marxist agitation. A third category juxtaposed against the ‘German worker’ were anti-social ‘idlers’ and ‘loafers’ (*Arbeitsscheue*, *Arbeitsbummelanten*, literally ‘work-shy people, slow-poke workers’). They were seen as being guilty of destroying the productivity and economic/political success of Germany. While coercion was used to deal with Jews and idlers, persuasion and propaganda were the tools for the mobilisation of the working class.

Emotional language, creation of associations and connotations, repetition and simplification of reality are the key elements of propaganda. Most popular were constructions using terms such as honour and nobility. ‘Labour ennobles’ (*Arbeit adelt*) was a popular slogan repeated day in and day out in radio, film and press. Other constructions connected the area of work to the area of war: ‘Soldier of work’ (*Soldat der Arbeit*), ‘Armies of workers’ (*Arbeitsarmeen*) and ‘German Labour Front’ (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*) (Seidel and Seidel-Slotty 1961). A third group of expressions connected work with religion, as in the expression ‘sacredness of work for the community’ (*Heiligtum der Arbeit für die Gemeinschaft*). The slogans and phrases discussed here were endlessly repeated in the media, which led to what has been termed *lexical hardening* (Ehlich 1989): that is, the word ‘worker’ became directly and positively associated with contexts of war, honesty, honour and religion.

**The art of propaganda**

Adolf Hitler summarised the art of propaganda in *Mein Kampf* as:

> Its [propaganda’s] effect for the most part must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect . . . all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.

(quoted in Pratkanis and Aronson 1991: 250–1)

Despite such large-scale propaganda, the working class remained, on the whole, distrustful of National Socialism. Everyday life didn’t match up to the national utopia proclaimed by the party. Although he was honoured and glorified, the German worker was still poor and, in fact, getting poorer. The longer the regime lasted, the less people believed in its utopian slogans (Peukert 1987). Thus, although the Nazis aimed at
„Es gibt nur einen Adel, den Adel der Arbeit”

Adolf Hitler

‘There exists only one type of nobility, and that is the nobility of work’
(Völkischer Beobachter, 1 May 1935)
the total control of public language, they did not succeed in their linguistic *Gleichschaltung*. Carnival speakers in the Rhine region regularly poked fun at the word creations and manipulations of the Ministry for Information and Propaganda. Resistance to official politics and language use is also evident in the popularity of political jokes, whose existence was a serious concern for the Nazi Party (Zenter 1983). The Jewish literary critic-cum-linguist, Victor Klemperer, who survived the Holocaust, argued that such strategies of resistance were a typical reaction to overt political and linguistic oppression.

The Lingua Tertii Imperii (the language of the Third Reich) was a prison language (a language of both, the prison officers and the prisoners) and to the languages of prisons belong inevitably (as acts of self-defence) words of pretence, confusing ambiguities, the counterfeiting, and so on. (Klemperer 1975: 89, translated by A. Deumert)

10.5 RESISTANCE TO POWERFUL LANGUAGE

The analyses in the previous section have two characteristics in common: (i) they concentrate largely on language of the media, that is, language that does not involve personal interaction; and (ii) they make assumptions about how the language of mass communication is ‘received’ by the audience (or ‘addressees’). Some studies of interactive, spoken norms make it clear that the language of the powerful is not swallowed whole by the less powerful.

The Weapons of the Weak

One scholar who has examined the everyday norms of the politically dispossessed in terms of resistance is James Scott. His book *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) is a classic in the wider field of political science, but has important lessons that are often overlooked by the sociolinguist. Wherever there is power (and Foucault thinks it is everywhere), there is resistance as well. Resistance, like domination, need not be a calculated, conscious and readily visible mode of operation. Like domination, the most effective forms of resistance in daily life (barring periods of war or revolution) may well be those that are transmitted as something else. Based on a study of the antagonisms and interactions between peasants and landlords in Sedarka, a pseudonym for a village in a rural part of Malaysia, Scott’s emphasis differs from that of Gramsci and Althusser in stressing not consent, complicity and ‘false consciousness’ but resistance and the memory of previous repression. Scott finds it necessary to distinguish between the ‘onstage’ behaviour of the peasants (i.e. their ‘face’ when dealing with the local
landlord elites) and their ‘offstage’ behaviour (when they interact among themselves away from the immediate influence of the elites). Linguistically, this shows up in a number of ways, including features of speech style and manner, naming practices and proverbs, though Scott’s examples are mainly from the realm of meaning and naming practices.

It was once common practice, before the advent of mechanisation when peasant labour was necessary and desired, for the rich farming landowners to keep on the good side of the peasants. This was done by giving wages in advance, gifts and invitations to feasts. In the symbolic realm, landowners would describe their own behaviour as ‘assistance’, ‘help’, ‘kindness’ and ‘sympathy’. With a change to mechanisation, relations between landlords and peasants changed and peasant labour became devalued. Changing linguistic practice was part of the deterioration in social relations. Scott differentiates between the ‘onstage’ or public use of language by peasants within earshot of the rich and their ‘offstage’ behaviour in the privacy of the peasant dwelling area. The rich of Sedarka described themselves as barely managing, while the poor describe them as kaya ‘rich’, almost without exception. The poor do not use this word onstage; but offstage they lose no time in calling a spade a spade. The vocabulary of the rich is characterised by euphemisms concerning their status, while the discourse of the dominated contains an element of onstage censorship. Both processes are part of the discourse generated by, and constitutive of, class struggle. Scott cites further examples involving nicknames for two members of the elite, who in public are called Haji Kadir and Haji Pak. These are respectful names made up of the title Haji implying the holiness of one who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca, followed by their proper names. The common offstage names used by the peasants for these persons are Kadir Ceti and Haji Broom, irreverent and censorious names based on Ceti, a non-Muslim moneylender associated with usury, and on the English word broom, implying a single vigorous sweeping action in ‘cleaning out the poor’. In Sedarka, semantics itself has become subject to a kind of social relativity. That is, the ‘meaning’ of key terms may well differ according to the class position of the speaker. The tussle over naming in Sedarka exemplifies Voloshinov’s view of the sign as an arena of struggle.

It is no longer enough that the descendants of slaves, chartists and suffragettes should be permitted to speak: they are not content to speak in their master’s voices, according to conventions laid down within traditions that excluded them. Indeed the new advocates of what has come to be called ‘political correctness’ are putting pressure on the masters to change their own tune. (Cameron 1995b: 26)
Some studies suggest that power is not so easily subverted. There are cases where semantic changes, far from being simple reflections of social change, might actually serve to conceal a lack of meaningful change. Franklin Southworth (1974) reports on a field study he undertook with a team of researchers in certain south Indian villages. Of several examples provided by Southworth pertaining to changes in caste practices and caste terminology and the semantics of power, we concentrate on one: the use of terms for former ‘outcastes’ in a village in the state of Tamil Nadu. (Caste was briefly characterised in section 1.6.) The older term paraiyan denoted a member of an ‘untouchable’ caste, the lowest in the societal system. The more acceptable term became ariyan, based on a term introduced in the twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi, harijan ‘God’s people’. Caste reforms aimed at improving the status of ‘untouchables’. Southworth describes an interview with an ex-president of a village, during which three labourers (formerly paraiyan) approached. Up to that point, the discussion had centred on caste and social life in the village. While the interview was in progress, the wife of the ex-president made some remarks to the labourers (as asides). These remarks did not disturb the interview, but turned up quite clearly on the tape:

Interviewer: Who are these three people? Where are they from?
Ex-president: Harijans, from this place itself.
Interviewer: What do you mean, ‘Harijans’?
Wife (in background): The name is Paraiyan.
Ex-president: Oh, they are in the colony.
Interviewer: In the cheri? [dwelling place for former ‘outcastes’]
Ex-president: One should not call it the ‘cheri’, they say.
Wife (in background): Yes, one may say [i.e. there is nothing wrong with calling it that].

[Original interview in Tamil]

This is an interesting text, with its polyphony of voices (including interviewer talk), its silences (the labourers are excluded from speaking) and the tussle over signs. These major concerns of Voloshinov and Bakhtin are now increasingly popular in literary analysis. The ex-president employs
euphemism, which seems to come easily to him as a village official aware of the government’s policy. Furthermore, he is accustomed to talking with outsiders and people of high status. His wife seems to be more concerned with the status quo within the village. She counters her partner’s tendency to euphemism by plain speaking within earshot of the labourers. The use of fancy words by her partner, she suggests, is only for the benefit of the visitors. In most village contexts, Southworth argues, the emergence of the term *arijan* involves a new semantic distinction, giving the speaker the choice between an insulting term and a respectful term. *Arijan* lacks the stigma of the term *paraiyan*, but the status connotations linger. The new term thus becomes the polite way of connoting disrespect. The intention of Gandhi and his followers in India’s independence movement had been to bring about social change in the long term. This social change was initiated by programmes of caste reform, by trying to change people’s attitudes and by semantic changes. Until those changes put into motion are realised fully (no easy task), the use of terms like *arijan* can be subverted to mask the nature of power relations and conceal the extent of socioeconomic differences within the society.

Southworth’s analysis has been vindicated by the appearance of a new term in the 1990s in Indian political discourse, *dalit*, which political movements led by members of the lower castes use in preference to *harijan*. They argue that the latter term is a ruling-class euphemism drawn from religious teaching and therefore evokes a hierarchy created by God. In popular usage it has also become somewhat patronizing. The new term *dalit*, which literally means ‘oppressed, down-trodden’, is meant to challenge ruling-class hegemony by pointing to human rather than divine causes. The Tamil Nadu study with its tussles over semantics creates problems for the simple view cited in section 10.1 that ‘language reflects society’.

**Anti-language**

Another example of resistance to powerful language comes from Halliday’s study of the language of oppositional subcultures within a society. Halliday coined the term ‘anti-society’ for a group of people who reveal their oppositional status to a dominant society by several means, including their use of language. He uses the term ‘anti-language’ for the special language of this group. The clearest example of an anti-society is the underworld, which in many countries is organised like a society though showing direct antagonism to it. Other counter-cultures of relevance here are the hippy movements of the west in the 1960s and Rastafarian culture, which have a voluntary ‘drop-out’ status in relation to the mainstream and a culture and language that challenge the assumptions of the dominant.
Halliday uses the term ‘relexicalisation’ to denote the replacement of old words for new in the anti-language, especially in areas of vocabulary crucial to the identity of the anti-society. In Elizabethan England, a vast population of criminals, which made a living off the wealth of the established society, relied on its own lexicon called ‘pelting speech’, with relexicalisations like *laws* for ‘strategies of theft’, *lift* for ‘one who steals a package’ and *marker* for ‘one to whom a package is handed’. Anti-languages are not just relexicalised in some areas of vocabulary, they are ‘over-lexicalised’. Halliday cites an account by Mallik (1972) of the underworld language of Calcutta, which contains, for example, twenty-one words for ‘bomb’, forty-one for ‘police’ and so on.

Halliday (1978: 175) argues further that an anti-language is ‘a metaphor for an everyday language; and this metaphorical reality appears all the way up and down the system. There are phonological metaphors, grammatical metaphors and semantic metaphors.’ An example of such a metaphor is the inversion of the world, symbolised by the inversion of elements within words in the Calcutta underworld anti-language: for example, *kodan* for *dokan* ‘shop’ (showing exchange of consonants), *karca* for *cakar* ‘servant’ (showing syllable inversion) and soon on. The cumulative effect of these inversions is of verbal display, humour as well as resistance and rebellion. At the same time, they ensure secrecy. Anti-languages have similarities with other forms of sublanguages, for example teenage slang, CB (Citizen’s Band radio) language and children’s games involving use of intrusive syllables (e.g. Pig Latin) or inversion. There are also similarities with certain social dialects, which seem to carry a great deal of oppositional culture in them, notably African American Vernacular English. There is probably a continuum between these types of speech. Going back to Poulantzas’s distinction between repressive and ideological state apparatuses, it would seem that anti-languages are a response to the repressive apparatus, while the other forms on the continuum signify rebellion against the ideological apparatus. Teenage slang, for example, is a response to the ideological state apparatus, essentially the confines of language norms of school, family and adults. The term ‘antilanguage’ should not be taken too literally – they are essentially lexical-substems, rather than independent language systems with a grammar of their own.

**Debates about Sexism: Successful Resistance?**

Perhaps the most overt and, arguably, successful opposition to power in dominant or standard forms of language has come from research on language and gender. Feminist researchers have identified areas of language structure and use that favour a male perspective and are demeaning of
women. Some claims in this regard by Robin Lakoff were outlined in Chapter 1. Examples include the male-as-norm phenomenon evident in certain English structures, while a marked form is used for the female (manager-manageress; waiter-waitress), and the use of man and he as the generic form for all people. (Man is never satisfied. He is always seeking new ways of bringing up his children.) Feminists drew analogies between such usage and more obviously patriarchal practices like women adopting the surnames of their husbands. Since the 1970s, there has been a
tussle over the signs of language between the proponents of change and the guardians of tradition. Dale Spender (1990: 153) makes claims like the following in her forceful book *Man Made Language*:

By promoting the use of the symbol *man* at the expense of *woman* it is clear that the visibility and primacy of males is supported. We learn to see the male as the worthier, more comprehensive and superior sex as we divide and organise the world along these lines.

Though this line of argument met with some support and sympathy from male academics, male reaction was often stridently protective of the status quo. Arguments in defence of *man* and other usages drew on notions of correctness, aesthetics and tradition. These were not always based on historical fact: for example, scholars pointed out that use of plural forms like *they* for generic *he* was once common in English, with examples found in Shakespeare and other writers. Sometimes opposition to feminism and language reform came in the form of jokes that exaggerated feminists’ claims, with forms like *personhole* and *persondate* for *manhole* and *mandate*. Susan Romaine (1994: 125) ironically characterises language reform from the conservatives’ position as ‘a misguided attempt to change

Using ‘man’ to mean both the male human and all humans is unnecessarily confusing. The word ‘man’ should only be applied to males. If some of those who make up the other half of the population are under discussion as well, then the terms ‘people’, ‘humans’ or ‘humanity’ are available and unambiguous. Other alternatives are:

- man-hour work-hour
- manpower workforce
- man-made artificial, synthetic
- man-to-man person-to-person
- prehistoric man prehistoric people
- man a post fill a post
  ...

If the sex of a person being discussed is unknown or could be female or male, use: *she or he; she/he; (s)he*. Alternatively, the plural offers a non-sexist pronoun, or the pronoun may be unnecessary:

- Man and his universe Humans and their universe
- Humans and the universe

herstory?’ Sometimes the reaction was neither objective nor reasoned. ‘Spokespersons of the world – get lost!’ read one extract from the British newspaper, the *Guardian* (7 February 1983), cited by Graddol and Swann (1989: 103).

Debates over gender perspectives and biases in language support the views of theorists cited earlier, concerning hegemony, denaturalising ideology, and understanding ‘femininity’ as a discourse. While being made to seem socially useful and aesthetically clear, traditional English usage with its gender loading is often implicated in power-serving purposes. That the non-sexist movement in language has met with some success can be seen from guidelines concerning appropriate usage now common in the west.

Changing language alone is not the intention of gender research, rather it is to effectively change societal arrangements over gender. According to Cameron (1995a: 197), ‘ultimately it is men who have the power (in public and private life) whereas women have only responsibility’. Contesting sexism in language is a part of a larger struggle. Cameron (1995a: 199) points to possible changes in management styles that might be genuinely empowering of females:

What is happening, at least in theory, is a shift in the culture of Anglo-American corporate capitalism away from traditional (aggressive, competitive and individualistic) interactional norms and towards a new management style stressing flexibility, teamwork and collaborative problem-solving, which is thought to be better suited to changing global economic conditions. Some companies attempting to promote the new values have begun to practise linguistic intervention aimed at ‘feminizing’ the interactional styles of male employers (Graddol and Swann 1989); while in women’s magazines there has been a vogue for features celebrating ‘female management styles’ as an idea whose time has come.

Critical linguistics focuses largely on written texts and oral media language. It favours the analysis of ‘linguistic signs’ at the level of the word and ‘turns of phrase’. It is interested in the form as well as the content of such signs. These preoccupations make critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis appear to be adjacent fields to, rather than subfields of, sociolinguistics, where the main focus is on spoken interaction, accent and the form and function (but seldom the content) of linguistic utterances. But the theoretical focus on ideology, hegemony and resistance does raise issues that sociolinguistics cannot continue to avoid. Questions like which social group is dominant in public speech and writing, which groups are merely ‘represented’ and by what means, do form part of a larger ecology of language use and human communication, into which particular branches of sociolinguistics fit. In the rest of this chapter, we examine the work of a sociologist and cultural critic whose ideas bridge the gap between critical linguistics and general sociolinguistics.
Pierre Bourdieu worked in much the same critical sociological tradition as the others we have drawn on in this chapter. Unlike them, he goes beyond discourse analysis to address a range of concerns of modern sociolinguistics. Although he was not a linguist, his work in politics, culture, education and language offers a base that a unified sociolinguistic theory could be built on.

Symbolic Domination

For Bourdieu, every linguistic interaction, however personal and insignificant it may appear, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce. Sociolinguistic competence accordingly goes beyond formulations of grammatical and communicative competence (see section 1.1). It includes the right to speak, to make oneself heard, believed, obeyed and so on. The philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) drew attention to utterances that are only appropriate within a specific context: *I hereby sentence you to six months’ hard labour* presupposes a judge in court, invested with the authority to pass judgement over someone being tried. Here the act of speaking coincides with the act of passing sentence. Word and authority coincide. Bourdieu argues that the efficacy of ‘performativc’ utterances like these is not to be found in language or in a special context, but is inseparable from the existence of an institution which gives meaning to the utterance. These institutions are not always physical ones; they may include any social relations between speaker and listener. Therefore, in his words, ‘what speaks is not the utterance, the language, but the whole social person’ (1977b: 653).

Two key aspects of Bourdieu’s thinking are the ideas of a communicative economy and of symbolic power. The model of human communication that he evoked is a systematic analogy of the discipline of economics, stressing that communication is a part of the economics of everyday living. At the same time, the practices people think of as ‘economic’ (e.g. buying and selling of goods) are part of a wider category of social practices, which pertain to everyday existence. In his way of thinking about language use, Bourdieu was concerned with the economics of linguistic exchanges: that is, what are the elements of exchange, on what markets are they exchanged, what is their value, what are the linguistic investments that are made, what profit can they yield and what capital accumulates? Such questions suggest an interplay between global and local histories in the linguistic habits of individual speech communities.
Bourdieu outlines four types of resources or ‘capital’ available to human beings:

- economic capital (wealth in the form of cash and assets);
- cultural capital (forms of knowledge, skill and education);
- social capital (resources based on connections and group membership);
- symbolic capital (accumulated prestige, honour).

Individuals are distributed in the social space according to (1) the total amount of capital they possess, (2) the composition of their capital and (3) their trajectory in the social space. The last concept, characterising how a person’s initial capital is transformed throughout his or her life history, is described in Figure 10.2. The top-left corner is made up of occupations associated with high cultural capital but low economic capital; the top-right corner is made of the opposite (high economic capital but low cultural capital); the bottom section involves occupations with low cultural and economic capital; the top-centre with high cultural and economic capital. Bourdieu’s model characterises people’s class position in terms of their relative positions within the social space, and not in an absolute way.

For Bourdieu, linguistic interactions between speakers (in terms of content and, more so, style) depend largely on the social relation between the speakers. This relation is the same as their respective standing in the social space schematised in Figure 10.2. Interactions take place within a ‘linguistic market’. The latter term demarcates the specific structured space

**Figure 10.2** Occupations in social space according to volume and types of capital. Trajectories (i.e. how initial capital is likely to be transformed throughout life histories) are indicated by arrows (adopted and simplified from Bourdieu 1984: 128–9)
in which people interact via language. Examples of such a market include
the education system, the labour market, ‘high society’, government and
ordinary daily interactions between people. Favoured patterns of language
(style, discourse, accents) are conceived of as symbolic assets which can
receive different values depending on the market in which they are offered.
This notion is similar to Fairclough’s account of an ‘order of discourse’.

For Bourdieu, power is essentially the capacity to mobilise the author-
ity accumulated within a market. Such power is seldom exercised as overt
physical force. Rather, it is transmuted into a symbolic form and thereby
endowed with a legitimacy it would not otherwise have (Thompson 1991:
23). Power is then exercised through symbolic exchanges. Control of the
‘symbolic marketplace’ is a central part of the exercise of all social power.

‘Symbolic domination’ is a favourite phrase of Bourdieu’s which refers
to the process whereby the ruling-class is able to impose its norms as the
sole legitimate competence on the formal linguistic markets (education,
the bureaucracy, ‘high’ society). This dominance is described as symbolic
rather than purely linguistic, since other facets of ruling class life (modes of
dress, forms of transport, leisure activities) come to seem desirable and the
norm to aspire to. The properties of the linguistic market endow linguistic
products with a certain value. Within specific markets, certain ‘products’
have greater value than others. Part of socialisation involves learning how
to produce expressions which are highly valued on the markets concerned.
However, opportunities for learning a range of styles of speaking are not
equally distributed in a society. The competences that have the most value
are those that are most unequally distributed. A clear example is the small
number of people who command the prestige accent of their society, for
example RP in England. Other examples include people who command the
‘high’ variety in situations of diglossia, those who have access to functional
literacy in some societies, those who have a command of an academic or
literary style or those proficient in certain oratorical styles.

A precondition for symbolic domination is that those who are subjected
to power believe in the legitimacy of those who wield it. Power thus always
involves a ‘misrecognition’. Although control of this ‘legitimated’ variety is
differentially distributed in stratified societies, those who do not command
the standard are led to accept its authority, ‘correctness’, its persuasive
powers and right to be obeyed (Gal 1989: 353). For Bourdieu, this is a
misrecognition of the standard form of a language, since it is not in an
absolute sense more ‘correct’ than other varities. Symbolic domination
results in euphemisation which Bourdieu’s editor, J. B. Thompson (1991:
19–20), characterises as follows:

All linguistic expressions are, to some extent, ‘euphemized’ – they are modi-
ified by a certain kind of censorship, which stems from the structure of the
market, but which is transformed into self-censorship through the process of
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anticipated. Viewed from this perspective phenomena of politeness and tactfulness, of choosing the right word for the right occasion are not exceptional phenomena . . . . Tact is nothing other than the capacity of a speaker to assess market conditions accurately and to produce linguistic expressions which are appropriate to them, expressions which are suitably euphemized.

Earlier in this chapter, we drew attention to the role that the power distance between speakers plays in Brown and Levinson’s account of politeness. The mastery of the rules of politeness, especially the ability to fine-tune one’s language according to the interlocutor and other aspects of the context, presupposes a (subconscious) acknowledgement of the sociopolitical hierarchy. In Bourdieu’s (1977a: 95) typically provocative words, ‘the concessions of politeness are always political concessions’. His characterisation of the euphemism necessary in all linguistic interaction is exemplified in Scott’s study of the everyday language between rich and poor in Sedarka.

The final concept that Bourdieu proposes in his analysis of language within a theory of social practice is that of the habitus (or ‘system of habits’). The term is an old one in rhetoric, which Bourdieu adapts to denote a system of durable, transposable ‘dispositions’, arising from the conditions of existence of a particular class or group in society. The closer the relative position of individuals in the social space, the more likely is their participation in a shared class habitus. As Figure 10.3 shows, the habitus is the link between ‘objective’ material conditions for class and ‘subjective’ dimensions of class and status formed by group and individual lifestyles. The ‘dispositions’ that make up a habitus include the way one walks, speaks, acts, eats and so on. They are acquired through a gradual process of inculcation that is socially differentiated and comes to denote a style of living. The habitus becomes almost ‘inscribed’ in the characteristic body postures arising from early discipline: ‘sit up straight’, ‘don’t talk with your mouth full’ and so on. Developing out of this is a characteristic style of articulation that becomes associated with particular groups.

![Figure 10.3](image-url)

**Figure 10.3** Class, habitus and class formation (based on Jenkins 1992: 142)
This aspect of Bourdieu’s model has much in common with Bernstein’s account of the differences between the working-class and middle-class life described in Chapter 12.

One advantage of Bourdieu’s general theory is that it is capable of characterising microlinguistic variation as well as macrolinguistic situations. We exemplify this briefly with respect to the spread of French in France and of English in postcolonial Africa, and by examining how findings in linguistic variation (Chapter 3) are compatible with the broader sociological framework offered by Bourdieu.

**Unifying a Linguistic Market: Two Case Studies**

**French**

Frequently, standardised languages serving the state are legitimated by veiling the conflictual processes involved in their rise. Bourdieu draws on the work of Ferdinand Brunot on the history of the French language to illustrate the unification of the French linguistic market. The existence of a standard French language which is dominant over the entire state is a relatively recent phenomenon. In medieval times, what is now the standard form coexisted with other dialects, all of which were used for ordinary writing and literary contexts. From the fourteenth century onwards, in the central provinces of the pays d’oïl (i.e. Champagne, Normandy, Anjou, Berry – see section 2.3 and Map 2.5), the French dialect emanating from Paris began to gain ground and started to have the status and function of an official language. The other dialects thus underwent a ‘devaluation’ in becoming restricted to largely oral purposes. Whereas the word ‘patois’ previously meant ‘incomprehensible speech’, it now came to mean ‘corrupted and coarse speech, such as that of the common people’. Included in this characterisation were the dialects and varieties that once had the status of independent languages.

In the langue d’oc (see section 2.3 and Map 2.5) regions of southern France, the Parisian dialect did not take hold until the sixteenth century, and the local dialects continued to be used for local texts. A situation of bilingualism arose: members of the peasantry and lower classes spoke only the local dialect, while the aristocracy, bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie had access to the official language as well. State linguistic unification arose with the Revolution of 1789. It was to the advantage of the new rulers to promote the official language as the language of the entire nation, since it gave the local bourgeoisie of priests and doctors as well as teachers a monopoly over politics and communication. Bourdieu warns against a simplistic view that linguistic unification was contingent upon the technical needs of communication between the different parts of the territory, especially between Paris and the provinces. He also dismisses the equally
simplistic view that sees it in terms of raw power, as the direct product of a state centralism determined to crush ‘local characteristics’. Rather, ‘the conflict between the French of the revolutionary intelligentsia and the dialects or patois was a struggle for symbolic power in which what was at stake was the formation and re-formation of mental structures’ (1991: 48). That is, the new language of authority which arose was eventually ‘legitimated’ by the expansion of the education system and the bureaucracy. This was a language with its new political vocabulary, terms of address and reference, metaphors, euphemisms and other representations of the social world linked to the interests of the new bourgeoisie. According to Bourdieu, these were inexpressible in the local idioms shaped by the specific interests of peasant groups.

The French case is by no means unique, and key features like state formation, capitalism and class formation apply to a wide range of standard or state languages of western Europe. In other parts of the world, a multilingual situation was restructured by colonisation and the market assumptions of the European colonisers.

**English in Nigeria**

Abiodun Goke-Pariola (1993) characterises the sociolinguistic situation in postcolonial Nigeria in terms of Bourdieu’s framework. The process of colonisation (in the nineteenth century) involved, among other things, the integration of a new linguistic market. Prior to this, over 400 independent groups spoke a variety of often mutually unintelligible languages, with no single over-arching lingua franca. English was a principal tool in the process of colonisation. With its associations of military, technological and educational superiority, it forced a restructuring of the linguistic market. To speak English was in itself a form of power, and local persons who acquired a knowledge of the language increased their own power dramatically. Education in English became the main means of acquiring the new form of cultural capital. In many parts of the country, people resisted attempts to use the indigenous languages in schools. However, as access to higher education was limited, a new elite class was created of local people who acquired the requisite cultural capital associated with English. With the restructuring of the colonial linguistic market came a new linguistic habitus, which included behaving and sounding as much like the ruling class as possible. The most salient of these habits, typical of the new elites, is stereotyped even today in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa as ‘speaking through the nose’. This appears to refer not to the phonetic feature of nasality as such but to the adoption of intonation patterns, stress rhythms and a linguistic demeanour associated with speech of the former colonial elite. Goke-Pariola argues that because the colonial linguistic market works to the advantage of the new postcolonial ruling elite, it shows no
sign of being dismantled. This analysis holds for territories like India and Sri Lanka, where a similar situation of stratified diversity occurs, with English – as the language legitimated by the former rulers – still proving difficult to dislodge.

Linguistic Variation and the Economics of Linguistic Exchanges

Bourdieu offers a reading of variationist sociolinguists discussed in Chapter 3, using his notions of symbolic domination, linguistic market, habitus and euphemisation. He takes as an example the language use of an elderly woman from a small town in Béarn (a province of south-western France), where a local dialect, Béarnais, is spoken. She first used a ‘patois French’ to a young female shopkeeper in the town, who was originally from a larger town in Béarn, and who might not have understood the local dialect. The next moment, she spoke in Béarnais to a woman of the town of the same age as herself, who was originally from the villages. Later, she used a French that was strongly ‘corrected’ to a minor town official. Finally, she spoke in Béarnais to a roadworker in the town, who was originally from the villages and about her age.

Such a versatility in code choice and style-shifting is commonplace in many parts of the world. From a micro- or interactional perspective, factors such as age, personal repertoire of interlocutors, relative status, topic, rights and obligations and accommodation are involved here. Bourdieu stresses a broader perspective – the integration of speakers into a larger political economy. A speaker’s assessment of the ‘market conditions’, and the anticipation of the likely reception of his or her linguistic products, serve as an internalised constraint on his or her speech choices. Bourdieu implies that the natural code for the town should be Béarnais, but it is not legitimated in all contexts. Thus, at one and the same time, the woman’s linguistic behaviour shows skill and versatility, as well as the effects of symbolic domination. The theory of symbolic domination would appear to explain instances of class divisions in language as well as competition over status (see section 3.4). In the dominant classes of New York City – the upper and upper middle class of Labov (1966) – is evident the linguistic behaviour of those whose habitus has become the embodiment of the norm. Bourdieu stresses the ‘relaxation in tension’ in the use of language by this class. This relaxation provides evidence of a relation to the linguistic market that can only be acquired thorough prolonged and ‘precocious’ familiarity with markets that are characterised by a high level of control. By ‘control’ he means attention to the forms and formalities of the prestige code, as well as more general ‘practices’ like avoidance of error and exaggeration, and keeping a distance from one’s
utterances rather than ‘surrendering without restraint or censorship to their expressive impulse’ (Bourdieu 1991: 85). This contrasts with what Bourdieu characterises as the lower middle class’s unhappy relations to their own linguistic productions. This linguistic insecurity is most evident in hypercorrection, which Bourdieu (1991: 13) interprets as ‘inscribed in the logic of pretension which leads the petits bourgeois [lower middle class] to attempt to appropriate prematurely, at the cost of constant tension, the properties of those who are dominant’. This is a rather strong (and judgemental) characterisation of a class divided against itself linguistically, whose members seek at the cost of constant anxiety to produce linguistic expressions that bear the highest yield on the market (in terms of prestige at least). These expressions bear the mark of a habitus other than their own.

As far as gender variation is concerned, Bourdieu (1991: 83) accepts Labov’s characterisation of women being more prone than men to linguistic insecurity. Bourdieu summarises the position as follows. In societies where the traditional division of labour between the sexes still holds, women can only seek social mobility through symbolic production and consumption, and are consequently even more inclined to invest in the acquisition of the ‘legitimated’ competences. That is, deprived of other forms of capital (and of power), women are thrown into the accumulation of symbolic capital. This account may not seem very different from Trudgill’s (1974: 93–5) explanation of the differences between male and female speech in western societies noted in Chapters 4 and 6. However, it escapes the criticism that Trudgill’s analysis tends to assess women’s language from the viewpoint of male language as the norm. In terms of Bourdieu’s thinking, it is not that male language is somehow more ‘normal’, but that as the language of the dominant group it is legitimated and assumes symbolic domination of the linguistic market. Eckert (1989b) argues that femininity (with its linguistic manifestations of a quiet and relatively high-pitched voice, politeness and cooperative talk) is a mitigation or even a denial of male power. These ‘feminine’ kinds of behaviour are avoided by men at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, for whom female competition in the workplace is a bigger threat than for other classes. By contrast, what is called ‘effeminacy’, involving among other things the rejection of overt power, is more prevalent among upper-class males. This is paradoxically the group that exercises the greatest global power (via an ultimate appropriation of the labour power of others). Eckert’s argument that class and gender interact in complex ways linguistically is compatible with Bourdieu’s characterisation of the habitus and of social trajectories.

Bourdieu portrays the working class as alienated from the mechanisms of the linguistic market. In Chapter 3, we reviewed studies showing a
polarisation between the working-class varieties and the legitimated varieties in Norwich (Trudgill 1974), Guyana (Rickford 1986) and Detroit (Eckert 1989a). In Bourdieu’s thinking, members of dominated groups are unable to exercise the liberties of plain speaking in formal linguistic markets, where they are forced to use a language or style that they are unaccustomed to. Otherwise, they might enforce a kind of self-censorship and escape into abstention or silence. Again, this echoes a theme in Bernstein’s early writing (1974) concerning the exclusion of working-class codes in contexts like education which require an elaborated code. Bourdieu’s generalisation on class language faces some of the same criticisms that were raised by linguists in the 1960s against Bernstein’s work (see Chapter 11). Both theorists seem to undervalue the structure and function of working-class vernaculars. From his integrated societal perspective, Bourdieu (1991: 71) characterises the contexts in which the vernacular thrives as relatively insignificant:

[T]he unification of the market is never so complete as to prevent dominated individuals from finding, in the space provided by private life, among friends, markets where the laws of price formation which apply to more formal markets are suspended . . . . Despite this, the formal law, which is thus provisionally suspended rather than truly transgressed, remains valid, and it re-imposes itself on dominated individuals once they leave the unregulated areas where they can be outspoken . . .

This analysis partly fits Scott’s account of onstage and offstage behaviour of peasants in Sedarka. But there are some differences of emphasis. Bourdieu’s suggestion here that the speech forms of the dominated in the private sphere are a temporary relaxation from the tensions of the linguistic market contrasts with Scott’s argument that onstage and offstage behaviour are equally part of consciousness. In the private sphere, domination gives way to symbolic resistance. This resistance is a symbolic undermining of the self-awarded status of the rich by a variety of linguistic and other means, including the invention of nicknames. There are several aspects of Bourdieu’s model that can be questioned. In matters of specific detail, we have already suggested that he undervalues the possibilities of resistance to symbolic domination. Second, many sociolinguists would question whether economic and political exchanges are the key aspect of language and whether ‘free speech’ and vernacular usage (in both senses of the term identified in Chapter 4) are the exception rather than the rule. In terms of Bourdieu’s economic model, the vernacular would count as ‘free’ in the other sense of ‘being exchanged without any cost or charge’. The model does not add much to the study of the vernacular, except to point to its relation to other modes of speech in the ‘symbolic economy’. The dimension of power is emphasised in Bourdieu’s work at the expense of the dimension of solidarity.
This chapter has been concerned with the work of scholars who follow Marx in taking a critical approach to the study of society, and hence to language. They see inequality and hence the potential for conflict in all aspects of society. As a background, we cited the work of Althusser and Foucault on ideology and discourse. More specifically, linguistic insights were drawn from the characterisation of the linguistic sign by Voloshinov and Bakhtin. Their argument that the potential for domination and resistance is implicit in the linguistic sign was illustrated by studies of phenomena such as class inequality in Sedarka, caste change in South India, the anti-language of the underworld in Elizabethan England and struggles over gender in the west. The main models in the chapter are those of Fairclough and Bourdieu. Fairclough developed a three-layered model of critical discourse analysis involving text, discursive practice and social practice. His emphasis falls particularly on how the ideological effects of texts (written and spoken) are produced. He advocates a critical language awareness of the media in particular. Bourdieu’s model of symbolic domination draws upon a wider notion of class than one involving economic capital alone. Key notions in his account of language and inequality are the linguistic market, the habitus and euphemisation.

One might question whether the approach to language by power theorists cited in this chapter leads to an inflexible account of all speech interactions. Are relationships between people and their social roles more dynamic than the account of the different types of capital they possess? Brown and Levinson (1987: 79) warn against an over-deterministic account of power in accounting for speech phenomena like politeness. A person from a lower caste in south India might approach a Brahman for ritual services with great deference. But the roles might be reversed if the person belonging to the lower caste is a government official, from whom the Brahman requires assistance. In the modern world, people’s roles have become multidimensional, and human communication more flexible than any theory has been able to capture. Still, the work discussed in this chapter, particularly that of Bourdieu, provides the beginnings of a framework against which many, if not all, of the broader phenomena associated with language in society, and society in language, can be analysed.

Notes

1. Bakhtin’s terminology contrasts ‘polyphony’ with ‘monophony’; Voloshinov contrasts the ‘multiaccentual’ nature of the sign as against the drive to make it ‘uniaccentual’. We have selected the terms ‘polyphony’ versus ‘uniaccentual’ here.