
Social Linguistics and Literacies

Ideology in discourses

Third edition

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First published 1990

This edition first published 2008

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in TimesNewRoman and GillSans by

Keystroke, 28 High Street, Tettenhall, Wolverhampton

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN10: 0-415-42775-4 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-415-42776-2 (pbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-94480-1 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-42775-3 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-42776-0 (pbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-94480-6 (ebk)

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Acknowledgments

This book argues that what we say, think, feel, and do is always indebted to the social groups to which we have been apprenticed. Thus, to thank those who apprenticed me to their expertise is to thank them for helping me to think and write this book, however much or little they may want the credit. Since the first edition of *Social Linguistics* appeared I have met a great many people whose reactions to the book, and to my subsequent work, have contributed greatly to the new editions of this book.

Sarah Michaels, years ago, showed me some wonderful stories by African-American children, stories that were viewed as failures in school. These stories brought forcefully to my attention the need for a linguistics that could account for how these children could possess such beautiful linguistic abilities and still, nonetheless, fail in school. This experience helped transform my view of what linguistics ought to be about. Sarah's work and ideas and style have been central to mine ever since.

Years ago, also, Courtney Cazden invited me (at the time I was just making my transition from theoretical linguistics to social linguistics and education) to take part in group activities with her at the Harvard University School of Education. This book owes a huge debt to this apprenticeship, and surely would never have been written without it. Though she might very well not like to hear it, she has always been for a great many of us a unique "role model."

Colin Lankshear and Donaldo Macedo have stuck with me for the long haul, though thick and thin, not just in the world of ideas, but in the world of souls. It's been a long trip and they can't know how much I appreciate their being fellow travelers.

The list of those who have helped and influenced me is now too long to list as I tried to do in the second edition. My borrowings are everywhere clear in this book and I have contracted so many debts I can now neither list them, nor ever repay them. A great many of the people I cite

in this book I know personally and so I have had ample opportunity to learn from them. Their ideas have everywhere colored mine, making me, over the years, seem better than I am, which is, given the theory in this book, much as it should be.

Partly as a result of this book, I have met a great many teachers throughout the world. It is impossible to overstate how much it means to someone like me, someone not “at home” in the conflicts and “power networks” of academics, to have a teacher or workplace literacy person—people actually working “in the trenches”—come up to me and say that the book had “made a difference.” Such help and encouragement have kept me going.

As I pointed out in the first edition of this book, many of my views on society have been formed in discussions with my identical twin brother, John Gee. The fact that my father—Ernest Lefel Gee—was born in poverty in the southern United States and left school in the third grade, never to return, but ended his life fighting racism and reading German and French theologians to us over the dinner table has a lot to do with my views on literacy and Discourses. The fact that my mother—Kathleen Bonner Gee—born and raised in the working class in Derby, England, spent most of her adult life as a housewife in the United States, but towards the end of her life ended up, through no choice of her own, taking a rough-and-tumble cab company in San Jose, California, out of deep debt and successfully running it to enable her children to survive and go to college also has a lot to do with my views on Discourses. Thank God that neither my father nor my mother was “one type” of person and that they did not allow social forces to “fix” them in terms of their beginnings, however hard those forces tried.

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J.P.G.

Introduction

As a linguist, I wrote the first edition of *Social Linguistics* with a personal sense of paradox. While the human eye sees best what is in the center of its field of vision, it had become apparent to me that the clearest way to see the workings of language and literacy was to displace them from the center of attention and to move society, culture, and values to the foreground. Paradoxically, this leads to better and deeper ways of analyzing language. It leads to a different sort of linguistics as well, one in which language-in-society is the heart of the field. So while we immerse ourselves in language in this book, language here always comes fully attached to “other stuff”: to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world.

Sociocultural approaches to language and literacy have made great progress since the first (1990) and second (1996) edition of *Social Linguistics*. I hope, too, that I have myself made some progress. In 1996 I rewrote the book in its entirety. I brought it up to date and tried to make it easier to read, as well. I added and subtracted material, though the same ground was covered and the same themes were stressed. I revised old analyses and added new ones, and, I hope, further clarified my approach to language and literacy. In this third edition, I have done much the same, though less drastically than in 1996. Nonetheless, through all three editions, the book has remained at core the same book.

Social Linguistics is not a textbook, though it has, over the years, often been used in classes. It was initially an attempt to do two things: first, to argue that a new field was emerging out of work from different disciplines, a field I called “The New Literacy Studies,” and, second, to develop a particular perspective within this field on language and literacy with special reference to educational issues. The New Literacy Studies is now established and the perspective has become one standard

viewpoint within that field, alongside others. Thus, what started as an “intervention” is now “after the fact” and the book can now serve as an introduction to what it originally only hoped to help bring into existence.

As I point out in this edition, the term “New Literacy Studies” is probably unfortunate, since anything that was once “new” is soon “old” and the New Literacy Studies is now no longer young. The New Literacy Studies is really just a way to name work that, from a variety of different perspectives, views literacy in its full range of cognitive, social, interactional, cultural, political, institutional, economic, moral, and historical contexts. When this book was written, the traditional view of literacy was “cognitive” or “psychological,” the view that literacy is a set of abilities or skills residing inside people’s heads. Because the cognitive or psychological was already entrenched, I did not stress cognitive features of literacy in this book, but, rather, tried to show the limitations of a purely cognitive or psychological view. In subsequent work I have written a good bit about psychological issues and how to integrate them with a sociocultural approach to language and literacy (see Gee 1992, 2003, 2004, 2005). In this book, I retain a strong focus on the social and cultural.

The book seeks to accomplish three things: first, to give readers an overview of sociocultural approaches to language and literacy, approaches which coalesced into the New Literacy Studies; second, to introduce readers to a particular style of analyzing language-in-use-in-society (see also Gee 2005); and, third, to develop a specific perspective on language and literacy centered around the notion of “Discourses” (with a capital “D”). I will return to “Discourses” below. Chapters 2–5 engage in the first task; the sixth and seventh chapters engage directly with the second, though there are examples of analysis throughout the book; and the final two chapters engage with the last task. The first chapter starts with the meanings of words, introducing some of the basic themes of the book, and closes on a discussion of the moral viewpoint that lies behind the book as a whole.

The general argument of the book, then, is this: to appreciate language in its social context, we need to focus not on language alone, but rather on what I will call “Discourses,” with a capital “D.” Discourses (“big ‘D’ Discourses”) include much more than language. To see what I mean, consider for a moment the unlikely topic of bars (pubs). Imagine I park my motorcycle, enter my neighborhood “biker bar,” and say to my leather-jacketed and tattooed drinking buddy, as I sit down: “May I have a match for my cigarette, please?” What I have said is perfectly grammatical English, but it is “wrong” nonetheless, unless I have used a

heavily ironic tone of voice. It is not just the content of what you say that is important, but how you say it. And in this bar, I haven't said it in the "right" way. I should have said something like "Gotta match?" or "Give me a light, wouldya?"

But now imagine I say the "right" thing ("Gotta match?" or "Give me a light, wouldya?"), but while saying it, I carefully wipe off the bar stool with a napkin to avoid getting my newly pressed designer jeans dirty. In this case, I've still got it all wrong. In this bar they just don't do that sort of thing: I have said the right thing, but my "saying-doing" combination is nonetheless all wrong. It's not just what you say or even just how you say it, it's also *who* you are and *what* you're doing while you say it. It is not enough just to say the right "lines."

Other sorts of bars cater to different "types of people." If I want to—and I am allowed to by the "insiders"—I can go to many bars, and, thereby, be many different "types of people." So, too, with schools. Children are "hailed" ("summoned") to be different sorts of students in different classrooms, even in different domains like literature or science. In one and the same classroom, different children may well be "hailed" to be different types of students, one, for example, a "gifted" student and the other a "problem" student. There are specific ways to get recognized—different in different schools and at different times—as "gifted" or "a problem." The teacher, the student, and fellow students need, however unconsciously, to know these ways for "business as usual" to go on. Conscious knowledge can, I will argue, sometimes disrupt this "business as usual." A good deal of what we do with language, throughout history, is to create and act out different "types of people" for all sorts of occasions and places.

Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or "types of people") by specific groups, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, bikers of a certain sort, business people of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort, African-Americans of a certain sort, women or men of a certain sort, and so on and so forth through a very long list. Discourses are ways of being "people like us." They are "ways of being in the world"; they are "forms of life"; they are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories.

Language makes no sense outside of Discourses, and the same is true for literacy. There are many different "social languages" (different styles of language used for different purposes and occasions) connected in complex ways with different Discourses. There are many different sorts

of literacy—many literacies—connected in complex ways with different Discourses. Cyberpunks and physicists, factory workers and boardroom executives, policemen and graffiti-writing urban gang members engage in different literacies, use different “social languages,” and are in different Discourses. In fact, Hispanic gangs and African-American gangs use graffiti in different ways, and engage in different Discourses. And, too, the cyberpunk and the physicist might be one and the same person, behaving differently at different times and places. In this book I will use schools and communities, rather than bars, as examples of sites where Discourses operate to integrate and sort persons, groups, and society.

Each of us is a member of many Discourses, and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities. These Discourses need not, and often don't, represent consistent and compatible values. There are conflicts among them, and each of us lives and breathes these conflicts as we act out our various Discourses. For some, these conflicts are more dramatic than for others. The conflicts between the home-based Discourse of some African-American children and the Discourses of the school are many, deep, and apparent. Indeed, the values of many school-based Discourses treat African-American people as “other” and their social practices as “deviant” and “non-standard.” In becoming a full member of school Discourses, African-American children run the risk of becoming complicit with values that denigrate and damage their home-based Discourse and identity. The conflicts are real and cannot simply be wished away. They are the site of very real struggle and resistance. Such conflicts also exist for many women between their ways of being in the world as women of certain types and the dominant Discourses of male-based public institutions. Similar sorts of conflicts exist for many others, as well, most certainly for many people, white, brown, or black, based on social class. They are endemic in modern plural societies.

Each Discourse incorporates a usually taken for granted and tacit set of “theories” about what counts as a “normal” person and the “right” ways to think, feel, and behave. These theories crucially involve viewpoints on the distribution of “social goods” like status, worth, and material goods in society (who should and who shouldn't have them). The biker bar “says” that “tough guys” are “real men”; some schools “say” that certain children—often minority and lower socioeconomic children—are not suited to higher education and professional careers. Such theories, which are part and parcel of each and every Discourse, and which, thus, underlie the use of language in all cases, are what I call in this book ideologies. And, thus, too, I claim that language is inextricably bound up with ideology and cannot be analyzed or understood apart from it.

I do not in this book intend to hide my claims behind linguistic or sociological jargon unless that jargon is integral to the claim being made. Real people really get hurt by the workings of language, power, ideology, and Discourse discussed in this book. I see no reason to sanitize such damage with distancing language. At the same time, the fact that the issues discussed in this book relate to the workings of power and hurt does not mean that these are not also theoretical issues. In fact, the book constitutes an overt theory both of literacy and a socially based linguistics, a theory that claims that all practice (human social action) is inherently caught up with usually tacit theories that empower or disempower people and groups of people. I will claim that it is a moral obligation to render one's tacit, taken-for-granted theories overt when they have the potential to hurt people. This book makes some of my theories about language and society overt and invites you, not to agree with me, but to make your theories in this area overt also.

I do not believe there is any one uniquely "right" way to describe and explicate the workings of language in society. Thus, I do not see myself as in competition in a "winner take all" game with other social and critical theorists, many of whom I greatly admire. Certain ways of describing and explicating language and society are better and worse for different purposes. And any way of doing so is worthwhile only for the light it shines on complex problems and the possibilities it holds out for imagining better and more socially just futures.

Furthermore, I believe that a great many of us, coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, are using different words to say very similar things, at least where the important matters are concerned. Thus, too, I believe we have made a good deal of progress, more than our different terminologies might at first suggest. It is for these reasons that I attempt to sketch out a sociocultural approach to language and literacies in Chapters 1–5 without using my own favored terms. Rather, I develop what I hope is a rather consensus-like overview using the work and words of many different people.

Meaning and ideology

Words and their meanings

A great many people believe that words have fixed and settled meanings, the sorts of things we can find in a dictionary. So, for example, a word like “bachelor” means “unmarried male” and that’s the end of the matter. Furthermore, they believe that the meaning of a word is something that resides in people’s heads, perhaps in terms of what some people call a “concept.” When people hear or see a word they can consult this concept or definition in their heads to know what the word means. Of course, since other people also understand words, we must then assume, for communication to work, that everyone (rather mysteriously) has the same concepts or definitions in their heads. However, thanks to the fact that the insides of people’s heads are private, we can never really check this.

These ideas about words and their meanings are quite common, so common they are, for many people, a form of common sense. These ideas are, in fact, a “theory” that many people believe, though they may not be all that conscious of the fact that they hold this theory; they may not have ever tried to put it into words; and they may just pretty much take it for granted. In that case, it is what we can call a “tacit theory.” Or, perhaps, they are more consciously aware that that this is their theory of how words and meaning work. Then the theory is overt. Either way, tacit or overt, this is a theory that many “everyday” people—that is, people who are not linguists or specialists of any other sort—believe. But, of course, it is also a theory that some (but not all) professional linguists and psychologists believe and argue for, as well (see Clark 1989 and Gee 2004 for further discussion). In that case, the theory is certainly overt and is usually more formal, explicit, and elaborated. In such a situation, we have a professional theory that also reflects a commonsense, taken-for-granted and often tacit everyday theory.

We can see how this theory might influence educational practice. Vocabulary is important for success in school. This theory that words have fixed meanings would imply we can teach word meaning by giving young people lists and definitions and having them write sentences containing the new words. We can tell them to memorize the meaning of the word, presumably by memorizing its definition. And, indeed, this is how vocabulary was traditionally taught in schools, and still is in some cases.

We don't often think about everyday people—non-specialists—having theories, especially tacit ones. We tend to say that such people—all of us when we are not doing our specialist jobs, if we have one—have beliefs, viewpoints, or perspectives on things, even prejudices. Nonetheless, I will say that people hold theories about all sorts of things, because in many cases—like this one—people's beliefs (and even prejudices) hang together and cohere in ways that are certainly like theories. Sometimes these theories contradict professional theories, sometimes they don't. In some cases, everyday people have picked up their theories from having heard about professional theories from other people, the media, or from their own studies. On the other hand, in some cases, though not all, the professionals' more formal theories are simply reflections of their commonsense everyday theories.

Some people are uncomfortable using the word “theory” both for people's everyday beliefs and for the perspectives of professionals like linguists. And it is true that logical consistency may sometimes be less common in everyday theories than in professional ones (diSessa 2006). For this reason, some people have used the phrase “cultural model” for what I have just been calling people's everyday theories (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Gee 2005; Holland and Quinn 1987). They retain the word “theory” just for professional theories. And this is fine with me. In this case, then, we can say that the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions stored in people's heads (an everyday theory) is similar to a theory (professional theory) held by and elaborated much further by professional linguists and psychologists.

Even when cultural models match a professional theory to a certain extent—and they often don't—this does not mean that either of them are right or useful. Both everyday people and professionals can be wrong, of course. In fact, I will argue in this book, along with some other linguists (though, of course, not all), that the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions stored in people's heads is misguided. So, too, is the professional theory version of this cultural model. Thus, in this regard, both “common sense” and some professionals are wrong.

Most words don't have fixed meanings. Take even so simple a word as "coffee" (Clark 1989). If I say, "The coffee spilled, go get a mop," the word betokens a liquid. If I say, "The coffee spilled, go get a broom," the word betokens beans or grains. If I say, "The coffee spilled, stack it again," the word betokens tins or cans. If I say, "Coffee growers exploit their workers," the word betokens coffee berries and the trees they grow on.

You can see that the word "coffee" is really related not to a definite concept so much as a little "story" (using the word loosely) about how coffee products are produced and used. (Berries grow on trees, get picked, their husks are removed and they are made into beans, then ground up, used as a flavoring or made into a liquid which is drunk or used for other purposes, for instance, to stain things.) And, indeed, you can fail to know parts of the story (as I most surely do) and still be quite happy using the word. You trust other people know the full story or, at least, that such a full story could be discovered if the need arose (which it rarely does). And, of course, new meanings can arise in new contexts. For example, though you have never heard it, you would probably know what I meant if I said, "Big coffee is opposed to the new legislation" (which you might take to mean something like "Powerful coffee growers, producers, and other businesses connected to coffee opposed the new legislation").

We can also call the little "story" connected to "coffee" a "cultural model." Cultural models are "models." Think about what a model is, for example a toy plane or a blueprint for a house. A model is just a scaled-down and simplified way of thinking about something that is more complicated and complex. Children can use toy planes to fantasize about real flight and scientists can use model planes to test ideas about real planes. Architects can use cardboard models of houses or blueprints (just quite abstract models) to think about designing real houses. So, too, theories and stories, whether used by everyday people or professionals, are, in this sense, models, tools used to simplify complex matters somewhat so they can be better understood and dealt with.

We will have a lot more to say about cultural models in Chapter 5. For now, we take them to be everyday theories, stories, images, metaphors, or any other device through which people try to simplify a complex reality in order to better understand it and deal with it. Such models help people to go about their lives efficiently without having to think through everything thoroughly at all times. We pick up our cultural models through interactions in society and often don't think all that much about them, using them as we go about our business on "automatic pilot," so to speak.

Of course, a word like “coffee” seems to mean something pretty simple, at least compared to words like “honor,” “love,” or “democracy.” But even the “coffee” example shows that the meanings of words are more like encyclopedia entries—even Wiki entries, as we will see below, since people can negotiate, contest, and change meaning—than they are like formal dictionary definitions. Words are connected more to knowledge and beliefs, encapsulated into the stories or theories that constitute cultural models, than they are to definitions. Lots of information based on history and what people do in the world is connected to each word, even a word like “coffee.” Lots of this information is picked up in conversation and in our dealings with texts and the media; not all or even most of it is attained in school. Some people know more or less of this information than do others. And, since history and what people do change, meanings change, as well.

Take another simple word, the word “bachelor” (Fillmore 1975). If any word has a definite definition, this word would seem to be it: “unmarried male.” However, now let me ask you, Is the Pope a bachelor? Is an older man who has lived with his homosexual lover for thirty years a bachelor? Is a young man in a permanent coma a bachelor? We are not really comfortable saying “yes” in each of these cases, even though in each case these people are unmarried males. Why? Because we really use the word “bachelor,” like the word “coffee,” in relation to a little “story,” a story like this: People usually get married to a member of the opposite sex by a certain age, men who stay unmarried, but available to members of the opposite sex, past a certain age are bachelors. In fact, this little story is our everyday theory of how the world usually goes or even, for some people, how it should go. It is, in that sense, a cultural model (an everyday theory), just like the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions in people’s heads. We humans, as we will see, have lots and lots of cultural models about all sorts of things.

The Pope, the committed gay, and the young man in the coma just don’t fit well in this story. For different reasons they aren’t really available to members of the opposite sex. So we are uncomfortable calling them “bachelors.” We go with the story and not the definition. Furthermore, people have for some time now actually challenged the story connected to the word “bachelor.” They have made a tacit cultural model overt by saying the story is sexist, especially since “bachelor” seemed once to carry a positive connotation while its twin, “spinster,” did not. Some of these people started calling available unmarried women “bachelors,” others starting using the word “spinster” as a term of praise.

We could even imagine the day when the Catholic Church both ordains women and allows priests to marry and where we are willing, then, to call the Pope a bachelor and the Pope happens to be a woman! Words and their meanings can travel far as their stories change and as our knowledge about the world changes.

So here is where we have gotten so far. The meanings of words are not fixed and settled once and for all in terms of definitions. They vary across contexts (remember “The coffee spilled, go get a mop” versus “The coffee spilled, go get a broom”). And they are tied to cultural models (stories and theories that are meant to simplify and help us deal with complexity). In fact, it is the cultural models that allow people to understand words differently in different contexts and even to understand new uses of a word for new contexts (e.g., remember “Big Coffee opposed the new legislation”). Now we will add a third point: that the meanings of words is also tied to negotiation and social interactions.

To see this point, let’s take yet another simple word—again, nothing fancy like “love” or “honor”—the word “sausage” and consider what the African-American activist and lawyer Patricia Williams (1991) had to say in court once about this seemingly simple word. Williams was prosecuting a sausage manufacturer for selling impure products. The manufacturer insisted that the word “sausage” meant “pig meat and lots of impurities.” Williams, in her summation, told the jury the following:

You have this thing called a sausage-making machine. You put pork and spices in at the top and crank it up, and because it is a sausage-making machine, what comes out the other end is a sausage. Over time, everyone knows that anything that comes out of the sausage-making machine is known as a sausage. In fact, there is a law passed that says it is indisputably sausage.

One day, we throw in a few small rodents of questionable pedigree and a teddy bear and a chicken. We crank the machine up and wait to see what comes out the other end. (1) Do we prove the validity of the machine if we call the product sausage? (2) Or do we enlarge and enhance the meaning of “sausage” if we call the product sausage? (3) Or do we have any success in breaking out of the bind if we call it something different from “sausage”?

In fact, I’m not sure it makes any difference whether we call it sausage or if we scramble the letters of the alphabet over this thing that comes out, full of sawdust and tiny claws. What will make a difference, however, is a recognition of our shifting relation to the word ‘sausage,’ by:

(1) enlarging the authority of sausage makers and enhancing the awesome, cruel inevitability of the workings of sausage machines—that is, everything they touch turns to sausage or else it doesn't exist; or by

(2) expanding the definition of sausage itself to encompass a wealth of variation: chicken, rodent, or teddy-bear sausage; or, finally, by

(3) challenging our own comprehension of what it is we really mean by sausage—that is, by making clear the consensual limits of sausage and reacquainting ourselves with the sources of its authority and legitimation.

Realizing that there are at least three different ways to relate to the facts of this case, to this product, this thing, is to define and acknowledge your role as jury and as trier of fact; is to acknowledge your own participation in the creation of reality.

(pp. 107–108)

It's pretty clear that Williams approves of option 3. But, exactly what are the consensual limits of a word's meaning? When does sausage cease to be sausage? How far can a company stretch the meaning of the word? What are the sources that authorize and legitimate the meaning of a word? These are not the sorts of questions we are used to thinking about in regard to words and meaning when we are tempted to just open a dictionary to settle what the meaning of a word is.

So let's look at the sausage issue—the sausage story, knowledge about sausage in the world—a bit more deeply. The sausage company engages in a social practice that involves making sausage in a certain way and selling it. Its social practice is fully caught up with a vested interest: making a profit. Consumers of sausage have another social practice, one involving buying and eating sausage. Their practice too is fully caught up with vested interests, namely, buying sausage for a low price and feeling well after eating it.

These two social practices exist only in relation to each other. Furthermore, the two practices happen to share some common interests. For example, it is not in the interest of either party to get too fussy about what gets labeled “sausage,” otherwise it will cost too much to buy or sell. But, the producers and consumers may conflict in exactly where they want to draw the boundary between what is and what is not sausage. This conflict opens up a negotiation about what the word “sausage” will mean. The negotiation can take place in court or in the supermarket where people buy or refuse to buy what the sausage company labels “sausage.”

In this negotiation, power plays a role—the power of the producers is pitted against the power of the consumers.

But, can this negotiation come out just any old way? Are there no limits to it? Williams says there are consensual limits. The producers and consumers are, though engaged in different practices, members of a larger community that has a consensus around certain values. One of these values is the health and well-being of its members, if only so that they can buy and sell more sausage. If one side of the negotiation violates these values, they can lose the negotiation, provided the community has the power to exclude them if they refuse to concede. Law is one way to try to do this. Boycotting the company is another. Systematically failing to apply the word “sausage” to the company’s products is still another.

Meanings are ultimately rooted in negotiation between different social practices with different interests by people who share or seek to share some common ground. Power plays an important role in these negotiations. The negotiations can be settled for the time, in which case meaning becomes conventional and routine. But the settlement can be reopened, perhaps when a particular company introduces a new element into its social practice and into its sausage. The negotiations which constitute meaning are limited by values emanating from “communities”—though we need to realize it can be contentious what constitutes a “community”—or from attempts by people to establish and stabilize, perhaps only for here and now, enough common ground to agree on meaning.

But how can we characterize what constitutes such a community, for example, the community of people that authorizes and legitimates, for a given time and place, the meaning of the word “sausage”? Following the lead of Amy Shuman, in her paper “Literacy: Local Uses and Global Perspectives” (1992), I will characterize these communities as persons whose paths through life have for a given time and place fallen together. I do not want to characterize them as people “united by mutual interest in achieving a common end,” since groups may negotiate a consensus around meaning when they share few substantive interests and have no common goals, or at least, when they have many conflicting interests and goals.

The word “community” here is probably not a good one. (See, I am negotiating meaning with you.) We might hope for—and, of course, often get—a more robust sense of community supporting the meanings of words and the shared communication of people. But, in the end, we often get more tenuous connections among people, ones in terms of which even foes can communicate, though there may always come a point where “words run out,” agreement (on words, or facts, or actions) can’t be

reached, and there is the risk of violence. (How well we know this in our current world.) In the end, one and the same person can be a “terrorist” to some and a “freedom fighter” to others, and communication is on the verge of failure and with it, perhaps, understanding, common ground, and peace.

So this is a different way to look at meaning. Meaning is not something locked away in heads, rendering communication possible by the mysterious fact that everyone has the same thing in their heads, though we don’t know how that happened. Meaning is something we negotiate and contest over socially. It is something that has its roots in “culture” in the very deep and extended sense that it resides in an attempt to find common ground. That common ground is very often rooted in the sorts of things we think of as “cultures,” whether something like “American culture” or “African-American culture,” though we will see the notion of “culture” (like “sausage”) is itself problematic.

But meaning, as I have argued above, can be rooted in relationships that are less stable, long-term, enduring, or encompassing as “cultures” in the traditional sense. Two people don’t need to “share a culture” to communicate. They need to negotiate and seek common ground on the spot of the here and now of social interaction and communication. In fact, we see such a thing every day in our current world in chat rooms and massive multiplayer worlds (like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*) where people of sometimes quite different ages, races, ethnicities, countries, genders, and social and political orientations of all sorts group together to engage in joint action and communication. Here very often the processes of negotiation, contestation, and the seeking or forestalling of common ground are obvious and foregrounded. Such processes are, I suggest, always part and parcel of language and communication, but they are often more hidden and taken for granted in our everyday lives in the “real” world, though they became obvious in Patricia Williams’s trial, as well.

Take, for example, a married couple. They each think that the meaning of the word “work” is clear and definite. Further, they each think they mean the same things by the word. Then, one day one of them says to the other, “I don’t think this relationship is working, because relationships shouldn’t take work.” The other partner, stunned, says, “But I have worked hard on this relationship and I think relationships require work.” They realize that they don’t really know, once and for all, what “work” means, that the word is being used in several different ways in these very utterances, and that here and now, in a quite consequential way, they have to negotiate the matter. (Perhaps, they should have done so earlier.) They

realize as well that they may hold different cultural models about work and relationships or that there are competing models available in society.

Notice, too, that there is no good way to clearly distinguish fighting over words and fighting over things and actions in the world. One partner doesn't like what he or she is being required to do, but if he or she didn't see—didn't feel—this was “work” or if he or she saw such “work” as good for relationships, then there wouldn't be a problem. Words, meanings, and the world are married and will stay together even if this couple doesn't. They are married because the primary way we humans deal with the world is by getting words to attach to the world in certain ways—like “sausage” above—and this is a matter we have to negotiate over and contest with in the face of other people, their practices and their interests.

Now I have made it seem like we are always fighting over words and their meanings. But, of course, we are not. Most of the time there is peace. But the question is why and how there is peace. There is peace because in many cases and for many parts of their lives people have come to agreements about what words will mean in different situations. These are “conventions.” We take them for granted until someone proposes to break them or we find areas or situations they don't really cover. We become party to these conventions by leading our lives with other people, by being parts of shared histories, groups, and institutions.

Indeed, we can see these histories, groups, and institutions as, in part, existing in order to stabilize and conventionalize meanings so that people can get on with their lives and their interests (unfortunately, sometimes at the cost of other people's interests). Looking at things this way shows us another side of the claim that meaning is social and cultural and not really just a matter of what is inside your head. It takes massive amounts of social work on the parts of groups and institutions to “police” meaning, to settle negotiations in terms of more or less stabilized conventions that everyone will abide by, often without giving the matter too much thought.

At one time in U.S. history, our government and military encouraged right-wing forces in some South American countries to harm civilians in order to encourage these civilians to oppose left-wing governments or left-wing revolutionary forces (Sikkink 2004). Some members of our government called such people “freedom fighters.” When Islamic fighters did the same thing to us and our allies, they, however, were called “terrorists.” Such a distinction takes work to uphold in terms of policies, media treatments, and political arguments, and is, in turn, contested by some people.

To see another example of the same sort of thing, consider a video game made in Syria called *Under Ash* (Gee 2003), a game whose hero

is a young Palestinian who throws stones to fight Israeli soldiers and settlers. The game operates by a cultural model that holds that while “civilians” should not be harmed, Israeli settlers don’t count as civilians, but rather as the “advance” troops of an occupation army. Of course, Israeli settlers don’t in reality count as anything until they are “modeled” in terms of their relationships to other things and people. If we see them as “civilians” (not combatants), then people who harm them are “terrorists.” If we see them as combatants and not civilians, then people who harm them are, at worst, fighting a war and, at best, are “freedom fighters.” Needless to say, lots of political works needs to go on to “enforce” the meanings we give words like “civilian” or “terrorist” in the face of people who wish to contest these meanings.

All this does *not* mean that “anything goes,” that it doesn’t matter whether we call someone a “civilian” or a “terrorist,” that “it’s all just words.” Nor is the matter “merely political” in the sense that it just all amounts to political rhetoric to advance one party over another. What it means is that what meanings we give to words is based on knowledge we acquire and choices we make, as well as values and beliefs—and, yes, even interests—we have. Words are consequential. They matter. Words and the world are married.

So we have developed a viewpoint (a theory) that the meanings of words:

- 1 Can vary across contexts of use.
- 2 Are composed of changing stories, knowledge, beliefs, and values that are encapsulated in cultural models, not definitions.
- 3 Are a matter, as well, of social negotiations rooted in culture if only in the broad sense of a search for common ground.
- 4 For many words at many points in their histories meaning is relatively stabilized thanks to the fact that many people accept and share a convention about what they mean in different contexts of use.
- 5 These conventions can be undone, contested, and changed.
- 6 Finally, it takes social work to enforce and police the meanings of words, work that never in the end can ensure their meanings will not change or be contested.

Combining words

So the theory of words and their meanings we have developed so far makes learning word meanings via lists and definitions—the sort of thing that sometimes goes on in school—pretty implausible. But the

situation is actually worse for lists and definitions. First, there really is no definitive list of the words one needs to know. Partly this is so because new words arise all the time and old ones die. Furthermore, each specialty area in society—from video gamers to gangster and lawyers—has its own words, some of which eventually filter into more general use (as have Freud’s terms like “ego” and “subconscious,” for example). But, worse, it is also so because we don’t always use single words, but often combine words into combinations that have their own meanings, that function, more or less, like single words. We saw this above with “Big Coffee.” You probably have never heard this combination before, but you can give it a meaning because you have heard things like “Big Oil” and “Big Business” and can, by analogy, guess a meaning for “Big Coffee.”

Our daily communication is filled with word combinations that take on their own life and meaning. And I am not now referring to idioms like “kick the bucket.” I am referring to compounds and phrases that take on their own non-idiomatic meanings in terms of stories, knowledge, beliefs, and values encapsulated in cultural models. No list could ever suffice. For example, consider the word combination “correct English” or “good English” or even “to speak English correctly.” These combinations—just like single words like “sausage” or “democracy”—have their own connections to cultural models in terms of which people can give them specific meanings in specific contexts, negotiate over such meanings, or contest them.

To see how matters work here—the sorts of trouble we can get ourselves into with words, words in this case that are not listed in any dictionary—consider the following sentence, uttered by a seven-year African-American child in the course of telling a story at “sharing time” (“show and tell”) at school (Gee 1985: 32–35; see also Gee 2005 and Chapter 7 in this book):

1 My puppy, he always be followin’ me.

Let’s consider a possible reaction to this sentence. From my years of teaching introductory linguistics, I know that many people on hearing a sentence like this one will say (or think) something like the following:

This child does not know how to speak correct English. This is probably because she attends a poor and neglected school and comes from an impoverished home with few or no books in it, a home which gives little support for and encouragement to education.

Note our word combination “correct English” and the work it is doing. This word combination (and related ones like “good English” or “to speak English correctly”) is connected to a cultural model something like this: There are right ways and wrong ways to speak English. How educated people speak and write determines which ways are right. If there is dispute about the matter, there are experts (grammarians) who can settle the matter, because they know how educated people do speak or, at least, how they should speak (because, of course, even educated people have lapses). This cultural model is often associated with another one (Finegan 1980) that holds that languages are always deteriorating over time because uneducated people and other debilitating social forces change them and that historically earlier forms of language are, thus, often more correct than later ones, something that can be put right, if it all, by experts telling us how we ought to speak (and write).

The “correct English” cultural model tells us the little girl is “wrong” (alas, then, she doesn’t even really know her native language) and the “language is deteriorating” model tells us she is part of a larger problem. There are two things in this little girl’s sentence that contribute to these claims. First is the juxtaposition of the subject “my puppy” to the front of the sentence, followed by the pronoun “he.” People who hold the above cultural models may well feel that this is simply “sloppy” or “colloquial,” much as is, they will say, using “followin’” instead of “following,” rather like slurping one’s soup. We all are prone in moments of carelessness to do things like this, but this little girl, they may feel, probably does it more than she ought to.

People with the above cultural models are likely to be more seriously disturbed by the “bare” helping verb “be,” rather than “is.” Why can’t the child say, “My puppy is always following me”? Can it be that hard? The problem will get worse when we add the fact that this child can be heard to say such things as “My puppy followin’ me” on other occasions. The child will now be said to be inconsistent, simply varying between different forms because she doesn’t really know the right form, doesn’t really know the language in this regard, despite the fact that it is her first and only language.

Let’s now juxtapose to the above cultural models what a linguist who has actually studied the matter might say about the little girl’s sentence. This is a case where cultural models and professional theories differ. So what is the linguist’s theory about sentence 1? We will start with the most striking feature, the bare “be.”

To understand how this “bare be” form is used, and to grasp its significance, we must first explicate a part of the English aspect system

(Comrie 1976). “Aspect” is a term that stands for how a language signals the viewpoint it takes on the way in which an action is situated in time. Almost all languages in the world make a primary distinction between the perfective aspect and the imperfective aspect.

The imperfective aspect is used when the action is viewed as on-going or repeated. English uses the progressive (the verb “to be” plus the ending -ing on the following verb) to mark the imperfective, as in “John is working/John was working” or “Mary is jumping/Mary was jumping.” In the first of these cases, John’s working is viewed as on-going, still in progress in the present (“is”) or the past (“was”); in the second, Mary’s jumping is viewed as having being repeated over and over again in the present (“is”) or past (“was”).

The perfective is used when an action is viewed as a discrete whole, treated as if it is a point in time (whether or not, in reality, the act took a significant amount of time or not). English uses the simple present or past for the perfective, as in “Smith dives for the ball!” (sportscast), in the present, or “Smith dived for the ball,” in the past. The imperfective of these sentences would be: “Smith is diving for the ball” and “Smith was diving for the ball.”

Linguists refer to the distinctive English dialect that many, but by no means all, African-American speakers speak as “Black Vernacular English”—“BVE” for short—or African-American English—“AAE” for short (Baugh 1983, 1999; Green 2002; Labov 1972a, b; Mufwene *et al.* 1998; Rickford and Rickford 2000). Some people prefer the term “Ebonics” (see Baugh 2000 for discussion) here, but, for better or worse, terms like “BVE” or “AAE” are in wider currency in linguistics (and, in general, linguists don’t name languages or dialects after the color of their speakers). Of course, there is, just as we would expect, negotiation and contestation to be had over “AAE” versus “Ebonics” (and, thus, we see that what we said about words above applies to specialist “jargon” as well). We will refer to the English that elites in society are perceived as speaking and that many others accept and do their best to emulate as “Standard English.” (There are actually different varieties of Standard English, see Bex 1999; Finegan and Rickford 2004; Milroy and Milroy 1985.)

AAE and Standard English do not differ in the perfective, though an older form of AAE used to distinguish between a simple perfective (“John drank the milk”) and a completive that stressed that the action was finished, complete and done with (“John done drank the milk up”). Like all languages, AAE (a dialect of English) has changed and is changing through time.

AAE and standard English do differ in the imperfective. Young African-American-speakers make a distinction between on-going or repeated (thus, imperfective) events which are of limited duration and on-going or repeated events which are of extended duration. For limited duration events they use the absent copula, as in “My puppy following me,” and for extended events they use the “bare be” as in “My puppy be following me.” Thus, the following sorts of contrast are regular in the variety of English spoken by many young African-American speakers in the United States (Bailey and Maynor 1987):

Limited duration events

- 2a In health class, we talking about the eye.
[Standard English: “In health class, we are talking about the eye”]
- b He trying to scare us.
[Standard English: “He is trying to scare us”]

Extended duration events

- 3a He always be fighting.
[Standard English: “He is always fighting”]
- b Sometimes them big boys be throwing the ball, and . . .
[Standard English: “Sometimes those big boys are throwing the ball, and . . .”]

In 2a, the talk about the eye in health class will go on only for a short while compared to the duration of the whole class. Thus, the speaker uses the absent copula form (“we talking”). In 2b, “he” is trying to scare us now, but this doesn’t always happen or happen repeatedly and often, so once again the speaker uses the absent be (“he trying”). On the other hand, in 3a, the fighting is always taking place, is something that “he” characteristically does, thus the speaker uses the bare be form (“he be fighting”). And in 3b, the speaker is talking about a situation that has happened often and will in all likelihood continue to happen. Thus, she uses the bare be (“big boys be throwing”). Standard English makes no such contrast, having to rely on the context of the utterance, or the addition of extra words, to make the meaning apparent.

Two things are particularly interesting about this contrast in AAE. First, it is one that is made in many other languages. It is one linguists expect to find in languages, though it is not always found—for instance,

it is not found in Standard English (Comrie 1976). That Standard English fails to overtly draw this contrast is then somewhat odd, but, then, all languages fail to make some contrasts that others make.

Second, older African-American speakers did not use “bare be” in this way, but somewhat differently. Young African-American people redrew their dialect to make this distinction, using forms that already existed in AAE (the absent “be” and the bare “be”), but with somewhat different uses (Bailey and Maynor 1987). That is, they are changing their language, as all children have done through all the time language has been around. It is as if they have (unconsciously) seen a gap or hole in the English system—the failure to clearly signal in the imperfective a distinction between limited and extended duration—and filled it in. All languages have gaps or holes, and children are always attempting to fill them in (Slobin 1985). Indeed, AAE has changed in certain respects since the first edition of this book (1990)—as, of course, has Standard English, though dialects less tied to writing than Standard English change more rapidly.

This is one of the major ways languages change through time. Children invent distinctions that they think (unconsciously) should be in the language. Some linguists believe this invention is based on a biologically specified view of what the optimal design of a human language ought to be (Chomsky 1986: 1–50; Pinker 1994). Other linguists believe this sort of invention is based on children’s social and cognitive development, their ways of thinking about the world that they gain through their early interactions with the world and people in it (see Hoff 2004 for general discussion).

Linguists disagree about exactly how to phrase the matter, though they do not disagree about the creativity of children as language acquirers or on the important role of children in language change. Languages are changing all the time, losing and gaining various contrasts. If a language loses the ability to draw a certain contrast, and the contrast seems to be an important one from the perspective humans take on the world, children may well replace it.

But, one might ask, why has the non-standard dialect introduced this distinction, and not also the standard dialect? One price speakers pay for standard dialects is that they change more slowly, since the fact that a standard dialect is used in writing and public media puts something of a brake on change. This is good in that the dialect remains relatively constant across time, thus serving the purposes of standardization (Milroy and Milroy 1985).

However, since non-standard dialects are freer to change on the basis of the human child’s linguistic and cognitive systems, non-standard

dialects are, in a sense, often “more logical” or “more elegant” from a linguistic point of view. That is, they are “more logical” or “more elegant” from the viewpoint of what is typical across languages or from the viewpoint of what seems to be the basic design of the human linguistic system.

Non-standard dialects and standard ones often serve different purposes: the former signal identification with a local, often non-mainstream community, and the latter with a wider, plural and technological society, and its views of who are elite and worth emulating (Bex 1999; Chambers 1995; Finegan and Rickford 2004; Milroy 1987a, b; Milroy and Milroy 1985). In fact, a change in a non-standard dialect, since it makes the non-standard dialect different from the standard, may enhance its ability to signal identification with a “local” community as over against the wider “mainstream” society.

However, we should keep in mind that in today’s complex, global world, where people can communicate with each other nearly endlessly via a wide variety of media, “local varieties” can spread and be used for political activism and as a badge of identity in contesting what is and what is not “mainstream.” In turn, what is or was “mainstream” in a given context can change as people adopt “local varieties” for the purposes of creating new consumer niches in a global market place. Both things have happened with AAE as it plays a role in rap and hip hop, for instance.

But both standard and non-standard dialects are marvels of human mastery. Neither is better or worse. Furthermore, it is an accident of history as to which dialect gets to be taken to be the standard—a reversal of power and prestige in the history of the United States could have led to a form of AAE being the standard, and the concomitant need here to save from negative judgments dialects that are closer to what is currently viewed as Standard English.

The other features of our sentence are also quite common across languages. The juxtaposition of the subject “my puppy” to the front of the sentence is a way to signal that a speaker is switching topics or returning to an old one. It is actually common in many dialects of spoken English and in many other languages (Ochs and Schieffelin 1983).

The variation between “followin’” in informal contexts and “following” in more formal contexts occurs in all dialects of English, including dialects closer to the standard. It turns out that people aren’t very good at actually hearing what they and others are really saying—though they think they are good at it—so you can’t trust your ears in this regard, you have to make tape-recordings and listen repeatedly and carefully.

The two forms (“followin” and “following”), in all dialects of English, actually have different social implications (Milroy and Milroy 1985: 95). The form “followin” means that the speaker is signaling more solidarity with and less deference toward the hearer, treating the hearer more as a peer, friend, or comrade. The “following” form signals that the speaker is signaling less solidarity with and more deference towards the hearer, treating the hearer less as a peer and intimate and more as one higher in status than the speaker. Of course, these matters are matters of degree, and so one can (unconsciously) mix and match various degrees of “-in” and “-ing” in a stretch of language to achieve just the right level of solidarity and deference (Labov 1972a, b; Chambers 1995; Gee 1993a, Gee 2005; Milroy 1987a).

So we have a conflict between a theory in linguistics—one that says that this little girl speaks “correct English” in terms of her own dialect—and an everyday, often taken-for-granted tacit cultural model (theory) that says the little girl doesn’t speak English correctly—indeed, claims that she speaks “bad English.” Of course, this doesn’t settle the matter. Common sense can be wrong, but so can experts.

Many readers are probably saying at this point, “Look, the issue is not what to mean by a combination of words like ‘correct English’, rather it’s a matter of what is true, a matter of whether the linguist’s facts are correct or everyday people’s facts.” Alas, you already know I don’t think language and the world can be separated that cleanly. What is at issue between the linguist’s theory and the everyday cultural model is not solely or only a disagreement over whose generalizations or facts are “true” or accurate or whatever. People who hold the everyday cultural model—even after they have heard the linguist’s views—can still choose to use the words “correct English” to mean “the dialect people speak (and write) whom we (or elites in society) view as intelligent and educated.” In this case they have conceded the linguist’s point about dialects, but have shored up their cultural model to claim that only Standard English is correct and other dialects are not, or some are not, namely ones like the one this little girl speaks. Such people can also, of course, just ignore linguists (probably the more common course).

Meaning is a matter of negotiation and contestation, and people by no means just give into experts. In fact, this point was made clear during the Oakland “Ebonics controversy.” The Oakland School Board had sought federal funds to aid African-American students who spoke AAE. The controversy had many aspects. But when newspapers and other media claimed that AAE was “bad English” or “slang,” linguists sought to correct them. The claim that these children were not speaking “bad

English” or “slang” was one that linguists had taken as proven for several decades by the point of the controversy. Nonetheless, many people in the media and many everyday people refused to change their cultural model and agree with the linguists, though, of course, they became more consciously aware of their model.

The final and ultimately the real issue for those who hold the everyday cultural model associated with “correct English,” once their tacit theory has been made explicit by being juxtaposed to the linguist’s theory, is this: Do they really want to define “correct English” in the way their cultural model does? Or, do they want, rather, to adopt the linguist’s framework? This choice is, of course, partly based on how people assess the linguist’s factual claims. But, in the end, the choice can only be based, for the most part, on a value judgment about the current social world and about what one takes to be both possible and desired changes in this world.

Such judgments are ultimately ethical or moral decisions. It is clear, also, that I personally believe that, exposed to the linguist’s theory and the everyday cultural model, the only ethical choice is to use “correct English” the way linguists use it. This is so because the linguists’ theory, I believe, will lead to a more just, humane, and happier world. I haven’t spelled this argument out here in full, but I believe that it is fairly obvious. In any case, the following chapters will make clear why I hold this belief.

A further moral we can draw here is this: Arguing about what words (ought to) mean is not a trivial business—it is not “quibbling over mere words,” “hair splitting,” “just semantics.” Such arguments are what lead to the adoption of social beliefs and values and, in turn, these beliefs and values lead to social action and the maintenance and creation of social worlds. Such arguments are, in this sense, often a species of moral argumentation.

Before going on, let me hasten to add that it is simply a piece of inaccurate “folk wisdom,” encouraged by the popular press and other media, that linguists claim that people never say anything wrong or can’t make mistakes in language. The sentence “Whom should I say is calling?” exists in the grammar of no variety (dialect) of English. It fails to fit any pattern of generalizations that characterizes any dialect of English. Some speakers do not use the “who/whom” contrast in their dialects; this is, in fact, true of the informal, colloquial speech of many speakers of dialects close to Standard English. Such speakers will sometimes say such a thing as “Whom should I say is calling?” when they are trying to sound very formal and sound as if they know where Standard (in this case, for the most part, written) English calls for the placement of

“whom” and “who.” This is called “hypercorrection” and it is indeed a mistake. People do such things, and linguists know they do.

Linguists do not claim that “anything goes.” They do, however, perfectly well know that the sentence uttered by our seven-year-old is grammatical (“correct”) in her dialect. And they know it is grammatical because it fits the “rules” of her variety of English, the pattern of generalizations that characterize her speech and that of her fellow community members sharing her dialect. These rules or generalizations are acquired through exposure to the language as a child, and not through overt instruction at home or school. Children come to school already well along in the acquisition of their dialect of English. To me—as well as to other linguists—it would seem important for teachers to realize this if they wish this little girl to acquire Standard English (another dialect) in school and affiliate with school as an institution that respects her, her family, and her culture.

What we have seen is that when we interrogate the cultural models associated with some words and word combinations we get to moral decisions. Attributing certain meanings to such words and word combinations leads to value-laden moral decisions about how the world is and should be and how we could make it better or worse. It leads to claims and beliefs about who and what is “good,” “right,” “normal,” “acceptable,” and who and what are not, judgments that have consequences in the world. When people negotiate over such words and word combinations they are also negotiating over social issues of moral import. I will call such words and word combinations “socially contested terms.” “Correct English” is one such term, but so, we will see in this book, is “literacy.”

Socially contested terms are words and word combinations whose cultural models hold implications about “right” and “wrong,” “good” and “bad,” “acceptable” and “not acceptable,” “appropriate” and “not appropriate,” and other such value-laden distinctions. When these distinctions are applied to people they have implications for how “social goods” are or should be distributed in the world, and this is, for me, ultimately a moral matter. Saying a child does not know how to speak her own native language correctly has implications about that child, her abilities and her deficits—and these carry over into how she is treated in school and society.

Morality and communication

We have seen that people hold cultural models and that these are theories. Such theories—like the one about “correct” English—are often tacit in the sense that people have not thought about them much and take them for granted. They seem “obvious,” even commonsense. If people have thought about them more explicitly, then they are overt and now, at least, people who hold them can engage in overt argument with people who don’t.

We can always ask where a person got his or her cultural models. In most cases, they picked them up from talk, interaction, and engagement with texts and media in society and within their own cultural spheres. In some cases, the cultural models may have come from that person’s thought and research into the matter, carried out in discussion and debate with others, especially if their models have been challenged by others or they have become, for whatever reason, aware they hold them and have become wary of them. Such thought and research, I will call “primary research.”

Even if the person has not engaged in primary research, he or she may have thoughtfully consulted, through discussion, listening or reading, a variety of such original thought and research, and discussed it with others. In either of these cases—where the person has actually carried out primary research or, at least, thoughtfully considered it—I will say that the person is operating now with “a primary theory,” something on the way from a cultural model to a more explicit theory. The issue here is not whether the person is “right,” rather it is this: Have people allowed their viewpoints to be formed through serious reflection on multiple competing viewpoints (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Billig 1987)?

Primary theories are not the possession solely of academics. My twenty-seven-year-old son was ten when I first wrote this book (1990). When he was ten, his theories about *Iron Man*, a comic book super-hero, were quite assuredly primary theories. He had read the books and discussed them with others, as well as, in fact, looked into something of the history of *Iron Man*. My theories of *Iron Man* were and are, however, not primary theories, as all I know about the matter I have heard in snippets from him and picked up in informal conversations with others about their children’s reading of “super-hero” comics. I have never studied the matter or confronted alternative viewpoints and opinions.

Basil Bernstein (1971, 1975) pointed out that the theories presented to teachers in training are very often “third-hand” knowledge. The teachers do not themselves read primary literature in linguistics, for example.

Nor do they read secondary sources written by linguists summarizing and discussing that literature. Nor do they do any research themselves. Rather, they are presented, orally and in their reading, with third-hand reports presented by people, not themselves trained in linguistics, summarizing and discussing secondary sources at best. Thus, the teachers hold their theories about language at some remove from being a primary theory.

In our daily lives, the beliefs we have and the claims we make on the basis of these beliefs have effects on other people, sometimes harmful, sometimes beneficial, sometimes a bit of both, and sometimes neither. There are, I believe, two conceptual principles that serve as the basis of ethical human communication and interaction. These principles are grounded in no further ones, save that the second relies on the first, and, if someone fails to accept them, then argument has “run out.” They are absolutely basic. The first principle (Wheatley 1970: 115–134) is:

First principle. That something would harm someone else (deprive them of what they or the society they are in view as “goods”) is always a good reason (though perhaps not a sufficient reason) not to do it.

What this principle says is that when we consider whether to believe, claim, or do anything, then it is always a good reason not to do it if we believe that our believing, claiming, or doing it would harm someone else. This does not mean that there may not be other reasons that override this one, reasons that lead us to do the harmful thing nonetheless.

I have, and can have, I believe, no argument for this principle, and, in particular, for well known reasons, utilitarian arguments for it won't work (Smith 1988: ch. 6). The principle is simply a basic part of what it means to be a moral human being. All I, or anyone, can say is that if people do not accept it, or if they act as though they do not accept it, then I and most others are simply not going to interact with them. We have come to a point at which one must simply offer resistance, not argument.

The second conceptual principle is yet more specific, and is couched in terms of our distinctions about different types of theories:

Second principle. One always has the moral obligation to change a cultural model into a primary theory when there is reason to believe that the cultural model advantages oneself or one's group over other people or other groups.

What this principle says is that if I have good reason to believe, or others argue convincingly that I ought to have good reason to believe, that a cultural model or theory I hold gives me or people like me (however this is defined) an advantage over other people or other groups of people, then my continuing to hold this theory in a tacit way or on the basis of little thought and study is unethical. I have an ethical obligation to explicate my theory, make it overt, and to engage in the sort of thought, discussion, and research that would render it a primary theory for me. It is not enough just to be able to put it into words (to be able to argue): it is necessary, as well, to confront evidence and alternative viewpoints and to be open to change. I have to have engaged in dialogue with alternatives (so consulting only sources that I already agree with is not enough).

By “advantage” in this second principle I simply mean “bring oneself or one’s group more of what counts, in the society one is in, as a good, whether this be status, wealth, power, control, or whatever.” Once again, I do not argue that there is any “transcendental” argument for this principle, only that if one fails to accept it, argument has “run out” and all that one can do is fail to interact with such people and offer them resistance if one must interact with them. At some point we have to cease to argue with people who will not open themselves to learning when their viewpoints have the potential to harm people. Such opening up does not mean, in the end, they will change their viewpoints, but it does mean they have seriously confronted other viewpoints. This second principle is, I would claim, also the ethical basis and main rationale for schools and schooling. An unexamined life isn’t moral because it has the potential to hurt other people needlessly.

Ideology

When I wrote the first edition of this book (1990), the term “ideology” was a matter of considerable interest and debate in education and the social sciences more generally (see, e.g., Giddens 1984, 1987; Jameson 1981; Thompson 1984, Voloshinov 1986; in reference to ideology and education, see Freire and Macedo 1987; Giroux 1988; Lankshear with Lawler 1987; Luke 1988; McLaren 1989). This was partly due to the deep influence of Marxist approaches to education and society that were prevalent in U.S. universities from the 1960s until well in the 1980s. People are somewhat less directly concerned with the term today, but the debates about ideology and the notion itself are still crucial.

Marx believed that human knowledge, beliefs, and behavior reflected and were shaped by the economic relationships that existed in society

(Williams 1985; Marx and Engels 1970; Marx 1977). By “economic relationships” he meant something fairly broad, something like the relationships people contracted with each other in society in order to produce and consume “wealth.” (“Wealth” originally meant “well-being” and in the economic sense is still connected to the resources in terms of which people and institutions can sustain their well being, at least materially.)

In a society where power, wealth, and status are quite unequally distributed (like ours), Marx claimed that the social and political ideas of those groups with the most power, status, and wealth “are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships” (Williams 1985: 155–156; Marx and Engels 1970; Marx 1977). That is, what people in power believe is simply an expression of their controlling and powerful positions in the social hierarchy, and their desire, whether conscious or not, to retain and enhance their power. Elites in a society believe what they do because it helps them keep control of power and status and to feel validated in doing so.

It is the failure of the elite and powerful in a society to realize that their views of reality follow from, and support, their positions of power that, in Marx’s view, creates ideology. “Ideology” is an “upside-down” version of reality. Things are not really the way the elite and powerful believe them to be, rather their beliefs invert reality to make it appear the way they would like it to be, the way it “needs” to be if their power is to be enhanced and sustained.

Marx also believed that the elite and powerful could get others with less power and status to accept their “inverted” view of reality in two ways. They could accomplish this through “intellectuals” who actively promote the views of the rich and powerful and who “make the perfecting of the illusion of the [ruling class] about itself their chief source of livelihood” (Williams 1985: 155–156; Marx and Engels 1970). And, they accomplish it, as well, through organizing society and its institutions so as to encourage ways of thinking and behaving which enhance their interests, even if these ways are, in reality, at variance with the “true” interests of many people engaged in such thinking and acting (Fiske 1993; Gramsci 1971).

There is still great power in this viewpoint. In this book we are going to be talking about language and literacy, including how language and literacy are used at school and in institutions of power. Marx warns us to reflect on the fact that people with power have a vested interest to use language and literacy in their own favor, to express views of the world that support and validated their power. He warns us not to facilely assume highly educated people see reality as it is and less educated people don’t.

In fact, he suggests that to the extent that extended education and high literacy skills ally people with the rich and powerful in society, they may invest people in believing and arguing for viewpoints—and seeing the world in ways—that better reflect the interests of the rich and powerful than the way things actually are or should be.

Unfortunately, Marx seems to assume that some people see reality only through a warped ideological lens, coloring reality in their own favor, while others see reality as it is. But none of us can see or deal with reality without words or other symbols. To discuss and debate—even to think about—reality we have to attach words to it. These words are, as we have seen, always connected to negotiable, changeable, and sometimes contested stories, histories, knowledge, beliefs, and values encapsulated into cultural models (theories) about the world. Nobody looks at the world other than through lenses supplied by language or some other symbol system. (This applies even to our senses—vision, for example, must be interpreted before it is meaningful, and such interpretation is done in language or some other symbol system.)

Of course, we can always ask whether the stories, histories, knowledge, beliefs, and values about the world that someone—even someone in some specific social group or class—uses are “correct” or “useful” or “moral.” But we can’t settle this by assuming members of one group or class are always wrong and members of some other group or class are always right. We all use words in ways that are colored by our lives, interests, values, and desires. We all have ample opportunity to be wrong. We all have ample opportunity—even a moral obligation—sometimes to change and do better. We all live and communicate with and through “ideology.” We cannot do otherwise, but we can seek to interrogate our ideology when we come to believe that aspects of it are wrong or hurtful to others.

The cultural models that are connected to words are indispensable. We cannot go about our lives and contest every cultural model we use. They exist to help us cope with complexity and get on with our businesses. Cultural models are not all wrong or all right. In fact, like all models, they are simplifications of reality. They are the ideology through which we all see our worlds. In that sense, we are all both “beneficiaries” and “victims” of ideology, thanks to the fact that we speak a language and live in culture. But we can—or at times are morally obligated to—interrogate our cultural models and replace them with others, sometimes even with explicit and well developed theories. Ultimately, these new theories are models too, but, we hope, better ones. This ability is what education owes us and why we need education, though not necessarily education just in schools.

This book is about using some tools from linguistics (e.g., discourse analysis) to reflect on and interrogate some of our cultural models germane to language, literacy, learning, and people in society. In the end, you do not need to agree with me, but I hope to have suggested here that to reflect on these matters is in the end a moral matter. We will throughout be on socially contested terrain.