

Revaluing Bourdieu's Theory on Language Politics for Multilingual Contexts

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Abstract: *This article takes a critical look at the politics of language by French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. It begins with Bourdieu's views on language and its interrelation with social concepts and hierarchies; followed by his critique of existing theories in linguistics and the process through which he built upon his own theory of language and power. Then the socio-historical processes contributing to the rise of a dominant official variety of a language and Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power, violence and struggle associated with the same are discussed. To understand the institutional mechanisms which lend validity and efficacy to language by the means of which symbolic domination is exercised, how and why different systems collaborate to form this complex matrix of language legitimization, and how it is related with the social hierarchies and their perpetuation are elaborated upon next. Last part delves into the critique of Bourdieu's work on language politics, from the language of his works, to the application of his theory in multilingual contexts.*

Keywords: Politics of Language, Language hierarchies, Symbolic Power

1. Introduction

Bourdieu's work on language politics is a part of his larger theory of praxis, whereby he used linguistic reasoning and practices to explain and elaborate upon the broader social concepts, and demonstrated the connection between the two. Bourdieu established that language usage in social context is related to power, authority and social hierarchy. He pointed out that when linguists deal with languages they refer to the social context in only so much as a language being a shared resource of society. Both formal and structural linguistics hence failed to understand the specific social and political conditions of language use. Even sociolinguists, became preoccupied with variations in usage and accents of language in the social context. Consequently, the complex interplay between language and society, where language and its practices are moulded by the concrete practices of power and inequality were missed. Linguists view language as common, objective, completely homogeneous and equally available to all, Bourdieu calls this the "illusion of linguistic communism". He believed that there is no homogenous, common language from which a speaker can draw from. Language according to him is the result of complex socio-historic and political processes and linguists ignore the conditions through which a particular model of language is established as normal, dominant and legitimate.

His own work developed a perspective on linguistic phenomenon that deals with concrete social practices of power and hierarchy rather than the 'abstract conceptions of social life'. He went on to elaborate that everyday language use no matter how seemingly insignificant, has bearings of social structures that it expresses as well as helps to replicate. Along with critiquing linguistic theories of Saussure and other Structuralists, he also points out that structural analysis poses the danger of monopoly and hegemonic domination of one model of language over ideological domains, a kind of 'intellectual imperialism'. Bourdieu was opposed to all semiotic analysis as they are purely internal, limited to the text, ignoring the socio-historical conditions that were there and contributed to the

formation of the text. These also ignore the position of the one who is analysing- the analyst's own context and their relation with the object of analysis.

Bourdieu argued that language itself is a socio-historic phenomenon; and that the rise of the dominant official language is a result of socio-historic and political processes. He demonstrates this through the contributing factors in the development of the official variety of the French language.

2. Bourdieu's Politics of Language

According to Bourdieu power is encompassed everywhere, it is present in every transaction of every field, still it cannot be dismissed just as a 'circle whose centre is everywhere and nowhere', it needs to be discovered in places where it is invisible or less visible or else misrecognized. Language is also a part of cultural capital and the dominance of one culture over others lends the dominant the power not only over material resources but also systems of symbolic production. Bourdieu defines Symbolic Power as "that invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it." (Bourdieu, 1991 pg. 164) This symbolic power is exercised through the means of Symbolic Instruments.

Bourdieu also emphasizes on the role of 'Symbols' as instruments which make 'consensus on the meaning of the social world' possible. The consensus which they help create is a crucial factor in the reproduction of social order as "Logical integration is the precondition of moral integration". (Bourdieu, 1991 pg. 166)

Symbolic Power is "a power of constructing reality" as well as symbolic structures that rely on it; these can derive their power to structure reality only because they themselves are structured, i.e. they are in agreement with one another and thus can exercise structuring power over minds. In simpler words, they have a common conception of various concepts, such as space, time, number etc. Durkheim refers to this as

'logical conformism'. This is how they derive their validity and power as instruments of knowledge and communication, through agreement with one another, and thus intellectuals reach agreement through logical conformism.

These symbolic systems serve a specific political purpose, they unify the dominant class by distinguishing them from other classes and help them communicate within their class. They falsely depict to unify the society as a whole by portraying the ideologies of the dominant class to be of interest to everybody and help establish social order by forming and legitimizing hierarchies. In the case of language which is a sub part of culture, this is achieved by masking the division under the guise of medium of communication. For instance, a standardized legitimate form of language is deemed necessary for the purpose of effective communication and administration of a union, not to mention the symbolic integration of it. At the same time the distinguishing of a particular variety of language simultaneously distances other varieties of language and their cultures from the dominant one in the process of definition. The dominant culture and class thus possesses an ideological superiority and are able to employ symbolic systems to portray their ideologies to be of common interest to all classes; they gain power over the systems of definition as well, and all the other cultures have to define themselves in relation to "their distance from the dominant culture" and view this hierarchy as a given. This concealment of the power relations contributes to the 'false consciousness' of the dominated classes and Bourdieu employs Weber's term to sum it up as 'domestication of the dominated.'

The different classes are locked in symbolic struggle to define the social world according to ideologies that best suit the purpose of their own class. This struggle can manifest itself either in the 'symbolic conflicts of daily life' or through the struggle between the specialists of the fields for monopoly over symbolic production. These specialists of fields came up with the division of labour. They have monopoly over the 'legitimate' productions in their own fields, for instance in the field of language they would be grammarians, teachers of language, writers and so on. The rise of field specialists rendered the instruments of symbolic production out of the reach of layman. This struggle to gain control over the symbolic production can be viewed as the miniature of the struggle between classes to impose 'arbitrary instruments of knowledge'. Remarkably the nature of these instruments as arbitrary isn't revealed. The dominant ideologies produced and legitimized by the field specialists continue when the dominant class wants to retain its economic capital and intermediaries participate to retain their position of power to define the social world, which they hold due to possessing specific form of capital.

Since communication is possible only between systems, the relations of power and the arbitrary nature of instruments of power are concealed not only from the people over whom the symbolic violence is meted upon but also from those who wield it. The very belief of the dominated and the dominant in these systems lends the systems their symbolic power, which in turn enables the dominant class to achieve an equivalence of what can be taken through force. This symbolic power can be transformed into other forms of

power, the idea that Bourdieu describes earlier in transformation of one form of capital into another¹.

3. Problems with Bourdieu's Theory

Bourdieu's writings have been critiqued on various levels, many who read his works find them challenging and often describe them as 'terse', 'dense' and at places 'wilfully obscure' (Hanks, 2005 pg. 68). The problem lies with his vocabulary derivations from different fields such as linguistics, economics, art, philosophy of language etc. "Throughout the writings he uses linguistic-semiotic terms, such as arbitrariness, generativity, invariance, and structure, but he dismisses much of the linguistics and semiotics from which they are drawn" (Hanks, 2005 pg. 68). Bourdieu borrows terms from various fields and attempts to appropriate them new meanings to serve his own purpose, trying to rid them of their 'intellectual baggage' in the process. The consequence being, the people reading his works either not aware or not in agreement with the re-appropriation of meaning, find it difficult to make sense of it. It also exemplifies the taking away of meaning production out of the hands of the common people, which according to Bourdieu's politics of language is the task of specialists of the field; he being a field specialist re-imposes meanings on certain words borrowed from other disciplines and thus takes away the common understanding of them, leaving the reader not only confused in the process, but also powerless to question the re-imposition of meaning. A sympathetic understanding will see this as a manifestation of his theory while it can also be seen as a mistake on the part of the author to fall into that fault which he himself criticized through his theories.

There are other questions regarding the general relevance of his theory. The reservations about the applications of Bourdieu's theory in multilingual societies being a prominent one. Unlike the same language-different varieties system, where the differences in groups is mainly based on class differences and strengthened and replicated through politics of language, a multilingual set up comes with way more complexities. This will be clearer if we take a keener look at how Bourdieu arrived at his theory of language politics. He perceived language as an ever evolving dynamic entity, unlike the stationary stance that structural linguists took through their synchronic analysis of language. Language was viewed as a 'structured structure' by Saussure, to be studied on its own rather than in relation with other fields, while Bourdieu stressed upon the relational analysis of the structuring structures with each other and deriving a theory of language based upon praxis. His own relational analysis and the praxis based derivation of a theory of language were however built upon the study of French language society, with its dominant standardised official version of language and non-standardised language varieties. In a multi-language set up however, the variables or factors increase in number, there are multiple spheres of power relations in play- the symbolic struggle takes place amongst groups using different languages and within these

¹Bourdieu elaborates in 'Forms of Capital' that capital is not just economic, but has other forms such as cultural capital, social capital, and one form of capital can be transformed into the other

groups between the speakers of standard language variety and its dialects, there are even languages which aren't recognized at all by the state as languages, and in former colonies the remnants of the colonizer's language still enjoy a special status which further complicates the situation. In such a set up the application of Bourdieu's politics of language may be able to explicate only sketchily the power dynamics between the dominant and the dominated groups especially because if a group's class position is determined by the position of the language they use, where does one place people who speak multiple languages that hold different positions in the hierarchy? Add to it the intermixing of populations and consequently their languages and it makes the absolute separation of groups based upon language use difficult if not impossible. Under such circumstances the theory arising out of analysis of these groups and their interrelation to arrive at a theory of language politics hardly seems to hold up. Also, if one considers Bourdieu's stress over the relational analysis between structures, and the 'specific social and political conditions of language formation and use', they are very different in multilingual societies from the ones on the basis of which he built his theories. The generalizability of his work therefore is questionable and has limited relevance when it comes to a multilingual set up.

The theory also presupposes the subservience of the dominated classes since by definition symbolic power cannot be exercised without the compliance of those that are subject to it; however, the symbolic instruments of domination such as literature, education etc. themselves have spaces for dissent. In the field of language use for instance, several groups raise their voices for the safeguards of minority languages or dialects through law, produce and circulate literature in the same, or argue for their propagation through education. People who belong to the dominated language groups use these systems to produce counter discourses as well. This isn't given due scope in Bourdieu's work though he does briefly point towards a part of this resistance in the form of symbolic struggle between different classes. At first he describes that the dominated are held down through 'false consciousness' which leads, in Weber's term to the 'domestication of the dominated'; he then proceeds on to describe the different classes locked in symbolic struggle to define the social world. However, how exactly are the minds colonized by symbolic power and subjugated through symbolic violence are able to reach the stage of resistance where the struggle ensues between classes, is unclear. Despite the challenges of applicability, Bourdieu's work is significant in its scope for understanding language politics.

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