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Power, as situated in the modern world, has been classified into two forms, hard versus soft – brute physical coercion versus the subtle manufacture of consent. Our understanding of power has grown to more fully encompass the role language plays in forming, conveying, and upholding the intricately complex relations of soft power. At the start of the twenty-first century, scholars interested in pulling apart the intricacies of language and power have a growing body of research to draw upon. In *Language and Power in the Modern World*, Mary Talbot, Karen Atkinson and David Atkinson have compiled a sampling of this research in a textbook treatment of the topic that combines theoretical discussion, empirical data and practical exercises for the student of language in our globalized society.

*Language and Power in the Modern World* divides its examination into five chapters: ‘Language and the media’, ‘Language and organizations’, ‘Language and gender’, ‘Language and youth’, and ‘Multilingualism, ethnicity and identity’. Each chapter starts with a theoretical discussion that introduces four or five selected readings. The readings are taken from recent publications and elaborate the ideas outlined in each chapter by providing exemplars of theory-in-practice. Each chapter also provides a set of activities that guide students toward critically interacting with language in their own hands-on exploration.

In creating their textbook, Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson included a selection of readings to represent a critical linguistics view of language and power. Within the confines of an introductory text, they succeeded at tying together the book’s main points with a large body of excerpts from ‘primary sources’, some of which...
are discussed below. The manageable nature of the readings and book’s overall layout allow for a variety of potential uses for students of linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics or socially oriented discourse analysis.

The central themes of the book draw heavily from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Foucault’s idea that ‘individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application’ (Foucault 1980: 98, cited p. 2). In his monograph *Language and Power*, Fairclough writes that while linguists ‘have had quite a lot to say about language and power’, they have ‘generally set out to describe prevailing sociolinguistic conventions in terms of how they distribute power unequally; they have not set out to explain these conventions as the product of relations of power and struggles for power’ (Fairclough 1989: 1). This book does just that. It sets out to unravel what Gal says is power’s ‘ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world... [that are]... inscribed in language and enacted in interaction’ (Gal 1991: 197, cited p. 1).

I reviewed this book while teaching an undergraduate course on language in U.S. society and drew from several of the readings and background discussions to supplement the class. Students doing final projects on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) read the excerpts from Smitherman and Cunningham’s (1997) ‘Moving beyond resistance: Ebonics and African-American youth’ and Fordham’s (1998) ‘Speaking Standard English from nine to three: Language as guerilla warfare at Capital High’ from the chapter ‘Language and youth’. While Smitherman and Cunningham’s article situates AAVE in the context of American society, Fordham’s discusses the ‘renting’ of Standard English by African American high school students in the classroom. Her article provides an accessible discussion of Gramsci’s (1971) idea of hegemony as ‘the tendency of all members of a system to unwittingly uphold its implicit power relations by engaging in those practices sanctioned by the powerful’ (Fordham 1998, cited p. 227). Such discussions were highly relevant to my students’ interest in the why and who behind the uses of AAVE – questions that ultimately led to their own explorations of the political economy of the American racial landscape.

Interestingly, Talbot, Atkinson and Atkinson break the issues of ethnic identity into two chapters. While the last chapter of the book is devoted to ‘Multilingualism, ethnicity and identity’, offering a look at English as a global language and issues of power and identity in language policy and planning, the chapter ‘Language and youth’ deals extensively with racial issues in the realm of how youths articulate identities. This tying together of youth culture and ethnic identities speaks to the demand of contemporary social change ‘that greater attention be given to cultural plurality, ethnic mixing and hybridization’ (p. 200). The explicit devotion of a chapter of the book to this focus sets *Language and Power in the Modern World* apart from its predecessors, exemplifies the ‘modern’ in the book’s title, and positions it firmly in the globalized world of the twenty-first century. The authors’ exploration of youth identities examines how language can be used to resist mainstream norms, signal group membership,
and negotiate status in a multiracial world. For example, in ‘The whiteness of nerds: Super-standard English and racial markedness’, Bucholtz (2001) examines how speech is used to signal the rejection of ‘cool’ and the construction of ‘nerd’ identity by high school students. Back (1996a, 1996b), in ‘Parodying racism and subverting racial meanings’ and ‘White identities’ and dominant definitions’, further explores how youth negotiate ethnicity within a modern urban setting. Furthermore, the chapter considers how new technologies, such as mobile phones and the Internet, provide alternative spaces for youth to converge and cultivate their own identities.

The chapter ‘Language and gender’ also provides an important resource for students with its overview of the traditional difference approach and subsequent call for approaches that go beyond this polarized view to look at ‘discourses and practices in specific situations, institutions and genres which may establish men in positions from which they can dominate women’ (p. 136). Sheldon’s (1996) study of how preschool girls use ‘double-voicing’ strategies to work towards an individual agenda while maintaining the group’s social fabric, along with Cameron’s (1998) pragmatics approach to female-male discursive interactions, provide a probing critique of the difference approach. Cameron’s article, “Is there any ketchup, Vera?”, Gender, power and pragmatics’, illustrates how ‘Gender is relevant’ to the interactions between women and men, ‘but not in the sense that the man has one way of making or interpreting requests, the woman has another...’ (Cameron 1998, cited p. 170). Ochs and Taylor’s (1995) exploration of family dinnertime narratives illustrates the panopticon-like power described by Foucault (1979) in what they term the ‘Father Knows Best’ dynamic. The chapter finishes with an article by Adams, Towns and Gavey (1995) that explores the convergence of soft power and hard power in men’s talk about their violence against partners. ‘The study examines articulations of a discourse of natural male entitlement, through which men assert patriarchal authority’ (p. 144).

The strength of Language and Power in the Modern World is the background it provides in the analytic paradigm of CDA. Its chapter ‘Language and the media’ looks closely at the linguistic construction of ‘common sense’ in the way information is filtered through mass media in our society. Teo’s (2000) article, ‘Racism in the news: A Critical Discourse Analysis of news reporting in two Australian newspapers’, lays out a solid review of the roots of CDA and provides a sample analysis of data using the paradigm. The examples from Teo’s article provide vivid illustrations for students’ understanding of how choice of topic, lexical and syntactical choices, and rhetorical devices such as metaphor affect perceptions of reality.

This book is a welcome synthesis of the topic of language and power in our modern world. It succinctly brings together a variety of work that forms an integrated picture of the topics, work that is of theoretical importance and practical use for a critical study of language and power. It will provide a useful resource for a variety of sociolinguistics courses devoted partially or
REFERENCES


