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Qualification Exam Practice 3: Transgression, Living English, and the Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity

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**Introduction**

Transgressive theory encompasses an entire host of “trans” concepts which challenge the status quo, not for the sake of doing so, but for sake of creating a critical awareness of the perceived fixity of language, gender, class, social status, etc. Making visible these notions, through a recursive and fluid consciousness allows for the disruption of perceived perpetual power and control in ways that are aimed to give rise to agency though conscious knowledge. This piece is organized in three main bodies: the first provides a brief explication of Pennycook’s (2007) transgressive theories and practices are presented: the second makes note of transgressive theories found in Lu’s (2006) concept of living language; and the third traces transgressive theory in Matsuda’s (2006) challenge of the idea of linguistic homogeneity.

**Transgression Theory, Pennycook (2007)**

Pennycook (2007) puts forth the term “trans” to mean more than to “cross over,” but to “transcend the bounded norms of social and cultural dictates, but also to question the ontologies on which definition of sex, gender, and sexuality rest (Butler, 2004, as cited in Pennycook 2007). Pulling from both theories of Fannon and Foucault, Pennycook (2007) seeks to explicate a transgressive theory that moves beyond the constraints of “post” and “critical” theories, which he argues, root a theorist to the past constraints of theory, thus preventing forward movement and essentially hindering transgressive capabilities. Pennycook (2007), citing Aravamudan (1999) states that together, Fannon and Foucault “attempt to free us, politically and theoretically, from the chains of history” (40). Along the same vein, here citing Scott (1999) he further argues “they [Fannon and Foucault] can work together…in a relation of strategic supplement” (40). The argument then, is centered upon Fannon’s pursuance of anticolonial liberation and Foucault’s epistemological skepticism (38).

Transgressive theories, like that taken from bell hooks (1994) suggests that “transgression is to oppose, to push against and traverse the oppressive boundaries of race, gender, and class domination” (p 40). Along a similar vein, Pennycook (2011) citing Jervis (1999) further explicates transgression, stating “transgression is more than mere reversal, inversion, subversion or opposition; it involves instead the ‘hybridization,’ the mixing of categories’” (41). Moreover, he states “the transgressive is a reflexive questioning of ‘the culture that has defined it in its otherness” (41). Here then, transgression functions as a means of challenging the status quo, but also creates “new frames of thought” that “investigate the ways in which common sense, the normal, the law, the taken-for-granted, the given are arbitrarily fixed round relations of power, yet also complicit with what they exclude” (41). Transgression then seeks to investigate the normative, the categorization of the normative and non normative, then moves to investigate the mechanisms between and beyond these elements.

Referencing Lacan (1997) and Foucault, Pennycook (2011) links transgression to desire, arguing that desire/pleasure are created within the confines of culture, and to transgress then is supported by the opposite principle—one cannot exist without the other. These boundaries are thus far more permeable beneath the surface. This movement between borders is a move towards alterity. Transgression is reflexive, as movement is far from arbitrary or chaotic, but rather requires a critical consciousness, and “demands a reflexive stance about what and why it crosses…demands a continuous and simultaneous questioning of how we came to be as we are, how such limits have been imposed historically, and how we can start to think and act beyond them. It is therefore thought for action” (43). Pennycook’s (2011) transgressive theory thus encompasses a critically conscious multidirectional movement seemingly fixed borders.

Pennycook (2007) addresses the notion of transculturation is an attempt to move beyond the unificatory and often fixed notions implied by the perception of culture. More specifically he criticizes the idea of social homogenization, ethnic consolidation, and intercultural delimitation and in contrast, suggests transculturalities, notions of contact zones, and the power of selection and invention even outside of controlling of regulation capacities. Moreover, transculturation brings to light the “constant process of borrowing, bending, and blending of cultures” (47). Finally, transidiomatic practices refer to “alternative spaces of cultural production” as they involve the selection and invention and subcultural sharing of a variety of linguistic and other communicative practices and codes found in both local and distant communicative channels.

Transmodality is argued to challenge the notion of monomodality and the adherent belief in the necessity of separate spheres of communicative practices wherein meaning is drawn from language alone. Rather, transmodality reflects Kress and van Leewen’s theories of multimodality, reflects geosemiotics, semiotic and somatic theory, and finally encompasses aspects of performativity as well. In essence, transmodality implies meaning making through communicative practices of body movement, physical space, objects, location and time.

**Living English, Lu (2006)**

Lu (2006) discusses the Chinese notion of language as a living language, a language--“in actual use by actual users” and weighs this against the fixed notion of English-only ideals and instruction. At face value, transgression theory is evident in the very concept of “living languages” as transidiomatic viewpoints challenge the perception of fixed language practices, the idea that meaning derives from language alone, and essentially the idea that any language exists in isolation. Standardization is a cornerstone of English-only instruction, placing it in stark contrast with the idea of a living and fluctuating language, and thus in direct contrast to any notion of transgression.

Lu’s discussion of living English therefore also encompasses many elements of Pennycook’s “trans” theories. Lieber’s thoughts on living language as “a living thing itself, with all the capacities rights, and necessities of life” challenge the notion of a fixed and stagnantly correct language. Achebe’s words on world language use and “its submission to many kinds of use” reflects transculturalities, notions of contact zones, and the power of selection and invention outside of controlling of regulation capacities of English language users.

Lu’s lines of inquiry also reflect transgression in a multitude of ways. She states “living English users weigh dominate stories of what English-only instruction *can* do for them, carefully against what such training hashistorically done *to* them…” Here we find the relevance of the transgressive, through its “reflexive questioning of ‘the culture that has defined it in its otherness” (Pennycook, 2009, p. 41). Living English users are conscious of what English-only instruction can do, i.e. the promise of improved educational and job opportunities, but also what it cannot do—“construct or express meaningful connections across experiences and circumstance of life” (Lu, 2006, p. 609). English-only instruction founded, materialized, and fueled by homogeneous notions of culture and social class etc. are challenged by a living English philosophy which seeks to transgressively “understand how we understand ourselves, our histories, and how the boundaries of thought may be traversed” (Pennycook, 2009, p. 42). Moreover, transculturation and transidiomatic practices “allow us to get beyond the question of uniformization or particularization, and opens up an understanding of the cultural movement while never losing sight of the uneven terrain over which such movements occur” (47). Lu’s living English concepts describe the recursive and critical consciousness of transgressive thought

**Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity, Matsuda (2006)**

Matsuda (2006) argues that college composition “not only has accepted English-only as an ideal but it already assumes the state of English-only, in which students are native speakers by default (637)”. He addresses the overwhelming influence of unidirectional monolingualism in College Composition and seeks to bring to light, the largely ignored second language issues in composition instruction. He terms the myth of linguistic homogeneity as “the tactic and wide spread acceptance of the dominant image of composition students as native speakers of the privileged variety of English” which has been mostly unchallenged (638). He focuses his efforts on tracing the development of English only policy, which not only fails to address the actual present student population and in turn continue to alienate those the fall outside of the dominate image.

Clearly stemming from notions of English language imperialism and monolinguistic nationalism, comes the conception of a language (in this case, the privileged variety of English) as a fixed, immobile, highly regulated tool and a determinate marker of intellectual and social worthiness. This widely held ideological approach materialized in Matsuda’s discussion of language difference policy procedures is exactly what transgression theory seeks to deconstruct. More specifically, fixed language, conceptualized in isolation of its user is completely rejected in transgression theory; as is the idea that meaning—and thus power are found in language alone.

Matsuda begins his trace of early language containment policy within the US to the latter half of the nineteenth century, wherein historically black colleges served as sites of ethnic and linguistic containment due to their segregation practices. While education was later opened to “women and students from a variety of other socioeconomic groups…native speakers of nonprivilaged varieties of English did not enter in large numbers…[as their inability to speak the privileged varieties of English] was often equated with racialized views of the speakers intelligence” (643). As a forerunner and foundational component to the current dominant English-only policy, transgressive theory, like that of bell hooks (1994) suggests that “transgression is to oppose, to push against and traverse the oppressive boundaries of race, gender, and class domination” (Pennycook, 2009, p. 40) in which case are largely regulated by elites controlling language policy through institutional measures which are now a commonplace in US higher education.

The 1847 Harvard entrance exam is “one of the major institutional initiatives that contributed to the exclusion of language differences” resulting in a powerful and widely spread tool for discriminating among students in higher education and “effectively excluding students who did not fit the dominant linguistic profile” (644). Other resulting practices in language containment are language proficiency exams and the placement of students in special English language courses. Alongside the problematic nature of the largely different admission policy regarding international versus second language English learners, is the dominant pedagogical approach in special English courses, as they are centered upon addressing the needs of an international student, which fail to recognize the diversity of language difference. This seems to translate to the perception found in the composition classroom today, wherein the perception of language difference is homogeneous. Matsuda argues “to work effectively with the student population in the twenty-first century, all composition teachers need to reimagine the composition as the multilingual space that it is, where the presence of language difference is the default (649). In other words, composition teachers should challenge the taken for granted categorization of the classroom population as native speakers of the privileged variety of English, but rather problematize their perception of language to be understood as “contingent, shifting, and produced in the particular, rather than having some prior ontological status” (Pennycook, 2009, pg. 39).

References

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