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Compare how Foucault and Bourdieu conceptualize language/discourse. How could these analytical tools be useful in RWS?

Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault concern themselves with social structures, and how people are shaped by their experiences within them. Each approaches the role language, or discourse, within these systems differently. Bourdieu views language as a form of symbolic power, and cultural capital. Language is the tool that exhibits power, or position within a field, based on its use, and legitimacy. However, Foucault does not address language directly. Rather, he focuses on discourse, and its role in structuring, and restraining within society. Discourse, according to Foucault, is a form of power that structures the world. Both discuss language and/or discourse as a form of power. The purpose of this paper is to compare the ways in which Foucault and Bourdieu conceptualizing of language and discourse in their work converge and diverge from one another.

Foucault defines discourse as “the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Foucault 1972: 80). In this sense discourse is the power over language. Discourse is not separate from language, but in defining it as the domain Foucault sets up a way in which for us to view discourse as something that “transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Mills, 55). This places discourse as part of a system of power. It is impossible to speak, or a make a statement outside of the constraints of discourse, because it is discourse that structures the world. It is not equal to language, but it is what structures our reality, and constrains/restrains our perception.

Where Foucault focuses on discourse, Bourdieu conceptualizes language. Foucault views discourse as a power that dictates the ways in which our world is structured, but Bourdieu views language itself as the power. Language is part of a person’s habitus. It is one form of capital that a person possesses. There may or may not be an institution that governs over language, but the social structure of language and how a group uses it means that one’s use of language, or access to language also becomes part of a person’s capital. Language is used in a way to differentiate and exclude among people within a field. Language represents a means to move within a field, but it is also a form of capital, which means that like with other forms of capital there is only so much of this specific capital that you are born with, and have the ability to use within a field.

Therefore those within a field that possess a well-formed habitus will be able to move within a field due to the fact that they are positioned within the field to use their capital to move. If language is a form of capital, and it is one way that a person can move up within a field, then this explains the ways in which Bourdieu “sees language ‘an instrument of power and action’ as much as communication” (Grenfell, 179). Those with valued language skills can use language an exclusionary tool due to the fact that “social uses of language owe their specifically social value to the fact that they tend to be organized in systems of differences (between prosodic and articulatory or lexical and syntactic variants) which reproduce” (Bourdieu, 54) This is what makes language a power.

Foucault views discourse as the power, because of the way it structures everything, and Bourdieu’s work suggests that the power is with language as a result of the value placed upon it by groups within fields. Language and speech are one way to “appropriate one or other of the expressive styles already constituted in and through usage and objectively marked by their position and hierarchy of corresponding social groups” (Bourdieu, 54). These styles that mark position flex the muscle of the dominating group within a field. Placing value upon a specific use or usages of language, while denouncing other usages or dialects, is a form of symbolic violence. This establishing of a hierarchy within language leads to an attempt to legitimize language, or place value upon a specific language usage, which creates a “a semi-artificial language which has to be sustained by a permanent effort of correction, a task which falls both to institutions specially designed for this purpose and to individual speakers” (Bourdieu, 60). Regulating and correcting language usage creates what Bourdieu calls “semi-artificial language.” This use of language to create a hierarchy among users of language is similar to the ways in which Foucault describes the exclusionary tools of discourse. Language becomes a capital that some within a field may have more readily access to than others. Within a field, those with access to this specific type of language, or language usage become a social group with a better position within a field.

Foucault suggests that there are three external exclusionary tools, taboo, distinction between mad and sane, and distinction between true and false. Therefore, any statement viewed as made that can be viewed as taboo, something only a mad person would make, or made by someone that does not have the authority to speak on an issue falls outside of discourse, and ultimately is not a statement that is to be believed. Discourse is a tool used by power. Discourse is related to knowledge and power in the ways in which those with knowledge of the constraining, and structured discourse can use work within it, or with it as a means to exert a form of power. Similarly, Bourdieu’s notion of language is that it can be used as a means to keep groups within their section of a field. If the language they use regularly does not hold the same value as other language uses in a field, then they are unable to use language as a means to move up within a field. Much like those that don’t have credibility, or are viewed as mad, within Foucault’s discourse, people in a field that don’t possess the same capital in regards to language, and its uses, will be unable to use language to move within a field. Language usage and acceptance by a social group will be the exclusionary tool used to create distinction between people in a field. Bourdieu views this as a way that social groups use distinction to set themselves apart from others within the same field. Although Foucault, and Bourdieu are not conceptualizing the same thing, it is clear that their work is similar. The exclusion of some to discredit, and/or exert power over is present in both of their works. In the ways Bourdieu views language as a form of capital this exclusion also relates to access. Some within fields will have access to the accepted language.

The ways in which discourse is related to power, or as an example being a part of the larger power system are based on one of Foucault’s many definitions of discourse. One such definition states “discourses should be seen as a group of statements which are associated with institutions, which are authorised in some sense and which have some unity of function at a fundamental level” (Mills, 65). It is merely part of the system that produces statements. These statements perform a function for a power system that discourse is a part of, but it also creates the space for it to be questioned when Foucault argues, “discourse is both the means of oppressing and the means of resistance,” (Mills, 55) he makes it clear that discourse has the ability to become the very thing that also structures resistance against itself. This approach to discourse keeps the ability for resistance open, and closed, as it is circular. Discourse by structuring all statements, allow for statements of resistance to be subject to the control and conditions of control that discourse enacts. Bourdieu sees language used as a form of symbolic capital, or cultural capital, that is one tool used to enact a symbolic violence against people, much in the same way language can be used as a means to move up within a field. Placing higher value on specific language uses or practices is a symbolically violent act.   
 Foucault and Bourdieu each see the elements of discourse and language that make them tools of power. However, each views the use of that power differently. Foucault sees discourse as part of a power system that structures everything. Bourdieu views language as part of a person’s habitus and capital. While access to this capital may be determined by one’s position within a field, it is possible to use language to move within a field. This possibility differs from Foucault’s ideas on discourse. Discourse is part of a system of power, and as such it structures every aspect of the world. It is inescapable, because even in resisting discourse, one is still making use of the structures discourse sets in place. Each of these concepts of discourse, and language are useful in the field Rhetoric and Writing Studies. It is important to know, and understand how it is that discourse and language shape our world, because each helps to construct our reality. Their use as analytical tools give us the opportunity to know how it is that we come to know information, and what is the system that structures that information within a society.

Works Cited

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