Jennifer Falcon

English 6321 Critical Theory

Dr. Mangelsdorf

3 March 2015

Qualifying Exam Practice #1

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 in the same way. Rather, he views discourse as one driving force behind language. Discourse, according to Foucault, influences language, because it is a form of power that structures the ways in which language is used, and constructed. 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 conceptualize language/discourse in their work.

According to Foucault, “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also

undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.” (55) Discourse is the power behind language. It is part of a power system that provides structure for the ways in which we use language, or have language used against us. The language used within a system of power, or social structure, is dependent upon the discourse that controls it. It is discourse that is a power that influences language. In this sense Foucault sees discourse as not only the controlling and influential force behind language, but as a force more powerful and important than language because it is discourse that exerts its power on language. It is impossible to speak, or a make a statement outside of the constraints of discourse. To control discourse, Foucault suggests that there are three external exclusions, 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 produces our language.

Discourse, therefore, is not language, nor is it equivalent to language. Discourse is what controls, restrains, and constrains language. It is related to power, or an example of part of the larger power system. He believes that “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” (65). It shapes our use of language with its subtle power. It does not “simply translate reality into language” (55). It is merely part of the system that produces statements. These statements perform a function for 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,” (55) he makes it clear that discourse has the ability to become the very thing that also structures resistance against itself. We shape our language, or statements as Foucault describes them, based on the discourse that oversees and influences language. Inversely then, it is also true that the same discourse that constrains and structures the language used does the same for language that resists it. Foucault’s work describes power systems, and the components of these systems, but he is very clear that for power to exist there must be resistance. Therefore, any language that is used against discourse is a product of the very discourse that particular language aims to fight against.

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. It is important to note that Foucault’s approach to discourse is not reliant upon language, for it is not language that makes up discourse, nor is it statements that create discourse. For Foucault discourse is the extension of power that oversees statements.   
 Where Foucault views language as a product of discourse, Bourdieu conceptualizes language differently. Foucault views discourse as the power that dictates the ways in which language will be used, but Bourdieu views language itself as the power. There may or may not be an institution that governs over language, but Bourdieu ultimately “sees language ‘an instrument of power and action’ as much as communication.” (179). This vastly differs from Foucault. Discourse is not the dominating power for Bourdieu. The dominating force is language, because it is language that he sees as used as a form of symbolic capital, or cultural capital, that is the 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.

Language is used as 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.” Language thus 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. If language is one way that a person can move up within a field, then this explains the ways in which he views language and speech as 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.” (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. An area in which this apparent is the educational system.   
 The educational system represents the state, and thus values of the state, so much so that when “language becomes the theoretical norm against which all linguistic practices are objectively measured,” those within the educational system become an extension of the state’s values. They regulate and correct language usage, because they “empowered universally to subject the linguistic performance of speaking subjects to examination and to the legal sanction of academic qualification.” This act of correction, and regulation is one of violence. The violence is symbolic, but no less powerful, and potentially suffocating. It represents the social phenomena of legitimizing one practice to create a distinction, or hierarchy, within a group.

In this understanding of language it is easy to see the ways in which Bourdieu views it similarly to the power that Foucault sees within discourse. Language as a tool, much like Foucault’s discourse, allows for regulation, and constraint, to be enforced on social groups. However, unlike Foucualt’s views on discourse, Bourdieu’s work on language bestows the power within language itself. Specifically, the language that holds greater value, and thus the power stays with language, and those with the ability to use it as a tool. Language can be used as a means to keep groups at the bottom 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. Language is part of a person’s habitus, as well as their capital.

The legitimacy of language, or value placed upon a specific language usage 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.” (60) Regulating and correcting language usage falls upon the educators, but also upon those that speak and use what Bourdieu calls “semi-artificial language.”

Foucault is an *analytical tool*

RWS people may work toward social justice/advocacy

Works Cited

Grenfell, Michael (Ed.). *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts.Durham*: Acumen, 2008. Print.

Mills, Sara. *Michel Foucault*. Routledge, 2003.