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Pretext(s): lost words as reflections of lost worlds

I have always been fascinated by that story which a friend found for me in a geography textbook: certain Australian tribes when one of their members dies, eliminate a word from the vocabulary as a sign of mourning. This makes languages equivalent to life, asserts that men are in control of what they say and give it orders rather than receive them from it. Roland Barthes

To begin the pretexting of this word-weave I employ Wittgensteinian reverberations of the utter truth.

The limits of our language mean
the limits of our world
the limits of the region or place we inhabit,
the limits of the projects we may define and participate in.
The limits of our world mean
the limits of our language,
the words and other linguistic elements
we are able to encounter and acquire.

To know a form of life,
a geographically and historically specific form of life,
a genre de vie,
is to know a language.

To actively engage in and understand speech acts,
to become embedded in discourse,
to give voice to life, intelligibly,
requires a taken-for-granted common background
of spatially and temporally concrete, nondiscursive practices,
nondiscursive practices themselves influenced by prior speech and discourse.

The language through which the consciousness of individuals is given expression and through which certain impressions of the world are differentiated, classified, retained, and creatively combined cannot be separated from the temporally and spatially specific conditions under which people

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live. As the constraining and yet highly flexible medium in which most organized communication proceeds, language is an absolute precondition for almost all of the social life, or institutional projects, occurring in a given place.

It is largely through language that local practices are instituted. It is largely through locally situated institutions that language is practiced and given meaning. It is through language that the component tasks of institutional projects are routinely or innovatively defined, made mutually understood and subsequently recounted.

To the extent that language allows memory traces, complex skills, practical knowledge, and rules and norms to be projected from one generation to the next, it helps facilitate the geographically particular perpetuation of institutions, the sedimentation of institutional practices “in deep time-space.” The place-bound reproduction or transformation of modes of production, social life, and cultural tradition occurs in and through geographically limited forms of language that themselves emerge out of the place-binding reproduction or transformation of modes of production, social life, and cultural tradition.

To the extent the internalization of language channels mental associations and facilitates the conveying of thought and experience as well as the re-presentation of events, physical settings and practice-based memories, it is fundamental to the establishment of common knowledge, a shared sense of place, and other forms of local or wider collective consciousness.

Language does not exist on its own, but comes to life in concrete acts of speaking, writing, and reading. It is embodied in people. It is acquired in childhood and beyond through socialization, through entering into an “already constructed network of comprehension,” through participating in location- and time-specific practices, in meaning-filled situations generated by the family and other institutions. The assimilation of linguistic rules and approved ways of speaking that become second nature, like the assimilation of social rules and accepted nondiscursive ways of acting that become second nature, occurs through socialization on particular grounds, through the constitution of the subject, through inter(con)textuality—through learning how to read one here and now situation from previously encountered situations,—through local patterns of presence and contact.
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The words, variable meanings, pronunciation, grammar and other elements of linguistic capital accumulated by a person depend upon the makeup of her daily paths, upon what is successively incorporated into her life path, upon the formation of her biography through the dialectical interlocking of her daily practices and long-term commitments.\textsuperscript{7} Linguistic repertoire is never uniformly distributed, but an “inevitable mirror”\textsuperscript{8} of one’s social roots, one’s previous and ongoing day-to-day history.\textsuperscript{9} Individual and collective repertoires are thereby engendered by the power relations that govern place-bound project admission, project content, and project execution, by one’s place in the world, the world in one’s place. Situated practical engagement, the knowing of language, and power relations, are never independent threads, but always part of a three-stranded dialectical helix, in which one becomes the other the other the other.

At the same time that language acquisition is dependent upon power relations, the reproduction of power relations is dependent upon language acquisition.\textsuperscript{10} The repeated fine-grained exercise of power on the ground requires individual absorption of the language of discipline, a working knowledge of the language of limit, boundary and periphery depiction, a consistent recognition of the gender-, age-, class-, or group-directed terms and phrases indicating who may or may not do what, when, and where. If people are to be kept within project lines or behave acceptably by localized standards, they must not only come to recognize the content of instructions, commands, role descriptions, or explicit rules. They must also come to recognize the blatant as well as subtle terms that either express disregard, disapproval, disgust, ridicule, and reproach, or some other form of normalizing criticism or censure. And, as Lacan\textsuperscript{11} and others have argued in building upon Freud, the most rigid categories of language employed in the everyday practices of the family and other institutions are at the root of the repression that forms the unconscious, at the root of the “perverse,” “decadent,” and taboo laden, at the root of subdued desire, “self-discipline,” and that which is absolutely forbidden to take place locally or become a part of the individual’s path.\textsuperscript{12}
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The linguistic elements encountered and acquired within any place or region inevitably vary among individuals, groups, and classes as people become differently engaged in the social division of labor, and become entangled in different sets of power relations and incorporate different practical experiences into their biographies. The common and uncommon discourses of daily life within any bounded area are thereby marked by diversity and stratification, a wide variety of voices, a polyphonic plurality of perspectives, or by what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed as “heteroglossia.”

As Bakhtin would have it: “At any given moment . . . a language is stratified not only into dialects in the strict sense of the word (i.e. dialects that are set off according to formal linguistic [especially phonetic] markers), but is . . . stratified as well into languages that are socio-ideological: languages belonging to professions, to genres, languages peculiar to particular generations, etc.” Moreover, “all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making them unique, are specific points of view of the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values.” At the same time, “the potential chaos” of an “absolute heteroglotic state” is limited and counteracted, and “a more or less maximal understanding” is achieved, by “the (sophisticated) ideal (or primitive delusion) of a single holistic language,” by the “real felt presence” of the linguistic norms of a culturally or sociopolitically centralized “correct language.”

Within the normalizing confines of a common unitary language, where word flows “cannot fail to be oriented toward

‘the already uttered,‘

‘the already known,‘

‘the common opinion,’”

“discourse in the open spaces of public squares,

streets, cities and villages,”

“is a social phenomenon . . . throughout its entire range . . .

from the sound image to the farthest reaches of abstract meaning,”

a heteroglotic confrontation

wherein the singular, biographically and historically rooted resources

of each participant are mobilized,

a heteroglotic confrontation

wherein the fashioning of each spoken word,

the play of differences within inner worlds,

is double edged and utterly unique,
determined as much by whose word it is, 
as by the audience at which it is aimed, 
the symbolically laden site at which it occurs, 
a heteroglotic confrontation 
wherein the utterances of personally different languages 
brush up against, and 
interpenetrate with, one another.
Thus, prevailing power relations need not be merely reproduced in any 
concretely situated discourse where actual meanings are determined by 
“who speaks and under what conditions,” and where rejoinders are contextualized by one another. For, in calling upon a virtually inexhaustible 
wealth of associations, forms, shadings, and nuances, actively engaged 
human agents may wittingly or unwittingly employ discourse as a vehicle 
for resistance, 
for struggle, 
for rejecting the classifications and categories of the Other, 
for setting up dominance-opposing and identity reinforcing boundaries, 
for ironically confronting the literal and proper with the meaning filled, 
for executing pun-filled sabotage against the Official Wor(l)d, 
for inverting meanings, 
for symbolically reversing hierarchical order, 
for turning the world upside down.
Yes, meaning is an instrument, a conduit of power; but, to restate Bakhtin 
with a foolproof Foucaultian twist: It is through one and the same 
language that people are ruled, or subjected, and exercise opposition to 
rules, or subjection. Or, in any geographically and historically specific 
setting, spoken discourse “is one of the components in the ethical glue that 
holds individual and society together and apart.”
In taking on language as “an instrument of action (or power),” rather 
than as solely “an object of understanding,” Bourdieu similarly reminds us 
that the linguistic exchanges making up the everyday discourse of a place 
or region do not involve the recognition of invariable meanings, but the 
grasping of singular forms in particular social-historical contexts.
Through Bourdieu’s 
window on reality we see that singular meanings are the consequence of 
contexts where different more or less “legitimate” styles of word choice, 
pronunciation, syntax, intonation, facial expression, and gesture are 
employed; 
contexts where the efficacy of performative utterances depend on an institutionally embedded authority to impose reception under certain conditions at certain locations and times, as well as on a deeply inculcated
disposition on the part of the receiver to recognize “legitimate” authorized usage as “proper” usage;
contexts where speakers, once having unreflecting assessed their audience, are predisposed to choose a certain level of correctness, to self-censor themselves at what appears to be the appropriate level.
In short, for Bourdieu the production and reception of speech are one with the reproduction of historically and regionally specific power relations between individuals, groups, or classes.24 Different contexts yield different discourses.
Meanings are not fixed,
but multi-layered and shifting with circumstance,
produced in time-space specific settings by particular agents,25 particular agents who utter, represent and express
“not only to be understood
but also to be believed, obeyed, respected, [or] distinguished,”26
who remark in order to have some effect on others,
to make a mark on the world about them,
particular agents who possess their own set of
previously acquired,
socially derived,
linguistic resources and predispositions,
their own strategies or tactics,27
their own capacity “to make a meaning stick”28 or count.
Not least significantly, the practice of language serves to nourish and reproduce historically and geographically specific power relations to the extent that it aids in the reproduction of ideologies, to the extent the culturally arbitrary classifications of the world it imposes become second nature, taken for granted, unexamined and regarded as incapable of being otherwise.
The repres(s)entation of the world contained
in socially given classifications,
the “social construction of reality” impressed by linguistic categories,29
the experience-channeled power of “common sense” word labels,
may often conceal or obscure the relations of domination
with which routine and nonroutine human practices are intertwined.30
(Thus, some of those who choose to deal with ideology primarily in terms of the sustenance of domination have argued that: “The study of ideology is fundamentally concerned with language, for it is largely within [the]
language [of everyday life] that meaning is mobilized in the defence of domination, in the interests of particular individuals and groups.”)31
Nevertheless, the language of localized practices and social life does not
guarantee the reproduction of ideologically bound power relations. Linguistic classifications after all, are not encountered in a vacuum, but biographically superimposed on one another and thereby open to mental associations and internal incompatibility and not automatically persuasive or accepted as legitimate.32 “Classification is a living process, and language offers not only an existing set of classifications, but also a set of operations to enable the individual to further classify or reclassify its reality.”33 People are not merely the bearers of taken-for-granted, traditional linguistic categories; but also “culture builders,”34 the constructors of new meanings. Through the exercise of creativity, human agents frequently become “involved in extending the meaning of words, in providing new meanings through metaphor, word-play and interpretation; and . . . thereby, knowingly or not, in altering, undermining or reinforcing [their] relations with others and with the world.”35

The spoken language of any settled area does not stand still, a frozen cultural form. It is, instead, ineluctably historical, always in a state of becoming. Social “stratification [of usage] and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as [a] language is alive and developing.”36 As practices and power relations emerge out of one another, and into one another, as new practices appear and former practices are discarded or modified, as power relations are transformed through consensus or struggle, as new powers of technology are developed and new technologies of power are implemented, as migrants arrive with their cultural and biographical baggage, the language of particular groups, institutions, occupations, and generations inevitably undergoes shifts and transformations.37 Words, expressions and forms of discourse sometimes die quickly as institutional projects are abandoned or radically reconstituted, sometimes slowly weather away, gradually or unintentionally altered in the course of prolonged daily use in relatively stable projects.38 Old meanings are likewise disrupted or altered, defeated or disfigured. New words and usages are adopted as significantly different institutionally embedded projects are introduced. New discourses are born at the same time that new pronunciations and deeper changes of syntax and generative grammar may also occur.39

Because words, expressions and other discursive elements that have fallen into disuse, or become lost, are bound up with lost place-specific practices and power relations, they are one with lost worlds, lost genres de vie, lost forms of consciousness.
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Thus,
to uncover lost words, no longer durable meanings and expressions,
to retrieve elements from no longer spoken dialects, jargons, and slangs,
is to lift the lid from a treasure chest of past social realities,
to reveal fragments shimmering with the reflections of lost worlds of everyday life.
To capture lost words,
to resuscitate dead (hetero-)glossaries,
is “not only [to] capture the attributes . . . of particular practice[s] but also [to] begin to conjure up the ghost of the whole language of practice and practice of language associated with a living set of social relations in a specific physical setting.”

The history of lost wor(l)ds
as the story of transformations
in institutionally embedded practices and power relations,
as the story of changes in shared consciousness – refract(ur)ed reverberations of Vico’s voice invoked as closing pretext.
A diversity of tongues: the practiced languages of Stockholm, 1880–1900

When I ran a bakery business in Stockholm [during the 1890s] I took up a brother directly from my home parish [in southernmost Sweden]. One day two carpenters – Värmlanders – came to repair the outer door of the bakery. They spoke a language that was difficult to understand for a southerner. While they were considering what was wrong with the door, my brother stepped forward and explained to him that “there was mög on skammelen.” The carpenters looked at him, then at one another and wondered if he was Swedish. They didn’t understand that mög means dirt, and that skammelen means the threshold. —Johan Grönvall

All peoples . . . have enormous spheres of unpublicized speech, nonexistent from the point of view of literary written language. —Mikhail Bakhtin

A diversity of tongues, an abundant variety of voices, extreme heteroglossia marked the discourses of daily life in late nineteenth-century Stockholm, just as they have marked the everyday discourses of any city simultaneously undergoing major physical expansion and transformation, large population increases, and uneven but generally rapid economic growth spurred by youthful, uninhibited, and unrestrained industrial capitalism. The often chaotic jostling of new production and consumption activities, social institutions, and political movements was synonymous with new modes of representation, differentiation, and description, with a multiplication of the vocabularies and languages employed in informal conversations, intimate exchanges, storytelling, role-bound communications, and public debate.

Underlying the heteroglossia of Stockholm was a local dialect, key elements of which were principally shared by much of the city’s longer-term population. Certain attributes of “Stockholmska” were medieval in origin, deeply ingrained by the seventeenth century and intergenerationally transmitted beyond that period through numerous localized practices. The dialect, like that found in most other Swedish cities of any
notable size, bore many phonetic, vocabulary, and conjugational resemblances to the dialects of the relatively nearby countryside, and especially to those spoken in the surrounding areas of southern Uppland and northern Södertörn. Among other qualities, Stockholmska was characterized by a shortening of the various definite article forms attached to the end of nouns in Swedish, the use of the pronouns he or she, instead of it, when referring to objects of masculine or feminine gender, the dropping of the g from adjectives ending ig, a u-sounding pronunciation of ö before r, the incorrect formation of superlative adjectives (ending with esta instead of aste), the absence of a thick-I sound, and the occasional substitution of a short i for e. Despite these verbal laxities, by the end of the nineteenth century many basic syntactical and word-choice characteristics of Stockholmska were one with rikstalspråk, or “proper” written Swedish. Being the dialect of the country’s political and economic capital, in some measure Stockholmska had become both norm giving and norm influenced. As early as 1857, a scholarly observer of the Swedish language noted that Stockholmska was now both “the foundation and the consequence” of written Swedish, at one and the same time giving it “tone and direction” while “receiving impressions therefrom” that result in the dialect’s own “constant transformation through fine-grained changes.” Given its locus and the nature of many of its practitioners, Stockholmska must have been particularly open to renewed attempts by the Swedish Academy to define and promote proper Swedish, partly through the 1874 issuance of a new glossary whose spelling was intended to influence pronunciation, partly through efforts to standardize word usage through the compilation of a mammoth etymological dictionary, the first volume of which was published in 1893 and the final volume of which is yet to appear. (The Swedish Academy, many of whose members were at least part-time speakers of Stockholmska, already had produced an official grammar in 1836.) If Stockholmska was deeply rooted in the historical preponderance of in-migrants from Stockholm’s immediate economic hinterland, the city’s extreme heteroglossia during the late nineteenth century was much the consequence of a highly rapid turnover of domestic migrants whose places of birth and previous residence were geographically widespread (table 1 and figure 1). A substantial number of migrants had either been born in, or spent some time in, relatively more distant hinterland areas around the western part of Lake Mälar. The full range of their local dialects were personally employed at the same time that certain of their peculiar terms and expressions gained wider circulation within Stockholm. Thus, for example, a number of words ascribed around 1880 to the dialects prac-