1 Introduction
Wordsmiths and the Business of Rhetoric

1.1 THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HIGH-END LANGUAGE WORK

A good friend told me she once saw a talk given by John F. Kennedy's speechwriter, Ted Sorensen. During the Q&A afterwards an audience member asked whether he had penned Kennedy's famous line, "ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country." Mr. Sorensen hesitated, and then responded, "Ask not." (The audience, of course, erupted in laughter.) This anecdote nicely encapsulates the mystique surrounding speechwriting as a profession, as well as the code which these markedly high-end language workers must carefully follow – they are the authors but not the animators nor principals of their craft (Goffman 1981). At the same time, and as others have noted (e.g. Hanks 1996), the complexity of these roles should not be understated. Indeed, Mr. Sorensen's response is all pretense, and serves as a coy admission of his authorship; speechwriters' work may take place behind the scenes, but they still routinely claim ownership and expertise. And certainly, they are economically invested in the material success of their linguistic output: words are power, but words are also money. As Del Percio, Flubacher, and Duchêne (2016) astutely observe, there often exists "a tension between the potential of language to enable access to symbolic and material capital and the complex logics, interests, and technologies regulating the convertibility of language into capital in specific markets" (69). Put another way, implicated in speechwriting are both the "symbolic power of language" (Kramsch 2021) as well as the political economy of the linguistic market – two interconnected (but not necessarily equivalent) systems of value. As an additional case in point, in *White House Ghosts* political correspondent Robert Schlesinger (2008) documents the very material ramifications of speechwriters "going rogue" – George W. Bush's former staffer David Frum was supposedly fired for claiming he wrote the

famed line "axis of evil," and much later the administration was plagued by two other speechwriters' public disagreements over the extent of their individual roles and impact. All of which is to say that the "production format" (see again Goffman 1981) of speechwriting offers a compelling case study of the real worth of words in popular culture, as well as the material value placed on the laborers who produce them (e.g. Thurlow 2020b).

As such, and following those who have engaged with linguistic labor as a phenomenon of our contemporary, knowledge-based neoliberal economy (e.g. Duchêne and Heller 2012), I am largely interested in how certain types of language workers are explicitly valued in the market (cf. Jakobs and Spinuzzi 2014). Thus, I follow Thurlow's (2020b) recent thinking concerning high-end language workers; the community in which I am interested is not an example of those who are without sociopolitical or economic capital. Rather, speechwriters – whose livelihoods are based on the crafting and designing of words for powerful, public figureheads – are well remunerated and relatively prestigious. However, and as is the case for many wordsmiths, the product of speechwriters' language work is almost always attributed to someone else. It is somewhat surprising, then, that language scholars have predominantly focused on political speeches/rhetoric without addressing the backstage laborers and actual producers of this discourse (see Wodak 2009 for an important exception). Additionally, while applied linguists have thoroughly documented the lower-end "precarious" working contexts of irregular employment (e.g. Park 2022) and online teaching (e.g. Curran and Jenks 2023), as well as the markedly invisibilized language work of professionals like medical doctors (e.g. Locher 2017) and social workers (e.g. Lillis 2017), the linguistic labor of speechwriters has been entirely ignored. This is all to say that it is perhaps time for language scholars to approach contemporary language work with this kind of high-end wordsmithery in mind.

To this end, I systematically investigate the ways in which speechwriters talk about their professional practices, as well as the material procedures which guide the production of their deliverables. This metadiscursive, text trajectory approach enables me to comment in detail on the microlinguistic processes which characterize these wordsmiths' work (cf. Macgilchrist and Van Hout 2011). Indeed, this is not a tell-all narrative of political or professional secrets; it is a nuanced examination of the relationship between text and talk, and between the various stakeholders in public rhetoric. My data, in this regard, comprise a robust collection of secondary and primary sources

including memoirs and training resources, a public talk by Jon Favreau (President Obama's former speechwriter), recorded interviews with practicing speechwriters, fieldnotes from a professional speechwriting course, speech drafts and other texts, a video-recorded meeting with several speechwriters, and US Presidential archive materials. As such, my methodological approach follows ethnographic work which is focused on the interconnectedness between different genres of (textual) data (e.g. Woydack and Rampton 2016; Lillis and Maybin 2017); this sort of discourse-centered approach is simultaneously situated and reflexive, thus fostering a holistic micro-to-macro perspective. My analysis of these data demonstrates precisely how speechwriters come to discursively enact "the new worker-self" in late or advanced capitalist regimes, essentially articulating their personhood as a bundle of "commodifiable skills" (Urciuoli 2008: 211). This case study therefore contributes nicely to recent conversations in critical applied linguistics related to the market-driven understanding of contemporary working life (e.g. Catedral and Djuraeva 2023).

In this vein, it is the political-economic ramifications of professional language work which is the primary motivation for this book. Speechwriters are bound by the expectation that they "make themselves profitable" (Martín Rojo and Del Percio 2020: 11), and yet this depends on their being entirely invisibilized, relatively unknown, and completely erased from their material output – reflecting the contradictions of a market which both empowers and disempowers its workers (cf. Panaligan and Curran 2022). And consequently, speechwriters' ultimate "status anxiety" (see De Botton 2004) comes to the fore: their discourse portrays not only the complex "semiotic ideologies" (Keane 2018) of contemporary language work but also a nuanced and simultaneous (dis)avowal of power and prestige. In this way, speechwriters – even as elite, highly skilled professionals – are workers who "have no choice but to sell their labour" (Holborow 2018: 59). Contrary to other sorts of language workers – Cameron's (2000) call center workers, for example – they are not oppressed nor necessarily exploited, but still, they are not immune to the precarities of a (linguistic) marketplace entrenched in ideological and socioeconomic struggle (cf. Park 2022).

Given the clear entanglement of language and capitalism in contemporary social life (see also Chun 2022a), the purpose of this book is to tease apart the inner workings of these simultaneously discursive and material processes, using metadiscursive insights from professional speechwriters. As such, I aim to answer the following questions:

1. What are the typical, daily professional practices of speechwriters, and how do they connect to the production format of their work?
2. How does the work of speechwriters intersect with the wider political economies of professional life – both in terms of linguistic labor and the more general disciplines (e.g. politics, commerce) in which they practice?
3. How do speechwriters understand the nature of language, its intersection with other semiotic modes, and its material consequences? And relatedly, to what extent do they recognize their work as both linguistically and ideologically consequential?

These questions are intended to produce empirically grounded conceptual insights for (critical) applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse studies, and linguistic anthropology. Following Coupland's (2016) call to more effectively document the real chains of metadiscursive activity which (re)produce the social world, this monograph is at once theoretically and methodologically germane. On the one hand, it contributes to cutting-edge debates related to the commodification of both language and labor, demonstrating the discursive negotiations that co-constitute socioeconomic inequality (see again Holborow 2018). On the other, this work pointedly decenters language scholars as the arbiters of linguistic skill and knowledge. By inviting metadiscursive commentary and self-reflection (of both researcher and research participants), I demonstrate what we as linguists can learn from other sorts of "elite" language workers (see Thurlow and Britain 2020). In this sense, the book is intended to help critical scholars envision what Bucholtz's (2021) "community-centered collaboration" methods might look like in practice, and how this sort of approach allows for a deeper understanding of how status claims and competition circulate in professional contexts.

In what follows, I first engage with important scholarship related to language in institutional and professional contexts (Section 1.2.1); language work and wordsmiths (Section 1.2.2); metadiscourse (Section 1.2.3); and reflexivity and semiotic ideologies (Section 1.2.4). In establishing this comprehensive theoretical framework, I document not only the ways in which "talking work" (Iedema and Scheeres 2003) both establishes and contests particular communities of practice but also how larger issues related to metalinguistic awareness and political economy are implicated in these processes. Next, I briefly map the history of speechwriting as well as the scant scholarly engagement with practitioners, and then turn to the specifics of my project.

I provide detailed overviews of my data collection before turning to an explanation of critical ethnographic discourse analysis (cf. Rampton et al. 2004) as my primary methodological approach. Here I also introduce the three primary rhetorical strategies which arise in speechwriters' metadiscursive accounts of their work: invisibility, craft, and virtue. Lastly, I conclude with an overview of the remaining chapters, throughout which I argue that speechwriters are simultaneously elevated and erased – their authorship both avowed and disavowed. It is these complex discursive negotiations which ultimately reveal the status anxieties and relative precarity of their positions as wordsmiths, who are nevertheless beholden to the demands of the neoliberal, linguistic market.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.2.1 Language in Institutional and Professional Contexts

Discourse analysts have long been interested in language at work, whether under the label institutional (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992), workplace (e.g. Holmes 2007), professional (e.g. Kong 2014), or organizational discourse (e.g. Wee 2015). Various others have documented this literature extensively (see Vine's 2018 *Handbook of Language in the Workplace*, for example) and so my review here is relatively brief and primarily considers the differences between these four terms. Although institutional and workplace discourse are used rather interchangeably in the literature, the former is arguably a bit broader, and it is the term which first gained traction in applied linguistics as a way of describing the distinction between language that emerges specifically in public contexts instead of more private ones. In Drew and Heritage's seminal work on the topic they propose a set of main differences which serve to distinguish institutional discourse: 1) it tends to be goal-oriented; 2) it involves particular constraints on what speakers may say in any given context; and 3) it is often associated with inferential frameworks, or contextualized heuristics which speakers draw on when determining the meaning or function of emergent talk. In general, these parameters point to an important takeaway in the literature – institutional discourse is conceptualized as relatively more structured, regulated, and systematic than the sorts of language use which crop up in private spheres (see Sarangi and Roberts 1999). This is not to say, however, that the everyday communicative work required for maintaining interpersonal relationships is

not important in these broader institutional contexts. Indeed, this has been a primary focus for scholars of workplace discourse in particular.

Koester (2010) describes workplace discourse as communication which occurs across any sort of occupational setting, encompassing interactions between co-workers, customers and clients, lay people, and professionals (5). In addition to some of the primary structural concerns related to workplace interaction, Koester highlights the fundamental nature of relational talk at work, noting that interpersonal management is a defining feature of accomplishing tasks effectively. Likewise, many other scholars have examined issues such as the construction of power and solidarity (e.g. Tannen 1994), gender and/or ethnic identity (e.g. Marra and Kumar 2007), and negotiating leadership (e.g. Rogerson-Revell 2011). In Chapter 5 I discuss this strand of research more thoroughly; here I will just underscore that as Holmes (2015) attests, much of this work has documented the unavoidable manifestation of power and hierarchy across white-collar professions specifically, leaving the blue-collar workforce markedly understudied (but see Baxter and Wallace 2009, Stubbe 2010, and Gonçalves and Kelly-Holmes 2021 for important exceptions). For this reason, many scholars adopt the distinctive term professional discourse to convey the necessary privilege and specialization attached to these more "elite" kinds of workplaces (see also Koester 2010 on "business discourse").

Following this tack, Kong (2014) opens his book *Professional Discourse* with a powerful quote from Bourdieu (1989), part of which I have reproduced here: "The notion of profession is dangerous because it has all appearances of false neutrality in its favor. Profession is a folk concept which has been uncritically smuggled into scientific language and which imports in it a whole social unconscious" (p. 37, cited in Kong 2014: 1). Here Bourdieu captures the structuring potential of language, alluding to the ways in which the prominent cultural indexicalities of a term like "profession" serve to erase and normalize its hidden ideological stance. Indeed, there is considerable status attached to defining oneself as a "professional." Kong argues that professionals are part of the "new work order" (see Gee et al. 1996), which is defined by the increasing need for specialization and efficiency/productivity in neoliberal economies. Subsumed within this conceptualization is an orientation towards specialist training in particular – for Kong, professionals are partly defined by this shared experience, as well as the ways in which they can be described as "symbolic communities" who orient around shared knowledge, functions, ideologies, and discursive practices. Relatedly, Sarangi and

Roberts (1999) make the point that a tension exists between what practitioners view as "institutional discourses" and the language they produce in their professional communities. In other words, professionals might see themselves as operating outside or separately from "institutions"; this shared ideological stance is additionally community-building. What emerges, then, is how professional discourse is concerned with establishing parameters of belonging. While these result in inevitable hierarchies between ingroup members themselves, they also allow people to claim prestige vis-à-vis others in the workforce. Importantly, this status competition is intensified by notions of meritocracy and efficiency – both of which are integral to upholding ideologies of neoliberal advancement.

In this regard, Wee (2015) highlights the consumer-oriented styling of organizational discourse in particular. For Wee, and precisely because of the role of neoliberalism in shaping various public discourses, it is useful to consider organizations to be "corporate actors" of specific sociolinguistic interest. Rather than framing organizational discourse as a contextual backdrop, Wee relies on a number of case studies which foreground the ways in which the communicative practices of organizations (e.g. universities, small businesses) demonstrate and disseminate ideologies pertaining to "autonomy, innovation, creativity, strategy and the ability to respond quickly to competition" (7). The pervasiveness of this "enterprise culture" as a normalizing rhetoric not only attributes human virtue to entrepreneurial qualities but also effectively demands that everyone – organizations, and the individual workers of which they are comprised – reproduce these discourses (see also Mapes 2021a on "pioneer spirit"). As Wasson (2006) points out, this has practical consequences for employees. Although the language of enterprise might have distinctly *empowering* effects as it allows workers to establish themselves as profitable businesses, it can also be *disempowering* in that the market ultimately controls the way in which they claim value. Various others have documented a similar positioning among professionals across various domains, including medicine (e.g. Iedema 2005), language teaching (e.g. Panaligan and Curran 2022), and the migration industry (e.g. Del Percio 2022). Indeed, what these and other studies have determined is that workers these days are often complicatedly enlisted into upholding the fundamentally hierarchical tenets of the so-called new economy, in which the product of one's work is often specifically knowledge-based rather than rooted in industrial labor/manufacturing. In this vein, I turn now to language work.

1.2.2 Language Work and Wordsmiths

Cameron's (2000) study featuring call center workers in the UK highlights the linguistic impacts of globalization on the provision of services in competitive markets. Her observation that employees' language use is both strategically styled and highly monitored demonstrates the ways in which these linguistic laborers have been ultimately exploited – their skills commoditized and anonymized as cogs in the neoliberal apparatus of wealth accumulation (see again Harvey 2005). While others have explored similar processes unfolding in various multilingual contexts (e.g. Heller 2003; Duchêne and Heller 2012), few scholars have attended to the sorts of language work which are more explicitly valued, or "elite" (but see Barakos 2024 on "elite multilingualism"). In invoking this term – which is sometimes contested – I align with other scholars who see claims to status or privilege as both material realities and also discursive accomplishments (e.g. Thurlow and Jaworski 2017a). In other words, high-end language workers not only possess relatively measurable amounts of social, cultural, and economic capital but also explicitly self-style as prestigious, powerful, and professional. And in terms of speechwriters specifically, they are prominently portrayed in fictionalized media representations (e.g. *The West Wing*; see also Chapter 2), and their memoirs have graced *The New York Times* bestseller list (e.g. *What I Saw at the Revolution*, 1990, Peggy Noonan). Thus, as these pointedly discursive manifestations of speechwriters' status circulate, their eliteness is performed into being.

In an effort to turn language scholars' analytical attention towards these more privileged wordsmiths, Crispin Thurlow's (2020a) edited volume *The Business of Words* covers professions such as dialect coaches, court judges, word artists, and school principals, to name just a few. Notably, in mapping the complex linguistic issues which arise in each of these domains, it becomes clear that prestigious, institutionalized language work in late capitalism is not only rife with social misunderstanding and inconsistency but also frequently used to support claims to expertise, status, and value (see also Karrebæk and Sørensen 2021 on Danish courtroom interpreters). However, and as Duchêne (2020) notes in his contribution to the volume, academics' understanding (and labeling) of these language work hierarchies must not be approached uncritically. Indeed, Thurlow's collection demonstrates the ways in which "elite" language work is distinctly profitable (for a range of stakeholders) and imbricated in the structures of neoliberal productivity, individuality, and status competition (see also De Costa

et al. 2016). Similarly, in their analysis of online language teacher profiles Curran and Jenks (2023) demonstrate how teachers make market-centric choices to succeed in the "gig economy," reflecting the real commodification of their labor (see also Lynch et al. 2022). Ultimately, speechwriters, like all explicitly specialized professionals (see Section 2.3.1) must continually (re)establish their value – vis-à-vis each other, as well as other members of the "wordforce" (Heller 2003).

In this regard, claiming professional worth and status based on neoliberal ideals of entrepreneurialism and market productivity can be challenging for those whose markedly "elite" labor is nonetheless largely invisibilized. As Thurlow and Britain (2020) point out in the case of dialect coaches, obscurity is the typical state of being for workers whose success is measured by the unnoticeable quality of their craft. Notably, this more discreet labor runs counter to contemporary society's prioritizing of attention-seeking personal branding and "microcelebrity" (Marwick 2013). However, in his investigation of various behind-the-scenes professions (e.g. UN interpreting) Zweig (2014) observes that invisibility is associated with perfection, meticulousness, and responsibility (cf. Inoue 2011 on nineteenth-century stenographers in Japan). Likewise, Portmann's (2023, 2025, 2026) user experience (UX) writers pride themselves on their ability to construct inconspicuous micro-copy for digital interfaces (see also Drozdit-Busset 2023 on advertising copywriters). In other words, for some professional communities of practice it is precisely their erasure which solidifies their value as high-end language workers. And indeed, it is a standard by which ingroup membership may be both claimed and contested – for speechwriters, this is a distinction which is often *metadiscursively* negotiated (for example, see Jon Favreau's repair from "we" to "he" in Section 2.3.3). I turn now to this theoretical domain.

1.2.3 Metadiscourse

In lieu of documenting the breadth and scope of metalinguistic theory (others have done this very successfully, e.g. Jaworski, Coupland, and Galasinski 2004; Gordon 2023), I will attend to just three relevant points. First, although I primarily refer to "metadiscourse" to conceptualize my understanding of "discourse about discourse or communication about communication" (Vande Kopple 1985), I also use the alternative terms "metacommunication," "metalanguage," and "metalinguistics" more-or-less interchangeably throughout the book. However, I do think it is useful to acknowledge the scalar differences between different sorts of metadiscourse. For example, Preston (2004) categorizes overt commentary related to language use as Metalanguage

1; intertextual references to prior conversations as Metalanguage 2; and widely shared beliefs about language use in a particular community as Metalanguage 3. While this heuristic is perhaps overly simplistic, it serves to establish the rather broad theoretical significance of *meta* to everyday discursive practices. Indeed, and as Cameron (2004) states emphatically, "a language that lacks resources for reflexive comment on its own characteristics is incomplete" (311). Thus, it appears that human communication relies quite fundamentally on metadiscursive commentary. It is used to make sense of social differentiation (e.g. Kemper and Vernooy 1993); it can be a resource for establishing a larger moral order (e.g. Wilson 2004); it gives access to the poetic functions of language (e.g. Jakobson 1960); and it is a primary strategy for creating humor, rapport, and involvement (e.g. Tannen 2005 [1984]). Metalanguage is therefore integral to the microlinguistic details of everyday interaction and an underlying element of all language use.

Various scholars have engaged with the specific ways metadiscourse arises in people's communicative practices across a variety of research sites. As I mentioned a moment ago, the scope of this literature is truly vast – it pertains to spoken, written, and digital contexts, with scholars using methods that range from eliciting "language portrait" drawings from hundreds of participants (Busch 2012) to analyzing character development on *The West Wing* (Richardson 2006). Most recently, Gordon (2023) expertly examines the relationship between metadiscourse and intertextuality specifically, arguing that participants in an online discussion forum rely on intertextual linking as a resource for metadiscursive meaning-making. In turn, this activity often reveals their ideological positionings, illuminating the ways in which metalinguistic commentary is an important means of establishing ingroup status for particular communities of practice. Relatedly, in the conclusion to his edited volume on theoretical debates in sociolinguistics, Nikolas Coupland (2016) identifies metacommunication as a primary area for future scholarship, writing:

> What is distinctly social about language resides in its metacommunicative aspects. This is where the social is embedded into linguistic practice, and how language use comes to be a socially constituted practice. The meanings structured around ways of speaking can usefully be seen as being sustained through reflexive (metapragmatic) representations. (p. 446)

Thus, and echoing the introduction to Jaworski, Coupland, and Galasinski's (2004) edited volume, the real crux of metadiscourse is the way in which it neatly exposes the inherently social aspects of