Introduction

LANGUAGE: A LOADED WEAPON?

In his classic little book *Language –The loaded weapon. The use and abuse of language today,* published in 1980 but conceived in the seventies at the height of the Cold War, the Harvard linguist Dwight Bolinger examines the way language is not only studied by linguists but put to use by language practitioners such as film and drama critics, news people who work for radio and TV networks, syndicated columnists, consultants in journalism, education and government, and language educators (among those, foreign language teachers) – in short, by professional experts, or at least specialists, in the resources of language to express, inform, teach and manipulate people and move them to action. These verbal "shamans," as he calls them, should in his view join forces with linguists, psycho- and sociolinguists to raise awareness in the general public about the nature of language. At a time when Applied Linguistics had only just taken off in the United States,[1] in this book Bolinger took linguistics out of its ivory tower and showed how the English language was being used and abused by everyday speakers and writers, but also by marketing strategists, politicians and "jargonauts" (p.125) in the real world of the time. In 1981 the book received the George Orwell Award, an award established in 1975 by the National Council of Teachers of English for writers "who had made outstanding contributions to the critical analysis of public discourse."

Bolinger had a reason to be concerned about language. While the world had overcome the onslaught of propaganda and disinformation campaigns waged by friend and foe during World War II, it was still in the throes of the rhetorical warfare of the Cold War. George Orwell (1949) had castigated communist Newspeak, but there was plenty of Newspeak on the capitalistic side as well. The rise of television entertainment and the media was fostering advertising clichés, marketing slogans, hyperboles and half-truths, and the use of language to "win friends and influence people" that Dale Carnegie had famously

advocated already before the war (Carnegie 1936) and that Vance Packard heavily decried after the war (Packard 1957, 1964). These were the brainwashing language practices of a rapidly growing consumer culture that Bolinger and other scholars from different fields were responding to in the 1970's and 1980's – for example Robin Lakoff (1975), Erving Goffman (1981) and Bourdieu (1977a 1977b, 1982) in sociology and sociolinguistics, Barthes (1972, Lyotard (1984) and Baudrillard (1983) in cultural studies.

In *Language – the loaded weapon*, Bolinger took a linguistic perspective to examine the uses of language in the America of the seventies: the political advertising, the sexism and euphemisms of the gun lobby and the tobacco industry that were manipulating people's imaginations and fabricating a social reality that was often an illusion. After a series of "prescriptions" for practitioners to cleanse their language of abusive features, Bolinger made the following recommendation to information shamans: "It should be as natural to comment on the linguistic probity of public figures as to comment on their financial probity – in both cases they are manipulating symbolic systems that are the property of everyone" (p.186). The book ended on a quote by John Ciardi: "Tell me how much a nation knows about its own language and I will tell you how much that nation cares about its own identity" (p.188).[2]

1.1 LANGUAGE AS SYMBOLIC ACTION

Today Bolinger's recommendations make us smile but they also sound eerily prescient. Our world seems eons away from Bolinger's world of the eighties. The advent of the Internet and of a deregulated globalized market economy, the spread of English as a global language, and the ever growing use and sophistication of information and communication technologies have changed the nature and role of language to such an extent that one has to wonder whether we are talking about the same thing. What do we mean by "language"? by "language use"?

As compared to the 1980's, our times are still concerned with speaking clearly and accurately, having equal access to the media and the free flow of messages, and with having the ability to speak the truth, but in ways that are different from those envisaged by Bolinger. In many ways, the computer has diversified our criteria of acceptable speech, democratized our access to information, amplified exponentially the flow of information, but it has also changed the nature of truth. By changing the scale and the scope of our communications, the digital age has fundamentally reshaped our relationship to language

and our power to be listened to and taken seriously. Social media, in particular, that idealistically claim to only want to "connect people around the globe," are now seen as creating addiction, anxiety and alienation, and as undermining democracy itself. The crude political propaganda of the Cold War has been replaced by the inordinately more subtle "persuasive technologies" of Facebook and Google.[3]

Some populists would even say that ours is not an era of persuasion, but an era of mobilization; people now move in tribes that get mobilized by the symbolic power of large-scale rallies and social media. In addition, the exacerbated competitiveness of a neoliberal market economy has increased the amount of surveillance and control of consumers, citizens and contributors to the workforce. Our language practices are being sanctioned by our "friends" on Facebook, monitored by our corporate employer in the workplace, and self-disciplined by our fear of falling out of line, out of sight or, worse, out of mind. More than ever, we feel the pressure to conform and we fear retaliation if we do not. The forms of retaliation have become more invisible: social humiliation and shame, threats to face and loss of legitimacy, spoiled reputation, social opprobrium, and the fall into irrelevance and ultimately oblivion.

This is the backdrop against which our students are learning and using language in their everyday lives. The pressure they feel is a social symbolic pressure – conveyed by words and images, online and in face to face, spoken and read, tweeted and blogged, exerting their symbolic power to influence their perceptions, memories and expectations of self and others. Language has become less a mode of information than a mode of impression management and emotional manipulation. This book aims to shift the focus from the instrumental to the symbolic dimensions of language that account for its awesome power to affect people's view of themselves and the world – language not as a loaded and potentially dangerous weapon, but language as a discourse with symbolic effects.

I.2 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The symbolic aspects of language are often occluded in Applied Linguistics by an overemphasis on the economic or material aspects of life, labor and language in a neoliberal economy. For many language learners, language merely reflects an objective reality out there, made up of money, jobs and consumer goods. But this is ignoring the symbolic nature of symbolic systems that, like language, images or music,

do not just represent and inform, but act on our emotions, our identities, how we position ourselves vis-à-vis others and how we are viewed by others.

What Do I Mean by Symbolic?

Any language learner knows that language is a symbolic system, that is, a semiotic system made up of linguistic signs or symbols that in combination with other signs forms a code that one learns to manipulate in order to make meaning. But beyond that, learners generally believe that the elements of this code have meanings to be found in the dictionary, that these meanings constitute information that can be retrieved from texts and reproduced in conversation, and that the only problem in understanding and getting understood by others consists in properly encoding and decoding messages according to rules imposed by a given community of native speakers. The fact that this cultural environment has been historically constructed, socially shaped and individually manipulated by the very discourse of speakers like themselves is not something they usually think about. Indeed, they don't like to think that utterances have effects and that language has not only semiotic informative power but the much broader symbolic power to define who they and others are, and to influence perceptions, memories and expectations. The symbolic universe that language learners are entering today requires them to have a much greater awareness of the power games that are being played with language, whether in their own or in a foreign tongue (see Bourdieu 1998; Kramsch 2012b).

I will use the term "symbolic" to refer to three ways of looking at language. First, there is the linguists' view. Like other symbolic systems such as painting, music or fashion, language as symbolic system consists of units of meaning encoded in visual, musical or textual forms. In Saussure's view, the linguistic sign or symbol is a physical form (signifier) associated with a semiotic concept (signified) (Saussure 1959). That is the view shared by most learners of a foreign language.

Second, we have the anthropologist's view. For the semiotician and anthropologist, symbols do not exist out there for the take. They are always created and wielded by people who use them to address someone else. The symbols that constitute language do not represent concepts in themselves, they have to be interpreted as such by the people to whom these symbols are addressed. Indeed, they interpellate people into interpreting them. These addressees are called upon to recognize the symbols for their conventional, agreed upon meaning that comes not only from the one isolated form, but from a combination of symbolic forms that together make up a recognizable code. Symbolic

relations, with their conventional meaning, their combinatory structure and their interpellative nature, build upon the lower-level semiotic ones – iconic and indexical relations, to act upon people's sensibilities and imaginations.[4] Their power to affect people is thus different from the immediate effect of a picture or a gesture. Because of their appeal to their addressees to link their form to both other forms in the system (text) and other forms in the world (context), to both universal convention and individual particularity of meaning, linguistic symbols have a variety of direct and indirect, immediate and delayed effects linked to addressors and addressees in complex and unpredictable ways.

Finally, there is the sociologist's view. Like anthropologists, sociologists are interested in the material and the symbolic culture of the societies they study. They observe and document the structures of dwellings, the ritual practices including the interactional rituals of everyday life and the meaning that members of such societies give to their practices. They note that these symbolic meanings regulate not only the conventional ritualized events of the community but also the spontaneous verbal exchanges between people and the way they go about their daily affairs. But they also note the way these meanings construct what people view as the real, the true, the good. Thus, besides the economic and material power that people have and talk about, there is a pervasive and all-encompassing layer of symbolic power that creates the very conditions of possibility of thinking and talking about material things. That symbolic power is the power of language as discourse and it has been studied in particular by Pierre Bourdieu (1991, 1998).

What Is Symbolic Power?

Symbolic power is different from physical coercion, economic domination or colonial oppression. It is the power to construct social reality by creating and using symbols that give meaning to the social world. Bourdieu writes:

> Symbolic power – as a power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, an almost magical power which enables one to obtain the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), by virtue of the specific effect of mobilization – is a power that can be exercised only if it is *recognized (reconnu)*, that is, misrecognized *(méconnu)* as arbitrary [. . .] What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the

> social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them. And words alone cannot create this belief. (Bourdieu 1991:170)[5]

Let us unpack this rather dense passage. Utterances, that is, not sentences out of the dictionary, but words uttered by someone to someone either in spoken or in written form, are a way of exercising power through the use of linguistic symbols. This power, says Bourdieu, constitutes, that is, creates, the reality we usually take as given. It is not a divine power that can create the physical world *ex nihilo*, but it can create perceptions (visions) of and beliefs about the world that can prompt people to take action and thus transform the world physically and economically. How can utterances have such a power? The answer is through their mobilizing effects, that is, through their ability to affect, move and motivate people. But this can work only if people acknowledge (recognize) that these words are justified (legitimate) and believe that the speaker is naturally (arbitrarily) entitled to utter those words. Such a legitimacy, Bourdieu adds, cannot come from the words themselves, they come from the credibility the speaker enjoys vis a vis his or her listeners, because of institutional affiliation, seniority, expertise, social rank, experience and so on. In other words, authoritative words must be backed by the authority of a speaker.[6]

We should also note that symbolic power is not just a question of someone intending to dominate or to exercise power over someone else. Because it is a social symbolic, not just a psychological power, it manifests itself through its effects, and can be at work even if the speaker does not intend it. For example I might not intend to exert power over you by inviting you out to dinner, but, as we shall see in Chapter 5, I am exerting symbolic violence towards you by putting you under the obligation to reciprocate. In the quote, Bourdieu capitalizes on the resources of the French language to build his theory of symbolic reciprocity. *Connaissance* (E.cognizance) denotes a more intimate understanding of things than *savoir* (E.knowledge), that denotes a mere informational apprehension of facts. *Reconnaissance* (E.recognition) denotes both a re-cognition, an acknowledgement of something previously known, but, like the phrase "in recognition of someone's merits," it is also the French word for appreciation or even gratitude. *Méconnaissance* (E.misrecognition) does not mean lack of knowledge, but mistaken knowledge. When Bourdieu speaks of symbolic power, he is speaking of a power that can only function if it is recognized, that is, acknowledged as legitimate, by both parties. But at the same time as it is recognized, says Bourdieu, it has to be also mis-recognized/mistaken or wrongly perceived as being in the natural order of things.

According to Bourdieu, symbolic systems such as words, images, music, but also fashion and living styles are instruments of knowledge and communication that serve to establish a consensus on the meaning of the social world. They add to the material world a non-material layer of signification that is composed of the beliefs and everyday practices of its members, the meaning they give to the natural and historical events they live through, the future they aspire to and that makes them share a common understanding of the social world. Symbols achieve the social integration of a group or society and help to reproduce the social order by reproducing the way the group interprets physical/economic realities. For this social integration to happen and communication to be successful, however, those who wield symbols have to make the meanings of these symbols not only recognizable to others, but taken for granted or accepted by others as "arbitrary," that is, as self-evident facts of life.

Some might think that the exercise of symbolic power in the real world is less real precisely because it is not physical, that is, it relies not on objective facts but on subjective beliefs and perceptions. This is without counting with the real objective consequences of such beliefs. Examples abound in the literature that make public shaming, the smearing of reputations and the loss of face into the source of tragedies.[7] In all these cases, symbolic power is the power to construct a social reality that can both include and exclude social actors and may even carry for them physical consequences of actual life and death. Because it is dependent on the recognition by others and on public sanction for its legitimacy, it is an eminently social form of power. While notions such as honor, duty, shame and ridicule might seem outdated for some people, they are still of crucial importance for users of Facebook and other social media, and for any endeavor whose success depends on the value of one's brand, one's name or one's popularity.

I.3 THE FUNDAMENTAL PARADOX OF SYMBOLIC POWER

One characteristic of symbolic power is its fundamentally paradoxical nature. It can appear as natural as a high I.Q. or an aptitude for languages. But a high I.Q. acquires a different meaning when it gets translated into a B.A. from Harvard vs. a B.A from a small community college; and one's linguistic abilities are given more symbolic value if one comes from a white upper-middle-class family than if one is a member of a bilingual immigrant community. Thus, the power of a high I.Q. and multilingual competence is both arbitrary (they are part

of a natural endowment one has not chosen) and non-arbitrary (their symbolic power is due to one's socio-economic environment). The paradox of symbolic power is that it is non-arbitrary but people are made to believe it is arbitrary. We will find that paradox at work throughout this book. For example, as we will see in Chapter 1, the language we use as a mother tongue is not ours – it belongs to the speech community we were born into and thus constrains our thinking, but we believe it belongs to us and we are free to say what we want and the way we want. Language gives us the power to organize and classify things in the world, but it also has the power to discipline and restrict our knowledge. As we shall see in Chapter 4, discipline entails paradoxically both order and surveillance, and surveillance entails both free expression and self-censorship. Face-saving strategies can also be face-threatening acts, generosity can also be symbolic violence, compliments can also be put-downs or acts of condescension. The same words can show solidarity with and distance from or even power over others. And, in Chapter 7, we will show how the very same social media that have empowered and given a voice to so many people are being used to sell their personal data and manipulate public opinion. In short, language as symbolic power both enables and limits what we can say and think; it structures and is structured by other people's speech and thought, and, ultimately, their actions.

I.4 LANGUAGE AS SYMBOLIC POWER IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

The relation of language and power has been amply studied by scholars from two different orientations. On the one hand, modernist scholars in linguistics, critical language education and critical discourse analysis; on the other hand, scholars in linguistic anthropology, postmodern sociolinguistics, and critical applied linguistics. The term "critical" generally indexes the social, ideological and broadly political engagement that these scholars have in common as they strive to show the crucial contribution linguistics can make to understanding the power struggles going on in public life. But there is a difference between the two groups, as I will now discuss.

On the one hand, in *Talking power: The politics of language* (1990), Robin Lakoff considers power as something that some people have and others don't. In this book, she examines "what is most traditionally thought of as the politics of language: the usurpation of language by the powerful, in one way or another, to create, enhance, and justify their power" (p.7). David Block in *Second Language Identities* (2007:26) and Bonny

Norton in *Identity and Language Learning* (2010:49) examine the workings of political power in the way that immigrants and minorities acquire the language of their host country. Here power is associated again with the existence of subordinate and dominant groups, dominance and resistance, coercion and opposition. In *Language and power* (2014:1) Norman Fairclough is interested in "increas[ing] consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others" through the use of ideologies and the manufacture of consent. He affiliates himself with Critical Language Studies within a Hallidayan systemic-functional framework. His work, associated with the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), is centrally focused on the way that power is reproduced by institutions, that is, on "the opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak 1995, cited in Blommaert 2005a:25). These four publications generally take a modernist, emancipatory approach to language and power, inasmuch as they view power as domination and as something to be resisted and liberated from.

The other group of scholars, on the other hand, takes a post-structuralist or post-modern approach, inspired to a large extent by Michel Foucault. It considers the workings of power on a larger scale, where the paradoxes of power play themselves out in more subtle and invisible ways. In *Critical Applied Linguistics* (2001), Alastair Pennycook associates power with "inequality, injustice, rights, and wrongs" (p.6) but he makes the difference between liberal sociolinguistics and critical sociolinguistics (p.55). The first assumes a "consensual view of equitable society" and believes that "language reflects society." The second assumes no such consensus. It believes that the role that language plays in perpetuating conflict and inequality must be understood and critiqued, because language as discourse not only reflects but produces unequal and inequitable social relations. In *Discourse. A critical introduction* (2005a), Jan Blommaert adopts a post-modernist approach to critical discourse analysis. He is interested less in power itself than in "an analysis of power *effects*, of the outcome of power, of what power *does to* people, groups and societies, and *how* this impact comes about" (p.1–2, italics in text). And in Duchêne and Heller's *Language in Late Capitalism* (2012), power becomes ambivalent as it has to balance the two contradictory pressures of national pride and global profit. The authors show how, in the new globalized economy, nation-states and their citizens navigate the demands of pride and profit to legitimize the two opposing discourses of the symbolic and the economic within a capitalistic framework.

While the work of sociolinguists like David Block (2018), Duchêne and Heller (2012) and Heller and McElhinny (2017) have put political economy on the map of second language studies, and reminded us of the economic forces and financial interests at work in the learning and teaching of foreign languages, the populist trends in various countries of the world are showing that economic conditions are only a trigger for much deeper cultural and symbolic power struggles. The narratives of the "forgotten-voices-of-the-downtrodden-left-out-by-globalization" are easily appropriated by populist politicians and reoriented toward age-old resentment against immigrants, racial minorities and anyone who challenges traditional gender hierarchies. The growing economic inequalities that have been brought about by globalization and have been extensively documented by sociologists like Thomas Piketty (2014), and the scholars mentioned earlier in this paragraph are being exploited by a populist rhetoric that taps into far more symbolic deficits than only economic ones, for example, lack of symbolic capital, loss of social and cultural pride, and lack of visibility on the global stage. Language becomes not only a means of economic advancement, but a means of cultural and ideological, that is, symbolic power as well. This book aligns itself with the post-modern critical tradition in the study of the relationship of language and symbolic power in applied linguistics, particularly in language education.

The field of research called "applied linguistics" emerged after World War II from the need to learn and teach English and other languages around the world.[9] It was famously defined by Christopher Brumfit as "the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue" (Brumfit 1997:93). Since its inception, it has focused heavily on language learning and teaching, and Henry Widdowson has called the "problem-solving accountability" of the field an aspect of applied linguistics which "alone justifies its existence in the first place" (Widdowson 2018:142). Indeed, accountability to the practitioners is what distinguishes applied linguistics from theoretical linguistics or psycho- and sociolinguistics, even though scholars in these fields are also called upon to consult with practitioners in the real world.

Why then, when a growing number of applied linguists have expanded the notion of language, language learning and language use towards post-structuralist, ecological and even post-modern approaches, are language teachers, administrators and textbook publishers still adhering mostly to a code-centered, structuralist view of grammar and vocabulary learned and practiced in communicative activities? (Kramsch and Zhang 2018). To start exploring this complex