

BOOK REVIEW: LANGUAGE, MIND, AND POWER
(Daniel R. Boisvert, Ralf Thiede (New York: Routledge), 2020, 189 pages, ISBN: 978-0-367-22437-0)

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2022.0456>

ABSTRACT

Numerous scholars have proposed linguistic equality in all human languages, but their focus has been only attached on human languages themselves. The book, Language, Mind, and Power, extends the scope of traditional linguistic equality from mere language to all human beings in terms of language education by clarifying the power of language and the language of power in detail respectively. Moreover, adequate vigilance against linguistic control is also stressed. This book provides a sound promotion to linguistic equality at the academic level with profound implications for all humanity.

Key Words: Linguistic Equality; Language Education; Power of Language; Language of Power; Vigilance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Why language is so powerful? What is the relationship between language and power? To what extent can language be used to empower human beings, either socially or politically? Numerous scholars have proposed linguistic equality in all human languages, but this book, Language, Mind, and Power, published in 2020 and written by Daniel R. Boisvert, a philosopher, and Ralf Thiede, a linguist, makes further elaboration on the power of language and the language of power, renews the call for linguistic equality.

This book consists of two parts: language and mind (in the first three chapters) and language and power (in the last four chapters) which are closely connected. The first three chapters focus on illustrating the power of language, covering the following topics: profile of an alphabet predator, thinking animals, and the narrating brain. Drawing on rich literature, the authors provide strong evidence to present how language works and strengthen the call for equality of sufficient linguistic immersion. The last four chapters further elucidate the language of power based on research and evidence explaining the power of language. Grounding on the in-depth analysis of the power of language, the authors explicitly call for linguistic equality not only in terms of the sufficient opportunity for linguistic immersion and actual knowledge of its power, but also in terms of sufficient understanding of why language can be used to gain and maintain power, thus urging the need for moral vigilance in the sense of linguistic discrimination and rights.

Chapter one clarifies the nature of language. For the sake of survival and self-protection, some animals have to complicate their signals of communication through combination based on bonding

and cooperative trust. Like many other species, human evolution is also accompanied by cooperation and violence, either by forming alliances or by conquering resources, thus making them as top predators. Human languages evolve during this process accordingly. Compared with languages of other species, human languages are higher in informational entropy for flexibility and more complex in combinatorial system for creativity by linguistic levels, thereby naturally excluding other species and setting human beings apart. Born into a hyper-social species, human beings are endowed with more advanced mental capacities that allow even babies to interpret the meaning of adults, express their inner states through cries, and acquire native language without instructions. Biologically, these capacities are common effects processed by different functioning areas in human brains, which evolve to multitask with more interconnections and denser neurons.

Chapter two elaborates the power of language from the perspective of its ability to force humans to exercise their mental capacities and develop them to become as they are today. The authors adopt the strategy of comparison and contrast between non-human species and human beings to lay out the discussion. Despite the evidence that some non-human animals such as Diana monkeys have certain ability to form simple concepts [1], human beings have evolved to harbor more complex conceptual systems serving as mechanisms to perform linguistic actions. The authors present some fundamental types of human conceptual capacities to remember and analyze, compare and synthesize, imagine and plan with the former pair laying the foundation for the latter one and all collectively laying the foundations for more complex types of thinking such as doubting, believing, fearing and hoping. Next, the authors argue that even though some non-human species, like whales and dolphins, convey information through signals or calls, no relevant evidence has been certified that the information they convey is out of communicative purposes or is complex [2]. By comparison, the authors further focus on humans' more mental capacities of social communication conventions. These capacities include conventionalizing and imitating, adjusting mental states of self and others, and collective engaging, making possible precise, discrete and extensive properties of human language. In return, the practice of human language enhances these mental capacities and allows humans to be the most hyper-cooperative species with radically social properties in return.

In chapter three, the last chapter of part I, the authors clarify the power of language from the angle of how language enables humans to reproduce particular information through framing by exerting cognitive control over their mental faculties mentioned in the preceding chapters. Different from previous exploration on what the brain is, interestingly, the authors take a metaphoric approach to hypothesize that thinking is narrative comparable to a computer processor, but perform it in a more intelligent and powerful way and accounts for human memory and decision. At the same time, the authors outline some examples comparing processing between computer and human brain to illustrate that human apperceptions are self-adjusting and outcome-oriented with intentionality and bias so as to help construct reality through Language.

In the last part of this chapter, the authors elucidate that human can predict and co-create each other's stories through cooperation based on trust. The storytelling serves as a device to promote

social bonding in which both speakers and hearers experience similar neural processes and feel temporarily transported beyond themselves. Meanwhile, the authors stress that the parameters of one's narrative are dependent on the framing that can be manipulated in a stealthy way to exert control over the hearer, including their actual interpretation outcomes and speed of processing messages. On one hand, the framing can be utilized as a power tool for good purposes, as exemplified by an example of how Oklahoma officials successfully utilize frames strategies to evacuate residents in 2019 to save lives. On the other hand, however, the author warn that deceptive framing can be a stealthy manipulator to be availed of by experts for evil purposes. I am astonished by the example of how an Appalachian Pike County's governor, Matt Bevin, managed to obtain trust and support from the public by using framing in announcing his destroying campaign to redirect their attention from their own interests [3]. The authors point out that the only way to defend against this contaminated narrative is critical thinking, but this skill is not allowed to be imparted on students in school, but only served as cognitive-controlling tools used by experts for desired uniform interpretation of public. Therefore, the authors first make warns about the hypnotic power of language at the end of part I.

Based on the explanations of the power of language in part I, the authors make the detailed analysis of the relations between language and power in part II based on some research and evidence, thus offering strong foundation for their arguments for linguistic equality. Chapter four draws on rich literature to elucidate the grounding theory of "doing things with words". The authors first provide a general description of the distinctions and components of pragmatics including three types of speech acts proposed by John Austin [4], five types of illocutions and direct or indirect ways of performing them proposed by John Searle [5]. Next, the authors focus on the theory of conventional and conversational implicature proposed by Paul Grice [6], arguing that implicatures occur when speaker meaning exceeds the literal sentence meaning and needs to be interpreted by the audience according to the context and mutual knowledge of the topic. In addition, the authors also review contemporary exploration and supplement of pragmatics to lay the foundation for the following chapters.

In chapter five, the authors further the discussion about Grice's theory of pragmatics in language use. Three levels of linguistic processing and cooperation — negotiated syntactic structures and functions from the perspective Grice's Cooperative Principle (maxim of quality, quantity, relation, and manner), negotiated literal interpretation and extended interpretation from the perspective of Grice's theory of implicature and politeness— are identified and analyzed to be skillfully applied to help resolve conflict through mediating external language (words) to create positive frames for cooperation. An example of how Marshall Rosenberg harnesses the cooperative nature of language by abandoning the frame for aggression and constructing positive frames for mutual welfare to successfully mediate between two conflicting tribes impresses me a lot with the art and power of language.

Different from chapter five that discusses the language of cooperation, chapter six takes on the destructive potentials of the language of violence that is embedded in oppression, violence and atrocity. Difficult as it is to reveal in publication, the authors explicitly take genocide, politicide and sexual assault as examples to illustrate all of these acts of violence require linguistic

preparation and reflect powerful human dispositions in essence. Some of linguistic dispositions are explained in the preceding chapters. Then, the authors focus on the content of violent language produced by Jonathan Leader Maynard and Susan Benesch (2016) that dehumanizes, attributes guilt, constructs threats, destroys alternatives, valorizes violence and biases the future. Violent language thus misleads the target audience that regarding violence imposed on the target victims as not forcible and coercive but necessary and virtuous or even glorious and makes audience's dispositions to behave violently toward them "justified". Next, the authors clarify the contextual features of violent language, including its source, audience, social-political history, and means of dissemination that are combined to reveal the process of power the violent language entails. The authors further explore more deeply linguistic preparations of dispositions, content and social context which strongly regulate what humans say, how they say it, and how they understand what is said. The realization of different forms of linguistic effects is presupposed by the recognition of differentiated social relations like perceived status and power between the speaker and the hearer. In the case of social interaction with cooperation, the higher the speaker's status is, the more directly the speaker direct the hearer. In the remaining section of this chapter, the authors focus on silencing in the case of sexual assault. Rae Langton's proposed three types of silencing, namely simple silence, perlocutionary frustration, illocutionary disablement, and the authors' supplemented fourth type, illocutionary diminishment, are explained in detail [7]. In fact, it is the combined effects of widespread sexual narratives, its resulting dispositions, and four types of silencing that often leave a woman fall as victim with little physical power, social power and linguistic power to use words with their typical illocutionary forces and perlocutionary effects. Even in some cases when the woman uses the right words, the public fails to realize the violence and offers help but instead regards it otherwise. The authors' explanation here reminds me of a lot of sexual assault tragic in society, but many reports linguistically overturn the focus, thus lamentably deprived the vulnerable women of the opportunity to utter the reality.

In the last chapter, the authors elaborate on the importance, techniques and measurements of confusion management clarity to allow cooperative interaction between the author and the reader. Examples of successful publishers, literary marketers, and even Internet companies are taken to illustrate the need for confusion management in consistence with audience needs. Then, the authors outline linguistic techniques to ensure cohesion and coherence so as to allow audience fluency information processing, including ordering constituents for information progression, and arranging given-new information for keeping to the topic. Next, the authors examine a genre of definitions in various dictionaries customized to satisfy the needs of different audience to demonstrate that clarity is the result of mutual engagement of both the writer and the reader in managing confusion. Based on the explanation of the cooperation between writer and reader, the authors turn to literary criticism that does not investigate how readers connect writers but focuses on the sophistication of some other famous authors to manage readers' cognitive resources across four domains of processing: linguistic parsing, logic, predictive processing, and event modeling, all of which constitute the Language faculty. Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants", Dylan Thomas's "The International Eisteddfod", Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express, and Dr. Seuss's Oh Say Can You Say are rated according to the four mentioned spectrums from the standpoint of readers. The diagram shows the parallel pattern between texts of Dylan Thomas and

Dr. Seuss, because, as the authors argue, both know when to focus on the language and when on plot. Based on these, the authors compare the art of writing/speaking to the dancing between the writer and the reader and emphasize that the grasp of superior language command comes from sophisticated trained skill and deliberation in cognition and in leading the cooperation.

The concluding chapter takes a comprehensive view of the implications of sophisticated knowledge of language to improve access to minds, and, as the authors states, the explicit explanation on the power of language makes it reasonable to call for linguistic equality in the sense of sufficient opportunities for immersion, knowledge and understanding. One phenomenon of categorizing language as “standards” and “shibboleths” occur in many communities, which has led to terrible linguistic discrimination, empowering people speaking standard language and rendering those using shibboleths disadvantaged. The authors refer to much effort of scholars that appeal for linguistic equality but bring only limited change. Meanwhile, in spite of realizing the negative influences of entertainment on screens on literacy and taking actions to cultivate reading habits of children since young, disparities of children of distinct backgrounds in terms of access to books exist worldwide. A lot of initiatives, such as First Book, RIF, have been campaigned to provide disadvantaged children with books to read with free access, but the rooted poverty gap still remains untouched. These two points upholds the author’s argument for linguistic equality.

Besides, the call for moral vigilance is also elaborated in a broader degree based on the descriptions of other pressing linguistic harms like contaminated language, uncooperative language and inadequate legal and institutional protections. As is recommended by the author, people should cultivate critical thinking, and use the skill of language to frame a counterculture against a dominant one. This can only be realized by understanding and immersing with language.

All in all, this book is logically rigorous and structurally coherent in view of the arrangement of content in each part and in each chapter. Selected research and evidence are lucid and adequate for comprehensive illustration and full understanding of readers at different levels. Drawing on the exhaustive clarification of the relationship between language, mind and power with both theoretical bases and practical evidence, this book has opened many venues and provided broader perspective for further insight concerning language and power, inspiring people like postgraduate students and researchers interested in language and cognition, and sociologists to a certain degree. The formers ones may find this book useful in delving into this area and extend their research scope, and the latter ones may study the language from the perspective of morality and ethics. Besides, readers of this book will enhance their vigilance and awareness when accessing to linguistic information and fend off the potential harms of language exerted on that of their own. Last but not least, the list of references in each chapter also provides further reading for those who would like to learn more.

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