

Interdisciplinary Journal of Linguistics
Volume [12] 2019, Pp. 86-93

**BOURDIEU'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE : LANGUAGE AS A
CATEGORY OF VISION AND DIVISION OF THE WORLD**

Sharad Baviskar*

Abstract

*Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most acclaimed and original sociologists of the twentieth century, developed an elaborate theory of language in his seminal works such as *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), *Practical Reason* (1998) in which he, transcending the formalism of Ferdinand de Saussure, brought out the dynamic nature of language in praxis. Trained in a wide range of disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, political theory and anthropology, Bourdieu argues that it is in praxis that language is born, produced and reproduced. For him, language is, therefore, to be understood and defined in praxis rather than in abstract theory that excludes the socio-political and economic factors requisite for its production, reproduction and survival. The dual objective of this paper is: a) to discuss Bourdieu's critique of formal of linguistics and b) to offer his view of language in praxis.*

(Key Words: Langue, Parole, Structuralism, Habitus)

(In fact, as long as they are unaware of the limits that constitute their science, linguists have no choice but to search desperately in language for something that is actually inscribed in the social relations within which it functions, or to engage in a sociology without knowing it, that is, with the risk of discovering, in grammar itself, something that their spontaneous sociology has unwittingly imported into it.(Bourdieu 1991, 38)

Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most acclaimed and original sociologists of the twentieth century, developed an elaborate theory of language in his seminal works such as *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), *Practical Reason* (1998) in which he, transcending the formalism of Ferdinand de Saussure, brought out the dynamic nature of language in praxis. Trained in a wide range of disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, political theory and anthropology, Bourdieu argues that it is in praxis that language is born, produced and reproduced. For him, language is, therefore, to be understood and defined in praxis rather than in abstract theory that excludes the socio-political and economic factors requisite for its production, reproduction and survival. The dual objective of this paper is: a) to discuss Bourdieu's critique of formal of linguistics and b) to offer his view of language in praxis.

* Jawaharlal Nehru University

Bourdieu's critique of Saussure's View of Language

Saussure's *langue*, a code both legislative and communicative which exists and subsists independently of its users ('speaking subjects') and its uses (*parole*), has in fact all the properties commonly attributed to official language. As opposed to dialect, it has benefited from the institutional conditions necessary for its generalized codification and imposition. Thus known and recognised (more or less completely) throughout the whole jurisdiction of a certain political authority, it helps in turn to reinforce the authority which is the source of its dominance. (Bourdieu 1991, 44–45)

In his *Language and Symbolic*, Bourdieu offers a comprehensive analysis of how language has been viewed in the history of ideas. After presenting a brief outline of prescientific literature on language, he pays a critical attention to the contribution of modern linguistics by systematically discussing the methodology of Ferdinand de Saussure put in practice in his foundational work *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). It would be pertinent to dwell upon Bourdieu's critique of formal and structural linguistics in order to appreciate the singularity of his theory of language that he grounds in his sociological insights. Let us discuss Bourdieu's objection to Saussure's view of language as a pre-constructed, self-sufficient, *monological*, homogenous, autonomous and legitimate object. Bourdieu argues that the structural theory of language, in taking a seemingly homogeneous language as its object of investigation removed from its socio-political conditions, occults the massive work undertaken by the homogenizing forces of nation-state since its genesis. Being aware of the heterogeneity of linguistic reality and the existence of multiple points of view, Saussure advocates the selection of a particular point of view in order to undertake a scientific work. In this regard, he writes in his *Course in General Linguistics*,

It would be absurd to attempt to sketch a panorama of the Alps by viewing them simultaneously from several peaks of the Jura; a panorama must be made from a single vantage point. The same applies to language; the linguist can neither describe it nor draw up standards of usage except by concentrating on one state. (Saussure and Baskin (trans.) 1959, 81–82)

The single point of view around which Saussure seeks to structure his homogeneous language is, for Bourdieu, nothing but a dominant point of view that has been projected as a *universal, official and legitimate* point of view while systematically suppressing other points of view in the course of the constitution and consolidation of the nation-state. Therefore, Bourdieu underscores the long historical process that is occulted by Saussure by simply instituting one single vantage point for the sake of methodology. Bourdieu insists on locating the emergence of the dominant point of view in the genesis of the modern nation-state. He brings out the co-relation between the genesis of the state and that of the dominant vantage point in his critical work *Practical Reason* where he argues,

The analysis of the genesis of the state as the foundation of the principles of vision and division operative within its territorial expanse enables us to understand at once the doxic adherence to the order established by the state and also the properly political foundations of such apparently natural adherence. Doxa is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view -- the point of view of those who dominate by dominating the state and who have constituted their point of view as universal by constituting the state. (Bourdieu 1998, 57)

In his analysis of the genesis of modern nation-states, Bourdieu explains with exceptional clarity that when the state chooses one speech variety over other speech varieties, it does not only choose one tool of communication over other tools of communication, but also one dominant point of view over other subordinate points of view. And the point of view of those who dominate the state is imposed and projected as a universal, official and legitimate point of view. Here we get a wider definition of language— *language as a point of view*— which resembles Saussure's definition of language which we discussed earlier— language as a principle of classification. But in his analysis, Bourdieu seems to have highlighted Saussure's subscription to the official ideology of the nation-state in that Saussure validates only one point of view as illustrated in his example of a panorama of the Alps sketched from one point of view while suppressing other points of view. It is rather revealing to notice a parallel between the imposition of one speech variety over other speech varieties in praxis by the forces of nation-state and the imposition of one point of view over other points of view by Saussure in his definition of language.

So far as the definition of language as *a point of view* is concerned, we notice that Saussure and Bourdieu do not differ fundamentally from each other. What differentiates Bourdieu from Saussure is that the single point of view which Saussure takes as the only legitimate one is seen by Bourdieu as a dominant point of view legitimized by the homogenizing forces of the nation-state. Following Saussure, Bourdieu argues that language provides us with the principles of vision and division with which we classify, analyze, understand and appreciate the world. When the state imposes one particular speech variety in the name of linguistic and cultural unification, it compels others to subscribe to the dominant and legitimized point of view, and thus further disqualifies subordinate points of view that are, according to Bourdieu, equally valid principles of vision, division and appreciation of the world. He makes this political work explicit in the following remark:

Cultural and linguistic unification is accompanied by the imposition of the dominant language and culture as legitimate and by the rejection of all other languages into indignity (thus demoted as patois or local dialects). By rising to universality, a particular culture or language causes all others to fall into particularity. What is more,

given that the universalization of requirements thus officially instituted does not come with a universalization of access to the means needed to fulfill them, this fosters both the monopolisation of the universal by the few and the dispossession of all others, who are, in a way, thereby mutilated in their humanity.(Bourdieu 1998, 46-47)

Bourdieu feels that by imposing one dominant language and culture in the name of cultural and linguistic unification, the state puts in place Maxwell's Demon who systematically favors those who have inherited the dominant linguistic and cultural capital and relegates those who are bereft of such linguistic and cultural capital to the periphery. Thus, the cultural and linguistic unification necessarily presupposes the legitimization of one dominant culture and language and by such a process of legitimization those who happen to belong to the subordinate language and culture are automatically relegated or mutilated in their very being. Bourdieu further argues that after having instituted the dominant point of view, the state apparatuses inculcate on the mind of the masses its legitimacy and *naturalité* through the process of naturalization. As a result, there appears a wide discrepancy between what Bourdieu calls '*la reconnaissance et la connaissance d'une langue légitime*'. In other words, those who belong to subordinate languages and cultures recognize the legitimacy of the dominant speech variety without really knowing or mastering it.

Bourdieu holds that the fact of legitimizing one dominant language is not necessarily accompanied by equal access to the legitimate language. As a result, such legitimization facilitates the monopoly of the few and the dispossession of the many leading to what he calls '*nouvelle noblesse*'. And the phenomenon of monopolization and dispossession is more acute in the sociolinguistic situation where the legitimate and official language happens to be not just a dominant variety of the same language but rather a foreign language that has little or nothing in common with the subordinated languages. We will return to the discrepancy between *la reconnaissance* and *la connaissance d'une langue officielle* in the next section. While further underscoring the close link between the genesis of the nation-state and the notion of homogeneous and legitimate language, Bourdieu argues that the notion of *langue* of which the *homo linguisticus* speaks without taking into account the socio-political conditions accepts tacitly the official definition of language.

To speak of *the* language, without further specification, as linguists do, is tacitly to accept the *official* definition of the *official* language of a political unit. This language is the one which, within the territorial limits of that unit, imposes itself on the whole population as the only legitimate language [...]. The official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses. It is in the process of state formation that the conditions are created for the constitution of a unified linguistic market, dominated by the official language.(Bourdieu 1991, 45)

What we understand in the above analysis of the formation of legitimate and official language by Bourdieu is the fact that any mode of expression is capable of becoming as competent as the official language provided the nation-state creates the same conditions for its development. In other words, we can argue using the example of Saussure's panorama of the Alps that we can sketch the panorama from any point of view or from multiple points of view rather than from a single dominant point of view. Bourdieu seems to accuse Saussure with creating 'the illusion of linguistic communism' in that Saussure's theory of language tacitly endorses the imposition of one speech variety and culture that it embodies on minority languages and cultures by describing the access to *langue* as a sort of mystical participation that is universally and uniformly accessible.

In describing symbolic appropriation as a sort of mystical participation universally and uniformly accessible and therefore excluding any form of dispossession, Auguste Comte offers an exemplary expression of the illusion of linguistic communism which haunts all linguistic theory [...] Chomsky has the merit of explicitly crediting the speaking subject in his universality with the perfect competence which the Saussurian tradition granted him tacitly: Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention or interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. This seems to me to have been the position of the founders of modern general linguistics. (Bourdieu 1991, 43–44)

On close analysis of this long quote in which Bourdieu formulates a trenchant critique of the theories of both Saussure and Chomsky, we get a clear understanding about Bourdieu's objection to the founding principles of modern general linguistics. Having exposed the specious nature of Saussure's idea of language as a '*trésor universel or dictionnaire identique*' universally and uniformly accessible to everyone, Bourdieu notices the same principle in Chomsky's concepts of competence and performance. For him, Chomsky's concept of competence fundamentally does not differ from Saussure's notion of *langue*. Secondly, Bourdieu shows a deep skepticism with regard to Chomsky's ideal speaker and the perfectly homogenous linguistic community in reality. Bourdieu believes that modern linguistics attempts to convert the immanent laws of legitimate and official discourse into universal norms with the help of concepts such as *trésor universel*, homogenous linguistic community, ideal speaker, *langue*, competence, etc., because these concepts occult the very question of economic and socio-political conditions requisite for the acquisition of legitimate *linguistic capital*.

Moreover, Bourdieu seems to be critical of the following methodological distinction that Saussure employs in his *Course in General Linguistics* to

separate internal linguistics from external linguistics. According to Saussure's linguistic theory, as discussed above, language can and must be studied within itself without any relation to human speech. By attributing the primacy to the purely internal and formal linguistics and excluding the ethnological, historical, socio-political and geographical dimensions, Bourdieu believes that structural linguistics becomes dominant and exercises an ideological effect on the study of language and other disciplines by giving a scientific appearance to the processes of naturalization and legitimization of the historical product.

According to Bourdieu, structural linguistics, which seeks to study *langue* abstracted from its socio-political and economic conditions of production, reproduction and utilization in fact, incorporates the pre-constructed object into its theory while masking its social political genesis. Besides, Bourdieu refutes Saussure's philosophy according to which language determines its space of diffusion by virtue of its internal, autonomous and intrinsic logic. He writes that

This philosophy of history, which makes the internal dynamics of a language the sole principle of the limits of its diffusion, conceals the properly political process of unification whereby a determinate set of 'speaking subjects' is led in practice to accept the official language. (Bourdieu 1991, 44)

In what follows, Bourdieu deconstructs the very foundational principles of Saussure's homogenous and self-contained language by exposing explicitly Saussure's subscription to the legitimate and official language. Bourdieu argues that the notion of autonomous, homogenous, *monological* language which, according to Saussure's theory, exists and survives without its users and outside human speech (*parole*) shares all the characteristics of the official language of the nation-state. He thinks that, by removing its specious *scientificity*, we can easily recognize the characteristics of the legitimate and official language in Saussure's notion of language.

Language as a Category of Vision and Division of the World

After having brought out the limits of structural and formal linguistics, Bourdieu sees in language an instrument of domination and control. In the above-cited passage, he argues that the dominant social group imposes, codifies and spreads its speech variety because in return the usage of the dominant variety in every domain reinforces the authority of the dominant group. And the dominant group has every reason in perpetuating the domination of their speech variety or language in the multilingual situations. Thus, Bourdieu proposes a wider definition of language: *language as an instrument of domination and control*. It would be rather naïve, argues Bourdieu, to see in the politics of linguistic unification only the needs of communication between different parts of the territory or to see in it a direct product of the *centralisme étatique*. He claims that the main objective of the imposition of one dominant speech variety is above all to structure and restructure the very cognitive structures of those who

inhabit that political unit. He illustrates his point in the following example of France during French revolution.

The conflict between the French of the revolutionary intelligentsia and the dialects or patois was a struggle for symbolic power in which what was at stake was the formation and re-formation of mental structures.(Bourdieu 1991, 48)

Thus, Bourdieu sees in language not only a tool of communication but also an instrument of domination and control with which the dominant group seeks the formation and re-formation of the cognitive structure of those who inhabit its political unit by means of symbolic violence. Bourdieu holds that the dominant group by virtue of its political, economic and cultural capital monopolizes the *espace social* and organizes its objective structure in accordance with the dominant point of view, and thereafter seeks to form or re-form the cognitive structure of those who inhabit its political unit. In other words, the State seeks to alter the very cognitive structure of those whose meek submission is sought for the *status quo* in the present *ordre étatique*. In order to understand the immediate submission and obedience sought by the *ordre étatique* in the modern nation-states, it is necessary, according to Bourdieu, to break with the intellectualism of the neo-Kantian tradition. Bourdieu explains that the recognition of legitimacy is not, as believes Max Weber, a free act of clear conscience, rather it is obtained by means of the agreement between the cognitive structure and the objective structure of the world.

To conclude, we can argue that all state apparatuses with ideological functions play a defining role in obtaining the consent and agreement between the cognitive structure and the objective structure of the world. But the most dominant and determining apparatus, according to Bourdieu, is the education system. He says,

In the process, which leads to the construction, legitimation and imposition of an official language, the educational system plays a decisive role: fashioning the similarities from which that community of consciousness which is the cement of the nation stems.(Bourdieu 1991, 48)

Thus, Bourdieu holds that, as we mentioned earlier, the educational system in modern societies plays a defining role in both protecting and legitimizing some languages, and marginalizing and blighting a great number of languages. As formal and structural linguistics defines language without referring to the social and economic conditions of production, reproduction and usage and thus justifies the success of a particular speech variety in terms of its intrinsic esthetic beauty, Bourdieu demonstrates with the help of his sociological insights its inherent contradictions and underlying political work. And he argues that the educational system plays a pivotal role in modern societies in strengthening an official language and marginalizing minority languages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bourdieu Pierre, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, 1^{re} éd., Stanford Calif, Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Bourdieu Pierre, *Language and symbolic power.*, traduit par Matthew ADAMSON et traduit par Gino RAYMOND, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1991.
- Bourdieu Pierre, *Questions de sociologie*, Reprise., Les Editions de Minuit, 2002.
- Deleuze Gilles et Guattari Félix, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie ?*, Collection « Reprise », Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 2005, 206 p.
- Deleuze Gilles et Parnet Claire, *Dialogues*, Paris, Champ essais, 1996.
- Derrida Jacques, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Paris, Galilée, 1996.
- Derrida Jacques, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume I*, 1st éd., University of Chicago Press, coll.« The Seminars of Jacques Derrida », 2009.
- Derrida Jacques, *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume II*, 1st éd., University of Chicago Press, coll. The Seminars of Jacques Derrida », 2009.
- Roche Daniel et Ferrone Vincenzo, *Le monde des Lumières*, Paris, Fayard, 1999.
- Saussure Ferdinand de et Baskin (trans.) Wade, *Course in General Linguistics*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1959.

