

Language and Politics: Perspectives on the Semiotics of Power

Reed College
Spring 2007

Ling/Anth 334
M/W 18:10-19:30
Eliot 419

Steve Hibbard
Vollum 241
x-7489

Office Hours:
Monday 3:00-4:30
Thursday 4:00-5:30

hibbards@reed.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, we will explore a number of the core issues of contemporary sociopolitical theory from a semiotic and linguistic anthropological perspective.

We begin with a close study of elements of Peirce's semiotic architectonic, on the basis of which we will develop a vocabulary and a conceptual apparatus appropriate to an investigation of the semiotic (including, of course, linguistic) aspects of power and authority.

The larger part of the course is organized thematically, and moves, roughly, from the "lower" (micro) level of semiotic process to the "higher" (macro) level. During the first part of the course, then, we will be concerned with questions such as: To what degree is power a semiotic phenomenon? How is ritual interactivity implicated in the construction of authority? What makes political language effective? What are the semiotic and linguistic mechanisms through which novel political structures are instituted? How can language itself—and other semiotic modalities—emerge as a key political issue? In the latter part of the course, we will address questions such as: In what sense are "nations" and other political communities linguistically constructed? How might states be legitimated or authorized by particular discursive forms? Is a common language necessary (or sufficient) for forming a cohesive political community? What role do the institutions of linguistic standardization play in modern statehood? How does political rhetoric, or propaganda, "work"?

Students are responsible for writing a (very) short, weekly reaction paper; these might be one page, or five pages. It is important to note that reaction papers are *not* meant to be literature reviews; rather, you are asked either, to think (in writing) about one or more of the focus questions (which we will discuss in the final minutes of each class period), or, to consider any topic addressed in the relevant reading that moves you, excites you, bothers, confuses, distracts, annoys, or otherwise touches you. Since reaction papers are due—and since I will read them—*prior* to class discussion, you are encouraged to write about both those aspects of the reading that you find interesting and those you find difficult or confusing (in short, to write about those topics you would like to see covered, in one or another way, in class). On occasion, I will comment on, and return, these reaction papers.

GRADING

Type	Percentage of Final Grade	Description
Short Essays	35%	Four short (approximately 3 page) essays, on topics chosen from among the focus questions, or any other topic relevant to the class (the paper must address at least two of the readings). You may complete these short essays on whatever topic(s), using whatever readings you like, so long as I receive two essays in the first half of the semester (=before March 18 th), and two essays in the second half (=between March 18 th and May 10 th).
Final Essay	25%	A 7-10 page essay on a topic chosen from a set of contenders I will provide (unless you have a better idea)
Reactions/ Participation	40%	<p>(i) Participation in conference is <i>obligatory</i>; satisfactory participation means—at a minimum—being prepared to discuss <i>each</i> of the relevant focus questions. I take participation very seriously (as reflected in the fact that it represents the larger part of your final grade): it is, in fact, <i>impossible</i> to earn an “A” in this class without contributing to conference.</p> <p>(ii) Note that “contribution,” should not be taken to mean “talking a great deal”; rather, it means, specifically, engaging in class discussion in such a way that it is clear to me that you have made a real effort to read and understand the assignments. Sometimes the very best way to contribute to conference is to ask questions about the more confusing and difficult aspects of the reading.</p> <p>(iii) Participation in class and the assigned readings are mutually informing; it is virtually guaranteed that you will not be able to keep up with class discussion if you are not, also, keeping up with the readings. Similarly, the assigned readings will remain opaque to you should you not engage in conference.</p> <p>(iv) Students are expected to email their weekly reactions/ responses to me <i>prior</i> to the first class of the week; typically, this means they will be due on Sunday. Note that the reactions/ responses are not “graded” as such, nor, as a rule, will I return them to you. Instead, I take your responses as one measure of the degree to which you are keeping up with, and understanding, the assignments—and, at the same time, they help me to determine which aspects of the reading deserve the most attention in class.</p>

COURSE SCHEDULE

THEME 1 *Course Introduction; Peirce's Semiotic Architectonic and its Utility for SocioCultural and SocioLinguistic Theory and Analysis*

(i) Goals of the course; what I expect from students, and what students can expect from me; review of this syllabus; (ii) Q: Why Peirce? A: Peirce's semiotic theory provides a principled, well-grounded and explicitly defined conceptual and lexical apparatus that allows us to make the subtle distinctions necessary to make sense of meaningful human action, sociocultural and linguistic facts, processes and events, and the kinds of relations they contract one with another. In short, Peirce gives us a vocabulary with which we can say interesting things about socioculture in general, and power and authority in particular. (iii) The major trichotomies; the sign-function as the locus of all forms of representation. (iv) Students should be able to analyze *any* given sign using the vocabulary developed this week.

[Please read the assignments in the order in which they appear]

- ☉ **Peirce**, *What is a Sign?*
- ☉ **Peirce**, *Logic as Semiotic*
- ☉ **Ransdell**, *Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)* [Entry on Peirce in the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics]
- ☉ **Hoffman**, *The 1903 Classification of Triadic Sign-Relations*
- ☉ **Lee**, *Talking Heads: Language, Metalanguage, and the Semiotics of Subjectivity* (Chapter 4: "Peirce's Semiotic")
- ☉ **Eco**, *Peirce's Notion of Interpretant*
- ☉ **Peirce Practice Handout** (with Exercises)

THEME 2 *The Ground of the Political: on the Constitution of Human Collectivities-I*

The notion of social/political power; on institutionalization and sociocultural typification; the linguistic and semiotic aspects of (arguably) the central problematics of sociopolitical theory, namely, the constitution of human collectivities—the construction of "groupness"—and the question of the legitimization of such collectivities, i.e., the naturalization of convention.

- ☞ **Berger & Luckmann**, *The Social Construction of Reality* (pp. 1-45 [skim, *don't skip*]; 47-104 [read]; 105-128 [skim]; 129-183 [skim or skip]; 185-189 [read])
- ☞ **Bourdieu**, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Editor's Introduction; Chapter 4: "Rites of Institution"; Chapter 5, "Description and Prescription: The Conditions of Possibility and the Limits of Political Effectiveness"; Chapter 7, "On Symbolic Power")
- ☞ **Parmentier**, *Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology* (Chapter 8, "The Naturalization of Convention")

THEME 3

Power in Linguistic Form?

Can formalization—the strict ‘fixing’ of discourse genres—itself become a kind of power or coercion? Can we locate authority in the very words themselves? Or is the power that seems to inhere in words only the power of the speaker? On the conditions of production and reproduction of authorized language and its (unequal, class-grounded) distribution, and the ritual ground of authoritative discourse; on multiple discursive norms; the construal of power as the recognition of and familiarity with a repertoire of norms; why is the belief in the magical effectiveness of words so widespread?

- 📖 **Bloch**, *Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society* (Chapter 1, “Introduction”)
- 🌀 **Duranti**, *Grammar and Politics: Agency in Samoan Political Discourse*
- 🌀 **Tambiah**, *The Magical Power of Words*
- 📖 **Keane**, *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society* (Chapter 1, “Introduction”; Chapter 4, “Loaded Terms”; Chapter 5, “Text, Context, and Displacement”)
- 📖 **Bourdieu**, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Chapter 1, “The Production and Reproduction of Legitimate Language”; Chapter 3, “Authorized Language: the Social Conditions for the Effectiveness of Ritual Discourse”)

THEME 4

*On the Constitution of Human Collectivities-II:
Poetics, Performativity, and Power*

On poetic effectiveness; “performativity” as explanation; the concept of “novelty” in contemporary North American culture and the concept of novelty in contemporary social theory (and contemporary linguistics); in what sense does the constitution of a “new” social group create something from nothing; the apparent social magic of political constitution; entextualization and decontextualization as fundamental semiotic processes; linguistic and semiotic anthropology and the language of the courtroom.

- 🌀 **Bauman & Briggs**, *Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life*
- 🌀 **Mertz**, *Legal Language: Pragmatics, Poetics, and Social Power*
- 🌀 **Honig**, *Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic*

THEME 5

Language: a Weapon of the Weak?

On the linguistic consequences of oppression; dominance and the discursive manifestations of resistance; a (flawed) model of the role of language in political conflict, of power and the articulation of opposition to it; critical perspectives on that model.

- 📖 **Scott**, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (Preface, Chapters 1-2)
- 📖 **Bourdieu**, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Chapter 6, “Censorship and the Imposition of Form”)
- 🌀 **Gal**, *Language and the “Arts of Resistance”* (Review Essay)
- 🌀 **Kulick**, *Causing a Commotion: Public Scandal as Resistance Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*

THEME 6

Language: a Weapon of the Strong? The Question of 'Hate Speech'

Arguments in favor of the criminalization of “hate speech” (as variously defined; essentially, however, ‘hate speech’ is most often conceived as [effective] talk by the powerful directed at the powerless); how is it possible that these words are powerful? Speech-act theory and the performative effectiveness of “pornographic” representation; the potentially-liberating effects of “transgressive” speech and “transgressive” performativity in general; the state as neutral arbiter—the state and the establishment of appropriate meanings, and legislation with respect to the performative effects words and expressions. Mill’s classic arguments for a “fundamentalist” free-speech position and their contemporary reflexes.

- 📖 **Matsuda**, et al, *Words that Wound* (“Introduction”)
- 🌀 **Lawrence**, *If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus*
- 🌀 **Lee**, *Legal Weapons for the Weak*
- 🌀 **Matsuda**, *Public Response to Racist Speech*
- 📖 **MacKinnon**, *Only Words*
- 🌀 **Villanueva**, *Ethnic Slurs or Free Speech*
- 🌀 **Douglas**, *The Force of Words: Fish, Matsuda, MacKinnon, and the Theory of Discursive Violence* (Review Essay)
- 🌀 **JS Mill**, *On Liberty* (Chapter 1, “Introductory”; Chapter 2, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion”)
- 📖 **Butler**, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*

THEME 7

The Politics of Language Rhetoric and Style; Propaganda and “Totalitarian Language”

Explicitly political language; rhetoric as the locus of sociopolitical ideologies; the politics of style and the stylistic/rhetorical characteristics of political communities; “our” propaganda and “theirs”; is there a specifically totalitarian (or authoritarian) language (of the rulers; of the ruled)? Return to the question of the discursive manifestations of oppression.

- 🌀 **Gal**, *Bartok’s Funeral: Representations of Europe in Hungarian Political Rhetoric*
- 🌀 **Bottici & Challand**, *Rethinking Political Myth: The Clash of Civilizations as a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*
- 🌀 **McLeod**, *The Sociodrama of Presidential Politics: Rhetoric, Ritual, and Power in the Era of Teledemocracy*
- 🌀 **Silverstein**, *Talking Politics: The Substance of Style from Abe to ‘W’*
- 🌀 **Wortham & Locher**, *Embedded Metapragmatics and Lying Politicians*
- 🌀 **Orwell**, *Politics and the English Language*
- 🌀 **Wedeen**, *Acting ‘As If’: Symbolic Politics and Social Control in Syria*
- 🌀 **Gross**, *A Note on the Nature of Soviet Totalitarianism*
- 🌀 **Havel**, *The Power of the Powerless*
- 📖 **Cameron**, *Verbal Hygiene* (Chapter 1, “On Verbal Hygiene”; Chapter 2, “Restrictive Practices: the Politics of Style”; Chapter 4, “Civility and its Discontents: Language and ‘Political Correctness’”)

THEME 8

Language and the Political History of the United States-I: A Republic of Words?

Aspects of the construction of the United States of America as a language/speech community; the role(s) of language in racial, social, and class differentiation in the context of nation-making in North America; the mediating function of language in ideologies of North American sameness and difference.

- 📖 **Cmiel**, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight Over Popular Speech in Nineteenth Century America* (“Introduction”; Chapter 1, “The Best Speech of the Best Soul”; Chapter 2, “The Democratic Idiom”)
- 📖 **Fliegelman**, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (“Introduction”; “Jefferson’s Pauses”; “The Elocutionary Revolution”; “Soft Compulsion”; “The Oratorical Ideal, Racial Politics, and the Making of Americans”; “Epilogue”)
- 📖 **Looby**, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (“Introduction”; “Logocracy in America”;
- 📖 **Gustafson**, *Representative Words: Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language* (“Introduction”; Chapter 1, “Political and Linguistic Representation: Confidence or Distrust?”; Chapter 2, “Language and Legal Constitutions: The Problem of Change and Who Governs”; Chapter 6, “The Enlightenment Project: Language Reform and Political Order”; Chapter 10, “Corrupt Language and a Corrupt Body Politic, or the Disunion of Words and Things”; Chapter 11, “Sovereign Words vs. Representative Men”)

THEME 9

Hegemony and Ideology: Language as an Iconic Index (Emblem) of Nationhood

Traditional approaches to the language/nation nexus and their critiques; discursive practices and the construction of specifically national identities; standardization—and ideologies of standard languages— as a key element in nation-making and state-formation.

- 🌀 **Haugen**, *Dialect, Language, Nation*
- 📖 **Anderson**, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Chapter 1, “Introduction”; Chapter 2, “Cultural Roots”; Chapter 3, “The Origin of National Consciousness”)
- 📖 **Lee**, *Talking Heads: Language, Metalanguage, and the Semiotics of Subjectivity* (Chapter 9, “The Performativity of Foundations”)
- 🌀 **Frosh & Wolfsfeld**, *ImagiNation: News Discourse, Nationhood, and Civil Society*
- 🌀 **Edensor**, *Reconsidering National Temporalities, Institutional Times, Everyday Routines, Serial Spaces and Synchronicities*
- 🌀 **De Cillia, et al**, *The Discursive Construction of National Identities*
- 🌀 **Babadzan**, *Anthropology, Nationalism, and the ‘Invention of Tradition’*
- 🌀 **Myhill**, *The Native Speaker, Identity, and the Authenticity Hierarchy*
- 🌀 **Havranek**, *The Functional Differentiation of the Standard Language*
- 🌀 **Milroy**, *Language Ideologies and the Consequences of Standardization*
- 🌀 **Silverstein**, *Monoglot “Standard” in America: Standardization and Metaphors of Linguistic Hegemony*

THEME 10 *Language and the Political History of the United States-II:
War and Terror, American National Identity and the
Contemporary “Propaganda State”*

Recent scholarly approaches to the discursive style of contemporary American governmentality; the discourse of terror and the language of war in the 21st century

- ☉ **Mitchell**, *9/11: Criticism and Crisis*
- ☉ **Noon**, *Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, The War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory*
- ☉ **Graham**, et al, *A Call to Arms at the End of History: a Discourse-Historical Analysis of George W. Bush’s Declaration of War on Terror*
- ☉ **Kellner**, *9-11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: a Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics*
- ☉ **Chomsky**, *Collateral Language* (Noam Chomsky interviewed by David Barsamiam)
- ☉ **Smith**, *Bush’s Enthymeme of Evil: the Amalgamation of 9/11, Iraq, and Moral Values*
- ☉ **Butt, et al**, *Grammar: the First Covert Operation of War*