
Social Linguistics and Literacies

Social Linguistics and Literacies in its first edition was a founding document in the “New Literacy Studies,” an interdisciplinary field that studies literacy in its full range of contexts: cognitive, social, cultural, historical, and institutional. The second edition, fully updated with new material, served as both an introduction to the field and the development of a particularly influential perspective within the field. It showed how contemporary sociocultural approaches to language and literacy—and, in particular, the New Literacy Studies—emerged and surveyed the current state of the field after its first few decades.

This fully updated new edition engages with topics such as orality and literacy, the history of literacy, the uses and abuses of literacy in that history, the analysis of language as cultural communication, and social theories of mind and meaning, among many other topics. It represents the most current statement of a widely discussed and used theory about how language functions in society, a theory initially developed in the first edition of the book, and developed in this new edition in tandem with analytic techniques for the study of language and literacy in context, with special reference to cross-cultural issues in communities and schools.

Built around a large number of specific examples, this new edition reflects current debates across the world about education and educational reform, the nature of language and communication, and the role of socio-cultural diversity in schools and society. One of the core goals of this book, from its first edition on, has been to develop a new and more widely applicable vision of applied linguistics. It will be of interest to researchers, lecturers and students in education, linguistics, or any field that deals with language, especially in social or cultural terms.

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Also by James Paul Gee

Introduction to Discourse Analysis (1999)

Situated Language and Learning (2004)

Social Linguistics and Literacies

Ideology in discourses

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James Paul Gee

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This book argues that what we say, think, feel, and do is always indebted to the social groups to which we have been apprenticed. Thus, to thank those who apprenticed me to their expertise is to thank them for helping me to think and write this book, however much or little they may want the credit. Since the first edition of *Social Linguistics* appeared I have met a great many people whose reactions to the book, and to my subsequent work, have contributed greatly to the new editions of this book.

Sarah Michaels, years ago, showed me some wonderful stories by African-American children, stories that were viewed as failures in school. These stories brought forcefully to my attention the need for a linguistics that could account for how these children could possess such beautiful linguistic abilities and still, nonetheless, fail in school. This experience helped transform my view of what linguistics ought to be about. Sarah's work and ideas and style have been central to mine ever since.

Years ago, also, Courtney Cazden invited me (at the time I was just making my transition from theoretical linguistics to social linguistics and education) to take part in group activities with her at the Harvard University School of Education. This book owes a huge debt to this apprenticeship, and surely would never have been written without it. Though she might very well not like to hear it, she has always been for a great many of us a unique "role model."

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The list of those who have helped and influenced me is now too long to list as I tried to do in the second edition. My borrowings are everywhere clear in this book and I have contracted so many debts I can now neither list them, nor ever repay them. A great many of the people I cite

in this book I know personally and so I have had ample opportunity to learn from them. Their ideas have everywhere colored mine, making me, over the years, seem better than I am, which is, given the theory in this book, much as it should be.

Partly as a result of this book, I have met a great many teachers throughout the world. It is impossible to overstate how much it means to someone like me, someone not “at home” in the conflicts and “power networks” of academics, to have a teacher or workplace literacy person—people actually working “in the trenches”—come up to me and say that the book had “made a difference.” Such help and encouragement have kept me going.

As I pointed out in the first edition of this book, many of my views on society have been formed in discussions with my identical twin brother, John Gee. The fact that my father—Ernest Lefel Gee—was born in poverty in the southern United States and left school in the third grade, never to return, but ended his life fighting racism and reading German and French theologians to us over the dinner table has a lot to do with my views on literacy and Discourses. The fact that my mother—Kathleen Bonner Gee—born and raised in the working class in Derby, England, spent most of her adult life as a housewife in the United States, but towards the end of her life ended up, through no choice of her own, taking a rough-and-tumble cab company in San Jose, California, out of deep debt and successfully running it to enable her children to survive and go to college also has a lot to do with my views on Discourses. Thank God that neither my father nor my mother was “one type” of person and that they did not allow social forces to “fix” them in terms of their beginnings, however hard those forces tried.

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J.P.G.

Introduction

As a linguist, I wrote the first edition of *Social Linguistics* with a personal sense of paradox. While the human eye sees best what is in the center of its field of vision, it had become apparent to me that the clearest way to see the workings of language and literacy was to displace them from the center of attention and to move society, culture, and values to the foreground. Paradoxically, this leads to better and deeper ways of analyzing language. It leads to a different sort of linguistics as well, one in which language-in-society is the heart of the field. So while we immerse ourselves in language in this book, language here always comes fully attached to “other stuff”: to social relations, cultural models, power and politics, perspectives on experience, values and attitudes, as well as things and places in the world.

Sociocultural approaches to language and literacy have made great progress since the first (1990) and second (1996) edition of *Social Linguistics*. I hope, too, that I have myself made some progress. In 1996 I rewrote the book in its entirety. I brought it up to date and tried to make it easier to read, as well. I added and subtracted material, though the same ground was covered and the same themes were stressed. I revised old analyses and added new ones, and, I hope, further clarified my approach to language and literacy. In this third edition, I have done much the same, though less drastically than in 1996. Nonetheless, through all three editions, the book has remained at core the same book.

Social Linguistics is not a textbook, though it has, over the years, often been used in classes. It was initially an attempt to do two things: first, to argue that a new field was emerging out of work from different disciplines, a field I called “The New Literacy Studies,” and, second, to develop a particular perspective within this field on language and literacy with special reference to educational issues. The New Literacy Studies is now established and the perspective has become one standard

viewpoint within that field, alongside others. Thus, what started as an “intervention” is now “after the fact” and the book can now serve as an introduction to what it originally only hoped to help bring into existence.

As I point out in this edition, the term “New Literacy Studies” is probably unfortunate, since anything that was once “new” is soon “old” and the New Literacy Studies is now no longer young. The New Literacy Studies is really just a way to name work that, from a variety of different perspectives, views literacy in its full range of cognitive, social, interactional, cultural, political, institutional, economic, moral, and historical contexts. When this book was written, the traditional view of literacy was “cognitive” or “psychological,” the view that literacy is a set of abilities or skills residing inside people’s heads. Because the cognitive or psychological was already entrenched, I did not stress cognitive features of literacy in this book, but, rather, tried to show the limitations of a purely cognitive or psychological view. In subsequent work I have written a good bit about psychological issues and how to integrate them with a sociocultural approach to language and literacy (see Gee 1992, 2003, 2004, 2005). In this book, I retain a strong focus on the social and cultural.

The book seeks to accomplish three things: first, to give readers an overview of sociocultural approaches to language and literacy, approaches which coalesced into the New Literacy Studies; second, to introduce readers to a particular style of analyzing language-in-use-in-society (see also Gee 2005); and, third, to develop a specific perspective on language and literacy centered around the notion of “Discourses” (with a capital “D”). I will return to “Discourses” below. Chapters 2–5 engage in the first task; the sixth and seventh chapters engage directly with the second, though there are examples of analysis throughout the book; and the final two chapters engage with the last task. The first chapter starts with the meanings of words, introducing some of the basic themes of the book, and closes on a discussion of the moral viewpoint that lies behind the book as a whole.

The general argument of the book, then, is this: to appreciate language in its social context, we need to focus not on language alone, but rather on what I will call “Discourses,” with a capital “D.” Discourses (“big ‘D’ Discourses”) include much more than language. To see what I mean, consider for a moment the unlikely topic of bars (pubs). Imagine I park my motorcycle, enter my neighborhood “biker bar,” and say to my leather-jacketed and tattooed drinking buddy, as I sit down: “May I have a match for my cigarette, please?” What I have said is perfectly grammatical English, but it is “wrong” nonetheless, unless I have used a

heavily ironic tone of voice. It is not just the content of what you say that is important, but how you say it. And in this bar, I haven't said it in the "right" way. I should have said something like "Gotta match?" or "Give me a light, wouldya?"

But now imagine I say the "right" thing ("Gotta match?" or "Give me a light, wouldya?"), but while saying it, I carefully wipe off the bar stool with a napkin to avoid getting my newly pressed designer jeans dirty. In this case, I've still got it all wrong. In this bar they just don't do that sort of thing: I have said the right thing, but my "saying-doing" combination is nonetheless all wrong. It's not just what you say or even just how you say it, it's also *who* you are and *what* you're doing while you say it. It is not enough just to say the right "lines."

Other sorts of bars cater to different "types of people." If I want to—and I am allowed to by the "insiders"—I can go to many bars, and, thereby, be many different "types of people." So, too, with schools. Children are "hailed" ("summoned") to be different sorts of students in different classrooms, even in different domains like literature or science. In one and the same classroom, different children may well be "hailed" to be different types of students, one, for example, a "gifted" student and the other a "problem" student. There are specific ways to get recognized—different in different schools and at different times—as "gifted" or "a problem." The teacher, the student, and fellow students need, however unconsciously, to know these ways for "business as usual" to go on. Conscious knowledge can, I will argue, sometimes disrupt this "business as usual." A good deal of what we do with language, throughout history, is to create and act out different "types of people" for all sorts of occasions and places.

Discourses are ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities (or "types of people") by specific groups, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort, bikers of a certain sort, business people of a certain sort, church members of a certain sort, African-Americans of a certain sort, women or men of a certain sort, and so on and so forth through a very long list. Discourses are ways of being "people like us." They are "ways of being in the world"; they are "forms of life"; they are socially situated identities. They are, thus, always and everywhere social and products of social histories.

Language makes no sense outside of Discourses, and the same is true for literacy. There are many different "social languages" (different styles of language used for different purposes and occasions) connected in complex ways with different Discourses. There are many different sorts

of literacy—many literacies—connected in complex ways with different Discourses. Cyberpunks and physicists, factory workers and boardroom executives, policemen and graffiti-writing urban gang members engage in different literacies, use different “social languages,” and are in different Discourses. In fact, Hispanic gangs and African-American gangs use graffiti in different ways, and engage in different Discourses. And, too, the cyberpunk and the physicist might be one and the same person, behaving differently at different times and places. In this book I will use schools and communities, rather than bars, as examples of sites where Discourses operate to integrate and sort persons, groups, and society.

Each of us is a member of many Discourses, and each Discourse represents one of our ever multiple identities. These Discourses need not, and often don't, represent consistent and compatible values. There are conflicts among them, and each of us lives and breathes these conflicts as we act out our various Discourses. For some, these conflicts are more dramatic than for others. The conflicts between the home-based Discourse of some African-American children and the Discourses of the school are many, deep, and apparent. Indeed, the values of many school-based Discourses treat African-American people as “other” and their social practices as “deviant” and “non-standard.” In becoming a full member of school Discourses, African-American children run the risk of becoming complicit with values that denigrate and damage their home-based Discourse and identity. The conflicts are real and cannot simply be wished away. They are the site of very real struggle and resistance. Such conflicts also exist for many women between their ways of being in the world as women of certain types and the dominant Discourses of male-based public institutions. Similar sorts of conflicts exist for many others, as well, most certainly for many people, white, brown, or black, based on social class. They are endemic in modern plural societies.

Each Discourse incorporates a usually taken for granted and tacit set of “theories” about what counts as a “normal” person and the “right” ways to think, feel, and behave. These theories crucially involve viewpoints on the distribution of “social goods” like status, worth, and material goods in society (who should and who shouldn't have them). The biker bar “says” that “tough guys” are “real men”; some schools “say” that certain children—often minority and lower socioeconomic children—are not suited to higher education and professional careers. Such theories, which are part and parcel of each and every Discourse, and which, thus, underlie the use of language in all cases, are what I call in this book ideologies. And, thus, too, I claim that language is inextricably bound up with ideology and cannot be analyzed or understood apart from it.

I do not in this book intend to hide my claims behind linguistic or sociological jargon unless that jargon is integral to the claim being made. Real people really get hurt by the workings of language, power, ideology, and Discourse discussed in this book. I see no reason to sanitize such damage with distancing language. At the same time, the fact that the issues discussed in this book relate to the workings of power and hurt does not mean that these are not also theoretical issues. In fact, the book constitutes an overt theory both of literacy and a socially based linguistics, a theory that claims that all practice (human social action) is inherently caught up with usually tacit theories that empower or disempower people and groups of people. I will claim that it is a moral obligation to render one's tacit, taken-for-granted theories overt when they have the potential to hurt people. This book makes some of my theories about language and society overt and invites you, not to agree with me, but to make your theories in this area overt also.

I do not believe there is any one uniquely "right" way to describe and explicate the workings of language in society. Thus, I do not see myself as in competition in a "winner take all" game with other social and critical theorists, many of whom I greatly admire. Certain ways of describing and explicating language and society are better and worse for different purposes. And any way of doing so is worthwhile only for the light it shines on complex problems and the possibilities it holds out for imagining better and more socially just futures.

Furthermore, I believe that a great many of us, coming from different disciplinary backgrounds, are using different words to say very similar things, at least where the important matters are concerned. Thus, too, I believe we have made a good deal of progress, more than our different terminologies might at first suggest. It is for these reasons that I attempt to sketch out a sociocultural approach to language and literacies in Chapters 1–5 without using my own favored terms. Rather, I develop what I hope is a rather consensus-like overview using the work and words of many different people.

Meaning and ideology

Words and their meanings

A great many people believe that words have fixed and settled meanings, the sorts of things we can find in a dictionary. So, for example, a word like “bachelor” means “unmarried male” and that’s the end of the matter. Furthermore, they believe that the meaning of a word is something that resides in people’s heads, perhaps in terms of what some people call a “concept.” When people hear or see a word they can consult this concept or definition in their heads to know what the word means. Of course, since other people also understand words, we must then assume, for communication to work, that everyone (rather mysteriously) has the same concepts or definitions in their heads. However, thanks to the fact that the insides of people’s heads are private, we can never really check this.

These ideas about words and their meanings are quite common, so common they are, for many people, a form of common sense. These ideas are, in fact, a “theory” that many people believe, though they may not be all that conscious of the fact that they hold this theory; they may not have ever tried to put it into words; and they may just pretty much take it for granted. In that case, it is what we can call a “tacit theory.” Or, perhaps, they are more consciously aware that that this is their theory of how words and meaning work. Then the theory is overt. Either way, tacit or overt, this is a theory that many “everyday” people—that is, people who are not linguists or specialists of any other sort—believe. But, of course, it is also a theory that some (but not all) professional linguists and psychologists believe and argue for, as well (see Clark 1989 and Gee 2004 for further discussion). In that case, the theory is certainly overt and is usually more formal, explicit, and elaborated. In such a situation, we have a professional theory that also reflects a commonsense, taken-for-granted and often tacit everyday theory.

We can see how this theory might influence educational practice. Vocabulary is important for success in school. This theory that words have fixed meanings would imply we can teach word meaning by giving young people lists and definitions and having them write sentences containing the new words. We can tell them to memorize the meaning of the word, presumably by memorizing its definition. And, indeed, this is how vocabulary was traditionally taught in schools, and still is in some cases.

We don't often think about everyday people—non-specialists—having theories, especially tacit ones. We tend to say that such people—all of us when we are not doing our specialist jobs, if we have one—have beliefs, viewpoints, or perspectives on things, even prejudices. Nonetheless, I will say that people hold theories about all sorts of things, because in many cases—like this one—people's beliefs (and even prejudices) hang together and cohere in ways that are certainly like theories. Sometimes these theories contradict professional theories, sometimes they don't. In some cases, everyday people have picked up their theories from having heard about professional theories from other people, the media, or from their own studies. On the other hand, in some cases, though not all, the professionals' more formal theories are simply reflections of their commonsense everyday theories.

Some people are uncomfortable using the word "theory" both for people's everyday beliefs and for the perspectives of professionals like linguists. And it is true that logical consistency may sometimes be less common in everyday theories than in professional ones (diSessa 2006). For this reason, some people have used the phrase "cultural model" for what I have just been calling people's everyday theories (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Gee 2005; Holland and Quinn 1987). They retain the word "theory" just for professional theories. And this is fine with me. In this case, then, we can say that the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions stored in people's heads (an everyday theory) is similar to a theory (professional theory) held by and elaborated much further by professional linguists and psychologists.

Even when cultural models match a professional theory to a certain extent—and they often don't—this does not mean that either of them are right or useful. Both everyday people and professionals can be wrong, of course. In fact, I will argue in this book, along with some other linguists (though, of course, not all), that the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions stored in people's heads is misguided. So, too, is the professional theory version of this cultural model. Thus, in this regard, both "common sense" and some professionals are wrong.

Most words don't have fixed meanings. Take even so simple a word as "coffee" (Clark 1989). If I say, "The coffee spilled, go get a mop," the word betokens a liquid. If I say, "The coffee spilled, go get a broom," the word betokens beans or grains. If I say, "The coffee spilled, stack it again," the word betokens tins or cans. If I say, "Coffee growers exploit their workers," the word betokens coffee berries and the trees they grow on.

You can see that the word "coffee" is really related not to a definite concept so much as a little "story" (using the word loosely) about how coffee products are produced and used. (Berries grow on trees, get picked, their husks are removed and they are made into beans, then ground up, used as a flavoring or made into a liquid which is drunk or used for other purposes, for instance, to stain things.) And, indeed, you can fail to know parts of the story (as I most surely do) and still be quite happy using the word. You trust other people know the full story or, at least, that such a full story could be discovered if the need arose (which it rarely does). And, of course, new meanings can arise in new contexts. For example, though you have never heard it, you would probably know what I meant if I said, "Big coffee is opposed to the new legislation" (which you might take to mean something like "Powerful coffee growers, producers, and other businesses connected to coffee opposed the new legislation").

We can also call the little "story" connected to "coffee" a "cultural model." Cultural models are "models." Think about what a model is, for example a toy plane or a blueprint for a house. A model is just a scaled-down and simplified way of thinking about something that is more complicated and complex. Children can use toy planes to fantasize about real flight and scientists can use model planes to test ideas about real planes. Architects can use cardboard models of houses or blueprints (just quite abstract models) to think about designing real houses. So, too, theories and stories, whether used by everyday people or professionals, are, in this sense, models, tools used to simplify complex matters somewhat so they can be better understood and dealt with.

We will have a lot more to say about cultural models in Chapter 5. For now, we take them to be everyday theories, stories, images, metaphors, or any other device through which people try to simplify a complex reality in order to better understand it and deal with it. Such models help people to go about their lives efficiently without having to think through everything thoroughly at all times. We pick up our cultural models through interactions in society and often don't think all that much about them, using them as we go about our business on "automatic pilot," so to speak.

Of course, a word like “coffee” seems to mean something pretty simple, at least compared to words like “honor,” “love,” or “democracy.” But even the “coffee” example shows that the meanings of words are more like encyclopedia entries—even Wiki entries, as we will see below, since people can negotiate, contest, and change meaning—than they are like formal dictionary definitions. Words are connected more to knowledge and beliefs, encapsulated into the stories or theories that constitute cultural models, than they are to definitions. Lots of information based on history and what people do in the world is connected to each word, even a word like “coffee.” Lots of this information is picked up in conversation and in our dealings with texts and the media; not all or even most of it is attained in school. Some people know more or less of this information than do others. And, since history and what people do change, meanings change, as well.

Take another simple word, the word “bachelor” (Fillmore 1975). If any word has a definite definition, this word would seem to be it: “unmarried male.” However, now let me ask you, Is the Pope a bachelor? Is an older man who has lived with his homosexual lover for thirty years a bachelor? Is a young man in a permanent coma a bachelor? We are not really comfortable saying “yes” in each of these cases, even though in each case these people are unmarried males. Why? Because we really use the word “bachelor,” like the word “coffee,” in relation to a little “story,” a story like this: People usually get married to a member of the opposite sex by a certain age, men who stay unmarried, but available to members of the opposite sex, past a certain age are bachelors. In fact, this little story is our everyday theory of how the world usually goes or even, for some people, how it should go. It is, in that sense, a cultural model (an everyday theory), just like the cultural model that words have fixed meanings in terms of concepts or definitions in people’s heads. We humans, as we will see, have lots and lots of cultural models about all sorts of things.

The Pope, the committed gay, and the young man in the coma just don’t fit well in this story. For different reasons they aren’t really available to members of the opposite sex. So we are uncomfortable calling them “bachelors.” We go with the story and not the definition. Furthermore, people have for some time now actually challenged the story connected to the word “bachelor.” They have made a tacit cultural model overt by saying the story is sexist, especially since “bachelor” seemed once to carry a positive connotation while its twin, “spinster,” did not. Some of these people started calling available unmarried women “bachelors,” others starting using the word “spinster” as a term of praise.

We could even imagine the day when the Catholic Church both ordains women and allows priests to marry and where we are willing, then, to call the Pope a bachelor and the Pope happens to be a woman! Words and their meanings can travel far as their stories change and as our knowledge about the world changes.

So here is where we have gotten so far. The meanings of words are not fixed and settled once and for all in terms of definitions. They vary across contexts (remember “The coffee spilled, go get a mop” versus “The coffee spilled, go get a broom”). And they are tied to cultural models (stories and theories that are meant to simplify and help us deal with complexity). In fact, it is the cultural models that allow people to understand words differently in different contexts and even to understand new uses of a word for new contexts (e.g., remember “Big Coffee opposed the new legislation”). Now we will add a third point: that the meanings of words is also tied to negotiation and social interactions.

To see this point, let’s take yet another simple word—again, nothing fancy like “love” or “honor”—the word “sausage” and consider what the African-American activist and lawyer Patricia Williams (1991) had to say in court once about this seemingly simple word. Williams was prosecuting a sausage manufacturer for selling impure products. The manufacturer insisted that the word “sausage” meant “pig meat and lots of impurities.” Williams, in her summation, told the jury the following:

You have this thing called a sausage-making machine. You put pork and spices in at the top and crank it up, and because it is a sausage-making machine, what comes out the other end is a sausage. Over time, everyone knows that anything that comes out of the sausage-making machine is known as a sausage. In fact, there is a law passed that says it is indisputably sausage.

One day, we throw in a few small rodents of questionable pedigree and a teddy bear and a chicken. We crank the machine up and wait to see what comes out the other end. (1) Do we prove the validity of the machine if we call the product sausage? (2) Or do we enlarge and enhance the meaning of “sausage” if we call the product sausage? (3) Or do we have any success in breaking out of the bind if we call it something different from “sausage”?

In fact, I’m not sure it makes any difference whether we call it sausage or if we scramble the letters of the alphabet over this thing that comes out, full of sawdust and tiny claws. What will make a difference, however, is a recognition of our shifting relation to the word ‘sausage,’ by:

(1) enlarging the authority of sausage makers and enhancing the awesome, cruel inevitability of the workings of sausage machines—that is, everything they touch turns to sausage or else it doesn't exist; or by

(2) expanding the definition of sausage itself to encompass a wealth of variation: chicken, rodent, or teddy-bear sausage; or, finally, by

(3) challenging our own comprehension of what it is we really mean by sausage—that is, by making clear the consensual limits of sausage and reacquainting ourselves with the sources of its authority and legitimation.

Realizing that there are at least three different ways to relate to the facts of this case, to this product, this thing, is to define and acknowledge your role as jury and as trier of fact; is to acknowledge your own participation in the creation of reality.

(pp. 107–108)

It's pretty clear that Williams approves of option 3. But, exactly what are the consensual limits of a word's meaning? When does sausage cease to be sausage? How far can a company stretch the meaning of the word? What are the sources that authorize and legitimate the meaning of a word? These are not the sorts of questions we are used to thinking about in regard to words and meaning when we are tempted to just open a dictionary to settle what the meaning of a word is.

So let's look at the sausage issue—the sausage story, knowledge about sausage in the world—a bit more deeply. The sausage company engages in a social practice that involves making sausage in a certain way and selling it. Its social practice is fully caught up with a vested interest: making a profit. Consumers of sausage have another social practice, one involving buying and eating sausage. Their practice too is fully caught up with vested interests, namely, buying sausage for a low price and feeling well after eating it.

These two social practices exist only in relation to each other. Furthermore, the two practices happen to share some common interests. For example, it is not in the interest of either party to get too fussy about what gets labeled "sausage," otherwise it will cost too much to buy or sell. But, the producers and consumers may conflict in exactly where they want to draw the boundary between what is and what is not sausage. This conflict opens up a negotiation about what the word "sausage" will mean. The negotiation can take place in court or in the supermarket where people buy or refuse to buy what the sausage company labels "sausage."

In this negotiation, power plays a role—the power of the producers is pitted against the power of the consumers.

But, can this negotiation come out just any old way? Are there no limits to it? Williams says there are consensual limits. The producers and consumers are, though engaged in different practices, members of a larger community that has a consensus around certain values. One of these values is the health and well-being of its members, if only so that they can buy and sell more sausage. If one side of the negotiation violates these values, they can lose the negotiation, provided the community has the power to exclude them if they refuse to concede. Law is one way to try to do this. Boycotting the company is another. Systematically failing to apply the word “sausage” to the company’s products is still another.

Meanings are ultimately rooted in negotiation between different social practices with different interests by people who share or seek to share some common ground. Power plays an important role in these negotiations. The negotiations can be settled for the time, in which case meaning becomes conventional and routine. But the settlement can be reopened, perhaps when a particular company introduces a new element into its social practice and into its sausage. The negotiations which constitute meaning are limited by values emanating from “communities”—though we need to realize it can be contentious what constitutes a “community”—or from attempts by people to establish and stabilize, perhaps only for here and now, enough common ground to agree on meaning.

But how can we characterize what constitutes such a community, for example, the community of people that authorizes and legitimates, for a given time and place, the meaning of the word “sausage”? Following the lead of Amy Shuman, in her paper “Literacy: Local Uses and Global Perspectives” (1992), I will characterize these communities as persons whose paths through life have for a given time and place fallen together. I do not want to characterize them as people “united by mutual interest in achieving a common end,” since groups may negotiate a consensus around meaning when they share few substantive interests and have no common goals, or at least, when they have many conflicting interests and goals.

The word “community” here is probably not a good one. (See, I am negotiating meaning with you.) We might hope for—and, of course, often get—a more robust sense of community supporting the meanings of words and the shared communication of people. But, in the end, we often get more tenuous connections among people, ones in terms of which even foes can communicate, though there may always come a point where “words run out,” agreement (on words, or facts, or actions) can’t be

reached, and there is the risk of violence. (How well we know this in our current world.) In the end, one and the same person can be a “terrorist” to some and a “freedom fighter” to others, and communication is on the verge of failure and with it, perhaps, understanding, common ground, and peace.

So this is a different way to look at meaning. Meaning is not something locked away in heads, rendering communication possible by the mysterious fact that everyone has the same thing in their heads, though we don’t know how that happened. Meaning is something we negotiate and contest over socially. It is something that has its roots in “culture” in the very deep and extended sense that it resides in an attempt to find common ground. That common ground is very often rooted in the sorts of things we think of as “cultures,” whether something like “American culture” or “African-American culture,” though we will see the notion of “culture” (like “sausage”) is itself problematic.

But meaning, as I have argued above, can be rooted in relationships that are less stable, long-term, enduring, or encompassing as “cultures” in the traditional sense. Two people don’t need to “share a culture” to communicate. They need to negotiate and seek common ground on the spot of the here and now of social interaction and communication. In fact, we see such a thing every day in our current world in chat rooms and massive multiplayer worlds (like *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*) where people of sometimes quite different ages, races, ethnicities, countries, genders, and social and political orientations of all sorts group together to engage in joint action and communication. Here very often the processes of negotiation, contestation, and the seeking or forestalling of common ground are obvious and foregrounded. Such processes are, I suggest, always part and parcel of language and communication, but they are often more hidden and taken for granted in our everyday lives in the “real” world, though they became obvious in Patricia Williams’s trial, as well.

Take, for example, a married couple. They each think that the meaning of the word “work” is clear and definite. Further, they each think they mean the same things by the word. Then, one day one of them says to the other, “I don’t think this relationship is working, because relationships shouldn’t take work.” The other partner, stunned, says, “But I have worked hard on this relationship and I think relationships require work.” They realize that they don’t really know, once and for all, what “work” means, that the word is being used in several different ways in these very utterances, and that here and now, in a quite consequential way, they have to negotiate the matter. (Perhaps, they should have done so earlier.) They

realize as well that they may hold different cultural models about work and relationships or that there are competing models available in society.

Notice, too, that there is no good way to clearly distinguish fighting over words and fighting over things and actions in the world. One partner doesn't like what he or she is being required to do, but if he or she didn't see—didn't feel—this was “work” or if he or she saw such “work” as good for relationships, then there wouldn't be a problem. Words, meanings, and the world are married and will stay together even if this couple doesn't. They are married because the primary way we humans deal with the world is by getting words to attach to the world in certain ways—like “sausage” above—and this is a matter we have to negotiate over and contest with in the face of other people, their practices and their interests.

Now I have made it seem like we are always fighting over words and their meanings. But, of course, we are not. Most of the time there is peace. But the question is why and how there is peace. There is peace because in many cases and for many parts of their lives people have come to agreements about what words will mean in different situations. These are “conventions.” We take them for granted until someone proposes to break them or we find areas or situations they don't really cover. We become party to these conventions by leading our lives with other people, by being parts of shared histories, groups, and institutions.

Indeed, we can see these histories, groups, and institutions as, in part, existing in order to stabilize and conventionalize meanings so that people can get on with their lives and their interests (unfortunately, sometimes at the cost of other people's interests). Looking at things this way shows us another side of the claim that meaning is social and cultural and not really just a matter of what is inside your head. It takes massive amounts of social work on the parts of groups and institutions to “police” meaning, to settle negotiations in terms of more or less stabilized conventions that everyone will abide by, often without giving the matter too much thought.

At one time in U.S. history, our government and military encouraged right-wing forces in some South American countries to harm civilians in order to encourage these civilians to oppose left-wing governments or left-wing revolutionary forces (Sikkink 2004). Some members of our government called such people “freedom fighters.” When Islamic fighters did the same thing to us and our allies, they, however, were called “terrorists.” Such a distinction takes work to uphold in terms of policies, media treatments, and political arguments, and is, in turn, contested by some people.

To see another example of the same sort of thing, consider a video game made in Syria called *Under Ash* (Gee 2003), a game whose hero

is a young Palestinian who throws stones to fight Israeli soldiers and settlers. The game operates by a cultural model that holds that while “civilians” should not be harmed, Israeli settlers don’t count as civilians, but rather as the “advance” troops of an occupation army. Of course, Israeli settlers don’t in reality count as anything until they are “modeled” in terms of their relationships to other things and people. If we see them as “civilians” (not combatants), then people who harm them are “terrorists.” If we see them as combatants and not civilians, then people who harm them are, at worst, fighting a war and, at best, are “freedom fighters.” Needless to say, lots of political works needs to go on to “enforce” the meanings we give words like “civilian” or “terrorist” in the face of people who wish to contest these meanings.

All this does *not* mean that “anything goes,” that it doesn’t matter whether we call someone a “civilian” or a “terrorist,” that “it’s all just words.” Nor is the matter “merely political” in the sense that it just all amounts to political rhetoric to advance one party over another. What it means is that what meanings we give to words is based on knowledge we acquire and choices we make, as well as values and beliefs—and, yes, even interests—we have. Words are consequential. They matter. Words and the world are married.

So we have developed a viewpoint (a theory) that the meanings of words:

- 1 Can vary across contexts of use.
- 2 Are composed of changing stories, knowledge, beliefs, and values that are encapsulated in cultural models, not definitions.
- 3 Are a matter, as well, of social negotiations rooted in culture if only in the broad sense of a search for common ground.
- 4 For many words at many points in their histories meaning is relatively stabilized thanks to the fact that many people accept and share a convention about what they mean in different contexts of use.
- 5 These conventions can be undone, contested, and changed.
- 6 Finally, it takes social work to enforce and police the meanings of words, work that never in the end can ensure their meanings will not change or be contested.

Combining words

So the theory of words and their meanings we have developed so far makes learning word meanings via lists and definitions—the sort of thing that sometimes goes on in school—pretty implausible. But the

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