

Language Militia Manifesto

Solidarity Federation

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Language is such a major part of everyday life, it gets taken for granted. But from the day we're born, our identity is defined by language. The genders, races and classes we belong to are also thus defined. Our status and level of living is fundamentally influenced by the language of power.

But language can also be turned into an important weapon in the fight against discrimination. This article details two primary concerns; how language is used to maintain power over us, and how we can use it to challenge and overcome existing power structures.

Language is vital in developing, maintaining and reproducing all sorts of power relations. It perpetuates a vast range of myths and stereotypes based on class, gender, racial, sexual and other feelings of superiority. From 'simple' name-calling and insults to the subtler-end chauvinistic journalism, verbal attack, in one form or another, is ever present. After a time, this negative language becomes ingrained, and so the power structures which language reflects determine our social and language practices. In turn, these practices contribute to maintaining the power structures. This cyclical process has helped establish and reinforce a hierarchy of language styles, used in different social and institutional situations, which are parallel to the hierarchy of social and class relations.

The form of language we use with our mates, our families, or in the school playground differs from that we use with the boss, the police, in an interview or in the classroom. The 'telephone voice' phenomenon indicates how we change our language to fit with the expectations and norms of society. In institutional situations, like the police station, the manager's office, the classroom, or all sorts of interview situations, the context is one in which rigid, pre-determined language roles exist. Power, in these situations, is reflected by the respective roles of the participants, and is either maintained or challenged through the ability or willingness of one or other of the participants to play their expected role. Where the authority figure can assume and retain control, power relations are reinforced, and regular repetition of these events throughout society reproduces these power relations.

Before going on to look at the part played by the education system in this process, let's deal with a few myths about language.

standard lingo

The form of the English language that is associated with power in Britain today, is variously known as BBC English, received pronunciation, southern British standard, or even simply 'proper' English. It is no accident that this dialect descends from the merchant class of London at the end of the medieval period. As this class evolved into the new capitalist class, so their linguistic influence spread. Capitalism required improved communication, and therefore a working class that at least understood the dominant dialect, both written and spoken, even if they didn't use it in their own speech. Establishing the dominance of this dialect was part and parcel of the capitalist class establishing its dominance over the working class.

It could be said that a language is just a dialect with an army and a navy. Two points arise. First, it ties prestige forms of language to capitalism's favourite form of political organisation — the nation state. Second, it reflects the reality that 'standard' English is no less a dialect than any other form of English. The difference is that it is a class dialect, not a regional one. It is held up as something to aspire to, not denigrated like regional dialects. It is a class dialect because

the capitalist class uses it most, and because it is working class people who are said not to speak 'proper' English.

Not content merely with dominance, there are even those who wish to go further and develop standard English into a uniform national language that everyone must use. The latest example to hit the headlines was Beryl Bainbridge's bigoted demand for working class accents to be weeded out at school. To hold such views is a demonstration of crass class arrogance. It certainly shows no understanding of how we learn language or what language should be about.

In fact, the majority of language learning is done before we reach school. Most of us therefore, don't learn 'proper' English, but the dialect of our families and communities. At school, we learn to read and write the standard dialect, but we largely ignore the attempts to make us talk proper(ly). Although people can, and do, change their accents or dialects, it has rarely anything to do with school. Even so, childhood dialects remain, as witnessed by their ability to show up, or get stronger, due to stress, emotion or inebriation. To try to wipe out regional dialect, therefore, can only be doomed to failure, for children by and large continue to use the same speech habits as their family and friends, not those that school attempts to force-feed them.

The elitist, prescriptivist ideology is that standard English is the one and only truly correct form, that all other forms are lazy, inelegant and lacking logic. But the truth is that no dialect is any more correct, elegant or logical than any other. It takes the same level of mental sophistication to develop the knowledge to speak 'proper' as it does to speak Scouse, Cockney, Geordie, Brummie or anything else. Prescriptivists like the bigot Bainbridge fear that English is being infected, debased and mongrelised by regional dialects and 'sloppy usage'. But no language remains static. Standard English, like other English dialects, and like other languages, changes all the time. Such changes are irresistible, and beyond the control of the self-appointed grammar police.

back to school

As already mentioned, capitalism needed improved communication, which led to the spread of literacy through the state education system and among the working class, who had hitherto been denied access to education. Of course, the teaching of skills like reading and writing, even if based on a standard, capitalist dialect, is no bad thing in and of itself. However, in going about the teaching process, the education system establishes the social patterns, including patterns of language use, that we go on to use in our dealings with wider society. School establishes a distinctive structure with a set of situations (class, assembly, playtime, staff meeting, etc), a set of roles (head, teacher, pupil, prefect, boy/girl, bully) and a set of purposes (learning, teaching, examining, maintaining [social] control), all of which demand their own distinctive language pattern — controlled roles, controlling roles, when to take turns, respecting the authority of the head, the teacher, and so on.

Having downplayed the education system's ability to affect our dialects, a more accurate assessment would be that, instead of our childhood dialects being affected, we are given access to another (standard) dialect for use in dealings with institutions, etc., which demands a language style higher up the hierarchy. Thus, to some degree we do absorb the standard dialect, for use in specific situations. How successfully we can do this is reflected in how successful we are in educational and career terms or, put another way, how successful we are in reproducing society's

values and power structures. Of course, people from capitalist, 'middle class' or professional backgrounds, that is backgrounds where they learn the standard dialect from birth, have a head start in this process.

media & ad-'men'

Another institution which reinforces both language patterns and capitalist power structures is the media industry, including its offensive off-shoot, the advertising industry. The media are skilled at disguising power relations to direct attention away from the powerful people and the profit-motivated causes that lie behind discrimination, pollution, and a long list of other social evils.

A sort of simulated egalitarianism, which depends heavily on hiding surface markers of authority and power, is projected through advertising and the media, as well as education, government and state bureaucracies. The language used presents capitalist practices as universal and 'common sense'. The power to do this is a significant complement to economic and political power.

For instance, industrial disputes are reported through the use of distorting language such as "trouble", "disruption" or the disease metaphor. All of the time, it is existing power structures which are reinforced. The whole point is to achieve consent in the maintenance of power, which is certainly a lot less risky than ruling through coercion.

free language?

An aspect of language which is just as important as its role in maintaining power, is the role it can play in challenging and breaking down power structures. Indeed, over the last four decades, various social and political movements have adopted various strategies to 'expropriate' language in this way. Capitalist society lays great store in being 'free' and 'democratic'. However, when those at the sharp end of social power structures claim such ideas in the fight against discrimination, and re-work their meanings, this is a challenge to existing power structures.

Another way of fighting back through language is to reclaim 'insulting' words. This has been done to a certain extent elsewhere, but has been most successful within the gay movement. The word 'gay' itself is one which was reclaimed back in the 1970s, while 'queer' has recently undergone the same process. Again, language is being expropriated and given unexpected and empowering meaning.

In recent decades, there has also been a trend away from the overt marking of power relations in language, resulting in the hiding or blurring of language power relationships. Examples include in higher education, the use of 'Japanese management techniques', and the increased use of indirect requests in everyday conversation, rather than direct orders. In languages like French, German, and Spanish it is also seen, in the trend away from using informal and polite equivalents of "you" to mark power relations, towards their use to express family, friendship or solidarity relations. Then again, it is seen in the shift away from "he" and other male pronouns to refer to all sexes collectively.

Such changes show a response to social struggle. The powerful have felt the need to exercise power in less open and direct ways. Of course, there is no question of them giving up any of that power. Power inequalities in terms of wealth distribution, access to health and education

facilities, and so on, continue to widen, deepen and generally become more stark. But they are disguised by the ever thicker wallpaper of subtle language change. This is simply one face of the simulated egalitarianism referred to earlier.

While such trends may show that the language of power relations can be challenged and changed, they also demonstrate that capitalist society can adopt and adapt to such language change without significant change to the whole hierarchy of power. The ultimate challenge, then, is to bring down the capitalist system, which is built on that hierarchy. And language must be a part of this process.

arming the militia

The expropriation of the terminology of the dominant ideology is one way in which we can immediately intensify our battle against it. For example, we can set about expropriating that old capitalist favourite 'free speech'. Since this must be based upon the ability to participate freely and equally within society, a society that expects the majority of us to meekly fit into subservient roles and follow orders cannot be one that encourages free speech.

To be in favour of free speech, therefore, is to reject both the social and class hierarchy, and the hierarchy of language roles that goes with it. Now, to take on managers, coppers and other authority figures, to refuse to accept being controlled, is no easy task. But it is one that is central to the whole idea of overthrowing the current society to bring about a better one. It is a task that we must prepare for, through self-education, backed by solidarity.

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