

Attention to Matters of Language



Tam Perry, Associate Professor,
School of Social Work,
Wayne State University



Meagan Winkelseth, Third-Year doctoral
Student, Department of Communication,
Wayne State University



Land Acknowledgment

Wayne State University rests on Waawiyaataanong, also referred to as Detroit, the ancestral and contemporary homeland of the Three Fires Confederacy. These sovereign lands were granted by the Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi, and Wyandot nations, in 1807, through the Treaty of Detroit. Wayne State University affirms Indigenous sovereignty and honors all tribes with a connection to Detroit. With our Native neighbors, WSU can advance educational equity and promote a better future for the earth and all people.



A Discursive Lens...

...helps us to understand how everyday conversations and written texts:

1. Indexes asymmetries of power
2. Shows how fluency/literacy is perceived and valued (complements attention to the digital divide)
3. Co-constructs belongingness and cultural transmission (including reinforcing and disrupting power structures)
4. Invokes previous conversations, contexts, texts, and unstoppability of language
5. Demonstrates strategic use of language to access resources and promote/hinder equity initiatives

...we also must remember to look at who is not invited to the table...



1. Asymmetries of Power

Gumperz (2009): Language differences play an important, positive role in signaling information as well as in creating and maintaining the subtle boundaries of power, status, role and occupational specialization that make up the fabric of our social life. (p. 2-3)



2. Shows how fluency/literacy is perceived and valued (complements attention to the digital divide)

Carr (2010): Significantly, those we study also have various and conflicting ideas about the nature of language and narrative. Linguistic anthropology takes these ideas about language to be important data in their own right, using the term language ideology to denote informants' theories or rationalizations about language...Indeed, linguistic anthropology presupposes that the 'truth' of language lies in how a community of speakers understands and uses language to do things in the world. (p. 126)



3. Co-constructs belongingness and cultural transmission (including reinforcing and disrupting power structures)

Foucault (1978): “Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (p. 100).



4. Invokes previous conversations, contexts, texts, and unstopability of language

Alcoff (1991): “In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context. One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker other credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there...the content of the claim, or its meaning, emerges in interaction between words and hearers within a very specific historical situation...we have to pay careful attention to the discursive arrangement in order to understand the full meaning of any given discursive event” (p. 26).



5. Demonstrates strategic use of language to access resources and promote/hinder equity initiatives

Goffman (1981): “For often it seems that when we change voice, whether to speak for another aspect of ourselves or for some one else,...we are not so much terminating the prior alignment as holding it in abeyance with the understanding that will almost be immediately reengaged” (p. 137).



Language and Aging

- How are we as researchers and teachers approaching work with older adults and discussions about aging?
 - Resources:
 - <https://clin-star.org/clin-star-deia-resources>
 - <https://www.reframingaging.org/>
 - https://www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Health_Equity.html
 - <https://www.apa.org/about/apa/equity-diversity-inclusion/language-guidelines>



Thank you

