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Introduction:

Bourdieu and Language

Simon Susen

This Special Issue is aimed at providing an in-depth analysis of Bourdieu's conception of language. In fact, it may be more appropriate to suggest that there are various conceptions of language both in Bourdieu's own works and, to an even larger extent, in the multiple interpretations of his writings on symbolic forms. The numerous challenges arising from the project of developing a comprehensive account of the key features and issues examined in Bourdieusian studies of language are reflected in the theoretical complexity of the following contributions. I would like to thank the commentators—Lisa Adkins, Bridget Fowler, Michael Grenfell, David Inglis, Hans-Herbert Kögler, Steph Lawler, William Outhwaite, Derek Robbins and Bryan S. Turner—for contributing to this Special Issue. In addition, I am immensely grateful to both James H. Collier and Steve Fuller for encouraging me to put this collection of articles together. Both the commentators and I are indebted to the editors for publishing our critical exchange in *Social Epistemology*.

As stated in the Table of Contents, this Special Issue on “Bourdieu and Language” contains one core article, nine commentaries and one detailed reply to these commentaries. Let me give a brief overview of the main topics covered in these essays.

The core article—entitled “Bourdieuian reflections on language: Unavoidable conditions of the real speech situation”¹—has three main objectives: (a) to shed light on Bourdieu's conception of language; (b) to demonstrate that, contrary to

common belief, Bourdieu's account of language is based on a number of ontological presuppositions, that is, on a set of universal assumptions about the very nature of linguistic communication; and (c) to reflect on the flaws and limitations of Bourdieu's approach to language.

Although the commentaries are, by and large, written from a sympathetic angle, they expose not only the strengths and insights but also the weaknesses and shortcomings of my outline for a Bourdieusian philosophy of language. The thematic foci of these scholarly and eclectic commentaries can be summarized as follows.

In the first commentary—entitled “Bourdieu and Habermas: ‘Linguistic exchange’ versus ‘communicative action’? A reply to Simon Susen”²—*William Outhwaite* convincingly argues that useful lessons can be learned from *cross-fertilizing Bourdieusian and Habermasian approaches to language*. Thus, instead of treating them as antithetical, let alone incompatible, accounts, we need to recognize that valuable insights can be gained from regarding Bourdieu's model of “linguistic exchange” and Habermas's theory of “communicative action” as two complementary frameworks for the study of language.

In the second commentary—entitled “Simon Susen's ‘Bourdieusian reflections on language: Unavoidable conditions of the real speech situation’—A rejoinder”³—*Bridget Fowler* endeavours to unearth the *ontological, phenomenological, hermeneutic and historical* presuppositions underlying Bourdieu's studies of language. By virtue of a fine-grained textual analysis, she puts her finger on the pitfalls arising from *fatalistic* misrepresentations of Bourdieu's critical engagement with the interest-laden constitution of symbolic relations.

In the third commentary—entitled “Response to Simon Susen's ‘Bourdieusian reflections on language: Unavoidable conditions of the real speech situation’”⁴—*Derek Robbins* warns of the dangers inherent in three interrelated sources of misinterpretation: *dehistoricization, decontextualization and formalization*. Founded on both his impressively wide-ranging knowledge and his meticulously organized examination of Bourdieu's writings, Robbins maintains that any attempt to develop a *universalist* theoretical programme is incompatible with the Bourdieusian commitment to the *historical* analysis of the social conditions allowing for the production of material and symbolic forms.

In the fourth commentary—entitled “Unequal persons: A response to Simon Susen”⁵—*Steph Lawler* makes a strong case for opposing any kind of *philosophical idealism* which endows language with a degree of agency that releases it from its various socio-structural constraints. In her perceptive piece, she insists on the sociological embeddedness of language by reflecting on five dimensions which play a pivotal role in the construction of symbolically mediated life forms: *reflexivity, sociality, corporeality, identity and legitimacy*.

In the fifth commentary—entitled “‘Shadow boxing’: Reflections on Bourdieu and language”⁶—*Michael Grenfell* contends that we must resist the temptation to *reify* Bourdieusian concepts by converting them into theoreticist grand narratives, detached from any empirical engagement with the multiple, and often messy, complexities of social reality. Wary of reductionist explanatory strategies in the human-

ities and social sciences, he suggests that Bourdieu's multidimensional study of language contains four principal strands: (a) language as an *empirical social phenomenon*; (b) language as a *mediating social force*; (c) language as a *specialist instrument of science*; and (d) language as an *object of philosophical contemplation*.

In the sixth commentary—entitled “Pierre Bourdieu and public liturgies”⁷—Bryan S. Turner draws our attention to two aspects of language which, he believes, tend to be overlooked by mainstream sociologists: the *historical* and the *performative* elements undergirding the construction of linguistic forms. Defending a strong notion of “sociality”, Turner maintains that the sociological significance of language cannot be properly understood without exploring its historical development and performative functions. In a somewhat pessimistic fashion, Turner claims that the colonization of public spheres by modern technology implies that, in highly differentiated societies, large parts of the population have been robbed of the collective experience of liturgies and, consequently, of the ritualistic *mise-en-scène* of shared languages.

In the seventh commentary—entitled “Ontological Bourdieu? A reply to Simon Susen”⁸—Lisa Adkins questions the validity of “ontological” interpretations of Bourdieu's conception of language. She does so by developing three lines of critique: first, on the basis of her *anti-rationalist* attack on the idea of language as the main *cognitive* source and vehicle of *meaning*; second, on the basis of her *anti-essentialist* assault on the idea of language as the key *ontological* source and vehicle of *transcendence and resistance*; and, third, on the basis of her *anti-hermeneutic* disapproval of the idea of language as the foundational *interpretive* source and vehicle of human *experience*.

In the eighth commentary—entitled “Unavoidable idealizations and the reality of symbolic power”⁹—Hans-Herbert Kögler defends the paradigmatic status of language in Bourdieu's oeuvre, particularly in terms of the central role which the most influential French sociologist of the late twentieth century attributes to the construction of symbolic forms in his theory of practice. Similar to both Outhwaite's and my own reading of Bourdieu, Kögler is sympathetic to the project of drawing upon the complementary insights gained from seemingly opposed thinkers such as Habermas and Bourdieu. Suspicious of one-dimensional accounts in the humanities and social sciences, Kögler insists upon the *multifunctionality of speech*, implying that there is far more involved in the use of language than the intent to communicate.

In the ninth commentary—entitled “Bourdieu, language and ‘determinism’: A reply to Simon Susen”¹⁰—David Inglis takes issue with five sources of misinterpretation, allegedly common amongst both sympathetic and unsympathetic critics of Bourdieu: (a) the simultaneous *overestimation and underestimation* of Bourdieu's insightfulness; (b) the opportunistic *fetishization* of language, inspired by the various “linguistic turns” proclaimed by prominent thinkers in the humanities and social sciences; (c) the derivative *intellectualization* of language, based on old ideas but dressed in new clothes; (d) the scholastic *over-complexification* of language, which fails to distinguish the essential from the non-essential functions of symbolic forms; and (e) the philosophical *idealization* of language, which underestimates, or completely ignores, the

socio-structural constraints permeating all symbolically mediated expressions of inter-subjectivity.

The main purpose of the final contribution—entitled “A reply to my critics: The critical spirit of Bourdieusian language”¹¹—is to address, and respond to, the most important issues raised by the commentators. As my critics convincingly demonstrate, in order to push the debate forward, it is crucial to scrutinize not only the strengths and insights, but also the weaknesses and limitations of my outline for a Bourdieusian philosophy of language. Arguably, such an undertaking enables us to contribute to a better—that is, more astute, more fine-grained, but also more useful—understanding of language. This is precisely what this Special Issue has sought to achieve.

Notes

- [1] Susen (2013a).
- [2] Outhwaite (2013).
- [3] Fowler (2013).
- [4] Robbins (2013).
- [5] Lawler (2013).
- [6] Grenfell (2013).
- [7] Turner (2013).
- [8] Adkins (2013).
- [9] Kögler (2013).
- [10] Inglis (2013).
- [11] Susen (2013b).

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