

Theorising academic language and learning: Past, present and future

Gordon Taylor

Formerly Language and Learning Unit, Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Email: gordonbyt@gmail.com

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“Language is the only true and verifiable a priori framework of cognition.”

George Steiner (1975, p.81)

In this introduction to the symposium papers collected here I offer my own perspective on the past, the present – as represented by the papers before us – and the future of academic language and learning. The first is to remind ourselves of the restricted, not to say arid, theoretical state of our field of study when I first began this work in the 1970s. The widely used tags “study skills” and “remedial English” revealed this poverty of almost exclusively Anglo-American thought in all its nakedness. In the present collection readers will find many approaches to theorising with varying starting points, the great majority – with the partial exceptions of genre and rhetorical theory – stemming from the thought of Continental Europeans. I shall list these, making a few comments in passing, and then try to distil a few themes that struck me. Notably, there is an absence: the almost total abandonment of psychological learning theories as being at all helpful. Then there are three closely interconnected themes on which I focus. First, identity and difference raises its head in many of the theories, a question which has wide ramifications in what follows. The other two are the fortunes of the theory of power/knowledge regimes and the degree to which linguistic and rhetorical (or genre) structures constrain students as learners and human agents. This introduction concludes with a meditation on how the Academic Language and Learning (ALL) field might deal with the plethora of theories being offered, how a sophisticated “theory of practice” seems already to be emerging as a common pursuit, and how this development might be handled in the future amidst constricting Enlightenment ways of thinking – beliefs and practices which are seriously at odds with the kind of culture towards which most of these papers are striving.

Key words: theory, theorists, history, Enlightenment, uniformity, variety, agency, identity, power/knowledge, determinism, consistency/ completeness, practice.

1. Past

Do we need theory? What relevance does it have to everyday life? Can't we get along perfectly well using our motherwit or what Voltaire called *le bon sens*? To begin with the last of these questions, *le bon sens*, beguiling in its apparent simplicity, is itself a theory – one which has dominated much academic and popular Western thought for over two centuries. Though Voltaire believed that the possession of *le bon sens* was limited to a few, it became

“naturalised” for all, no more to be questioned than whether the sun actually “rises” each morning, itself a now long-discredited theory – though it rightly remains part of our everyday talk. So, to answer the question about relevance, we would have to say that yesterday’s theories sometimes become today’s widely accepted facts and often tomorrow’s discarded theories. But some discarded or almost forgotten theories find new resonance in a new time or setting, as we shall see.

So we cannot escape theory: it should be quite clear that practical life, for better or for worse, depends on it – as well as the converse. Whether we recognise it consciously or not, theories are always there, guiding our behaviour. When we step off the footpath to cross a busy road we are guided by a theory, contributed to by experience and learning in particular circumstances, about our chances of safely reaching the other side. As every traveller into unfamiliar foreign countries knows, this can differ from one place to the next. The theory, then, needs to be adaptable; but it is still a theory. Bad theories in the realm of the humanities and social sciences – in language and learning – if not in standard interpretations of the natural sciences, are those that presume to account for what is right or best to do in all settings. But people and the things that influence them are forever changing in unpredictable ways. “Out of the crooked timber of humanity”, wrote the great and often imponderable theorist Immanuel Kant, “no straight thing was ever made”.

Yet following almost slavishly the heirs of Voltaire and much of the rest of the French and English Enlightenment tradition, which said that human behaviour could be made “straight”, once the principles were well formulated, this was the temper of thought that I found when I first began work on language and learning in the university in the 1970s. There were very restricted ways of looking at the relations between learning, language and knowledge. Indeed, not only did the *bon sens* assumption that its “theory” was well designed to fit all – and the devil take the hindmost – each aspect of this, paradoxically perhaps, was almost a watertight compartment unto itself, without much sense they were all part of a whole.

Learning Theory in the English-speaking world was the almost exclusive preserve of psychologists, who also had a very deterministic theory of behaviour. True, behaviourism was in its death throes, having been badly wounded by Noam Chomsky’s (1959) review of B. F. Skinner’s *Verbal Behaviour* – itself just part of the then exciting nascent theory of cognitive science, which quite early split between those “universalists” of the mind like Chomsky and Piaget (for all their differences) and those who worried that the particular *content* and *context* of learning was being left behind. But all these arguments seemed only marginally relevant to university education; and few had heard of Vygotsky, who wrote *Thought and Language* in the 1930s, but had to wait until 1962 for an English translation (Vygotsky, 1939/1962). The new American cognitive psychology looked exciting to many (including me) if only because it acknowledged that learners actually had something called a mind rather than a mere set of neuronal reflexes which could be conditioned; moreover, a mind which was constructively active. We were at last being freed from the suffocating cell of the Skinner box. Few of these developments had percolated through to my university in Australia when I returned to the country in 1974. Theoretical sophistication in Australian higher education only began to develop in the very late 1970s and early 80s when researchers, initially in Sweden (notably Marton, Säljö and Svensson) and the United Kingdom (Ramsden, and more slowly Entwistle) progressively dropped the language of generalised “learning skills” or “study skills” and began to take a qualitative approach to learning which enquired into just what was and wasn’t being learned in the disciplinary context. Even so, phenomenography, as the Swedish movement came to be known, was rooted in phenomenological approaches to the psychology of learning which ultimately could not escape the confines of a philosophically naïve realism – knowing “the thing in itself as it really is”. A few of us in Australia were gradually putting together an alternative perspective. The subsequent theoretical and practical tussles have been comprehensively and perceptively analysed by Kate Chanock (2011).

Language Theory was still pretty much wedded to Saussure’s rationalist structuralism (*ex* Descartes) or the empirical structuralism of American descriptive linguistics (*ex* David Hume); that is, where it wasn’t simply assuming that grammar was pretty much what the prescriptive

grammarians of classical times and the 17th and 18th centuries had laid out. The Chomskyan transformational grammarians of the 1960s onwards, as I have said, did have a theory of mind, but continued to believe that language study was exclusively a branch of psychology. They spent most of their energies in true Cartesian style hunting for linguistic universals underlying the mind – what was called “competence” – having little to say about the practicalities of everyday language and learning. Sociolinguists, it is true, particularly in the United States, studied variability in language; but even they found themselves having to invent the superficial term “communicative competence” in order to stay fashionable. The most promising development of the 1970s to me was that Michael Halliday’s functional linguistics was beginning to get into its stride, (himself a student of London University’s J. R. Firth, whose dictum was to study “how we use language to live”), a development which we at this symposium now know quite a bit about, but which still struggles to get an adequate hearing in theoretical linguistics.

There had also been the “ordinary language” Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin, who talked about speech acts: ordinary language viewed as something to *perform*, rather than to acquire, in particular situations. The title of his volume of lectures was *How to do things with words* (Austin, 1962). That was revolutionary. *Doing*, participating in a learning conversation, rather than simply *acquiring* knowledge and skills is a recurrent leitmotif at the present symposium, for example in Steve Johnson’s paper on Deleuze, in the concluding section of that by Anthony Paré, and in Bronwyn James’s study of Judith Butler.

The **Theory of Knowledge** at that time was dominated by philosophy departments wedded to Anglo-American analytical philosophers, arguing endlessly among themselves about the various dogmas of empiricism and wondering whether the later Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, which also emphasised the importance of everyday language, had completely subverted the noble enterprise in which they were engaged. But, of course, the seeds of regeneration are always lying about somewhere, even in a desert like this, just waiting for a bit of rain. Some American philosophers, notably W.V.O. Quine, Hilary Putnam and later, Richard Rorty, had begun to pick large holes in not only the empiricist but also the rationalist doctrine – in fact both sides of the Enlightenment tradition.

As for academic staff in the other disciplines, it had occurred to very few of them that there might be a connection between the problems of knowledge discussed in their discipline and the problems of learning, understanding and writing faced by their students. The epistemological traditions and assumptions behind their disciplines were taught only to honour students in a little esoteric world of its own without any application to students’ own understanding and writing of the discipline in question. For example, the ideas of the historiographers R. G. Collingwood and E. H. Carr, directly relevant to the writing and teaching of history, were never “translated” into the everyday history classroom. It was not until the publication of the anthology edited by Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, as late as 1987, that some of these issues were brought to the attention of rhetoricians, but remained unnoticed by discipline specialists. This has now been addressed at the present symposium by Glenda Ballantyne on Ricoeur.

The social sciences were a little bit ahead in this ball game. In 1971, Penguin re-published in paperback a 1966 book by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann with the then shocking title *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/1971). Nowadays, of course, this phrase is a mantra, almost a cliché, which until recently, has been given less critique than it deserved, not so much because of what it says but because of what it leaves out – notably the private individual learner and writer seeking his or her own understanding in the hypermarket of competing products which is the modern multiversity. Moreover, the extreme social relativism – itself a determinism of sorts – which this mantra is often taken to imply, can itself sideline the individual learner’s quest. Another ground-breaking feature of Berger and Luckmann’s book was that its references were overwhelmingly to Continental European theorists.

Yet, much of this social science remained wedded to the idea that an overarching theory, whether explicitly Marxist or other, which encompasses all humankind in all circumstances is possible, a continuation of the Enlightenment project. The rest, as they say, is history. Of the

papers presented in this symposium, Continental European theorists are predominant. Anglo-American thought is the better for it, since it broke the tidy bonds that the empiricists and positivists had wrapped around the nature of language and thought, and which I had to begin thinking about when I first started in this work. But we don't yet have a clear set of guidelines for the future; this plot is yet to be played out. I shall suggest later the lines it might follow: how teachers of academic language and learning theory and practice are not (or must not allow themselves to become) mere bit players in this wider intellectual drama.

2. Present

2.1. An overview

What are these theories, on the evidence of the papers presented at this symposium? (Here I confine myself for the most part to the papers published in this particular issue of JALL – I understand that more will be published in the future.) The most striking, as I have already suggested, is the sheer variety of approaches that have been put forward. In listing this variety I have tried to be fair, but it will be obvious that that my own views and, indeed, prejudices will out. For this I make no apology. By being as direct as I think appropriate, I hope to encourage debate. In my summary judgements I fully expect that many will turn out to be wrong. But whether I am wrong or right is not the issue. The issue is always to discuss and to find ways of getting apparently fixed horizons of understanding to intermingle.

Let us turn now to the theories themselves.

Genre theory and *Rhetorical theory*, and combinations of both, as in the keynote essay by Anthony Paré and (in the second special issue) that by Anne Freedman are significant contributors. There might be a chance that genre and rhetorical theory are saying similar things, using a different vocabulary and adopting a different tone – or tenor. Or are they fundamentally very different? Perhaps some genre theorists could benefit from the strong historical interests of the rhetoricians – things do change over time – and rhetoricians could pay more attention to the *inventio*, the “ideational” or epistemic dimensions of academic language.

Then there is *Discourse Analysis*. Again, there are various versions of this, similar to those of genre theory: critical discourse analysis, rhetorical discourse analysis, and problems of discursal identity, which arise in a number of other theories presented to us. (I confess I have difficulty deciding whether Discourse Analysis is just a modern term for rhetorical studies.) Certainly in the first of these guises, critical discourse analysis, as the name might imply on the analogy of critical social theory, there is a strong socio-political polemic – evident to a degree in Antoon De Rycker's paper on Van Leeuwen – which appears to be absent from rhetorical theory, which, while being well aware of the issues, adopts a more conciliatory tone. When we come to questions of discursal identity, there are themes here which seem to be strikingly matters of recent times. I shall have more to say about this later.

Practice theory, in particular Bourdieu and Judith Butler, both of whom attract attention in the papers presented, has now earned for itself its own label, perhaps principally because Pierre Bourdieu (1977) titled one of his books *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. This is a sleeping giant, especially but not only amongst sociologists, about which I shall also have a great deal more to say.

Activity theory is also a sociologically inspired theory of practice. Though arising, as Monica Behrend tells us, from Vygotsky and Leontiev, in Engeström's “third generation” incarnation it has taken on the architecture of modern information theory and systems theory as a model of how to organise cooperative learning enterprises amongst individuals and groups who contribute varying parts to the total experience. It is therefore of a rather different kind from the other approaches explored in these pages. This theory might be called a second order theory or heuristic, inasmuch as the various inputs into the model presuppose that the kinds of questions that concern most of our contributors have to a significant extent been answered. It is when the model detects that there are incompatibilities or inconsistencies (what are called “contradictions” in activity theory and negative feedback in standard information theory) in

these inputs that the need for changes and modifications is triggered. Given that team teaching is bound to become more pervasive, especially with the now probably unstoppable momentum towards electronic course delivery in a political and economic climate dominated by notions such as productivity, a theory of this kind will no doubt have an important role to play. The irony might not be lost on the spirit of Vygotsky.

Now, hitting a rather different note, there are other papers I shall label broadly *Humanistic theories*, which, against the structuralist and post-structuralist tendencies of the age, wish to re-emphasise the importance of learners and student writers as people, as human agents, who are not “texts” or merely the socio-psychological products of a dysfunctional modern capitalism. As Anne Freadman asks in her keynote paper to be published in the second issue of these proceedings, “Where is the subject?” She answers the question by arguing that the subject cannot be “in the genre” in the way that most genre theorists think. Similarly, Anthony Paré addresses himself not only to structural discourse/genre communities but also to individual human agency in the pursuit of change. But this desire will always be constricted not only in certain collaborative writing situations but also in seeking to put one’s own individual efforts into the public domain. In this tradition there is also *Hermeneutics*, whose principle exponents are Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, examined by Glenda Ballantyne, drawing strongly but not at all exclusively on the post-Enlightenment thinking of Heidegger. Hermeneutics is also very much a theory of *Practice*. (It appears that the excellent Canadian philosopher of language, agency and identity in this tradition, Charles Taylor, has yet to make a significant impact in Australia, despite a brief mention by Ballantyne). This resurgence of a sophisticated humanism in an intellectual climate which has largely rejected it for a very long time is a fascinating development – just so long as it does not degenerate into a mindless subjectivism, such as the “process writing” and “discovery learning” fads (about which Anthony Paré has comments to make) which enjoyed much attention in the 1980s and 90s and have yet not quite been put to rest. The student as writer and individual thinker is another theme I shall pursue later on.

An intriguing absence from this symposium includes *Cognitive Psychological* theories such as Constructivism, apart from the role they play in Activity Theory. Given what I have said about the once dominant position of psychology in learning theory, this lack of interest is a shift of quite seismic proportions. My own interest, early on, was piqued by very scientific psychological research into sense perception, mostly because it overturned the old empiricist assumption that the mind is an “empty bucket”. But now, for probably quite understandable reasons, given the sophistication of some of the theories I have already referred to, scientific theories will have to work hard to claw their way back into what has become, for the time being anyway, almost indisputably the preserve of the social sciences and humanities. I cannot see an extreme scientific, generic and fundamentalist theory such as one offshoot of cognitive science, artificial intelligence, might seek to promote ever resonating again among serious language and learning theorists. But this is not a reason to discard *tout court* some of the subtler insights that cognitive science might yet be able to contribute to learning in the computer age.

2.2. Some dominant themes

2.2.1. Identity and difference

I have touched in passing on a few themes that seem to be emerging. Perhaps one of the more constantly recurring of these is the conundrum surrounding the question of identity and difference in the writing and thinking student. The question of identity crops up in many papers whose titles do not necessarily promise it. So it is clearly a major concern (not confined to our own area of study). It is a topic which – though a major preoccupation of the 19th century Romantic tradition – looks to be treated by our authors in very modern and innovative ways. In the late 1990s, the pages of American composition journals were full of discussions which seemed to treat identity as a point of departure for students, who were lumped into baskets labelled race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class. It takes little imagination to see how this list might be greatly extended – almost a loose sociological reprise on the mediaeval theory of “humours”. In some English universities, though the discussion was mostly about class, it nevertheless followed the ever expanding number of sub-groups in society whose voices wanted

not only to be heard, which is necessary, but to be particularly privileged as the only authentic interpreters of the experience. The same happened in Australia. The problem remains, however, that, as Maton (2000, p. 154) comments on the climate in England at the time, “knowledge claims [became] *reducible* to the social characteristics of the group voicing them” (my italics). But what I am seeing in this symposium is a view of identity not as a place from which the student starts and gradually cobbles together some mix of these categories, but as part of an ongoing discovery of oneself in the actual act of learning and writing, of “becoming a writing subject”, as Bronwyn James in her paper puts it, and as Morton, Storch, and Thompson identify as “our students’ changing identities and developing disciplinary personas”.

What does it mean to “have”, “possess” or “own” an identity? Despite the superficial syntactic similarities it is nothing like possessing a blue car or even blue eyes. This is an existential statement, not a possessive (‘Mary has blue eyes’) or an attributive (‘Mary is blue-eyed’). As Gadamer (1976, p. 55) puts it in his *Philosophical Hermeneutics*:

...all understanding is self-understanding, but not in the sense of a preliminary self-possession or of one finally and definitively achieved. For the self-understanding only realises itself in the understanding of a subject matter...The self that we are does not possess itself; one could say that it “happens”.

For us language and learning specialists in higher education, Gadamer’s view of the deep connection between our students’ learning to become themselves and their engagement with the disciplines their interests have led them to study is not so much about some sociological category or categories where they start or even their aims or desired “outcomes”. Though we obviously need to be sensitive to these starting points and aims, our focus should be on what “happens” in the actual practice of reading, writing, revising and talking in pursuit of their studies and in their university life as a whole. For this reason, Bronwyn James points out, one’s identity is “fragile” and never “stable”, always requiring a resolving of the competing claims of our “multiple selves”. Glenda Ballantyne’s discussion of Ricoeur’s ideas on what happens when we read is that it requires a “*dispossession* of the immediate self/ego” (my italics) before going on to reconstitute a new enlarged self. Our job, I suggest, along with that of all their other teachers, is to encourage and help students to negotiate this happening. This, taking as her point of departure Vygotsky’s idea of the “zone of proximal development” and Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, Celia Thompson tells us of her experience writing a PhD eventually coming to “forge a ‘voice’ of her own” as she grapples with the subject matter of her thesis, the apparently conflicting notions of plagiarism and intertextuality. Similarly, Roberts and Reid, discussing Bourdieu, use the term “reflexivity” in a similar vein – as making it possible for students to transcend the limitations of what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, the more and less explicit “rules of the game” to find their own individual interpretation of their freedom.

As for difference, Deleuze and others are to some extent performing a Derridean inversion which either privileges it over identity or tries to free it completely from the binary opposition. While I welcome such barriers being broken down, as I have said, structuralism demonstrates fairly clearly that binary oppositions are built into language: part of the meaning of “cold” is its opposition to “hot”, connected by a sliding scale interpreted according to the context. While “us” and “them” can certainly do with a great deal of deconstruction and pragmatic softening around the edges, as post-structuralists and post-colonialists have busily been doing, I don’t see this distinction disappearing any time soon from the grammar of the world’s languages – what one linguist calls “a general human tendency to ‘polarise’ experience and judgement”. This is, of course, what Derrida, Edward Said and Deleuze, amongst others, are attacking in its particularly Western manifestations. It is a matter of observation throughout the world, nevertheless, that each “other”, so labelled from one perspective, tends itself to seek out its own “others”.

Despite some attention being given to overseas students, no papers in the present collection have revisited theoretically and practically the once much discussed Kaplan (e.g. 1966, 1978) thesis concerning the philosophical, rhetorical or genre traditions of cultures other than the

Western; though Ballantyne in her teaching of sociology makes explicit use of the cultural differences and presuppositions of her own students. How does one approach the belief of some hypothetical Muslim students, for example, so “different” that the precise words of the Qur’an in classical Arabic are not open to interpretation or translation? Such students might assume that the same applies to the texts that they study in a Western university; or, like other students, they gradually learn to negotiate their way between what Wittgenstein called the different families of “language games” they encounter, which Tim Moore’s paper explains, and in the process find themselves forging their own identities. Such a quandary is also addressed by Roberts and Reid on Bourdieu. Craig Calhoun in his book *Critical Social Theory* has remarked that “There is no simple sameness unmarked by difference, but likewise no distinction not dependent on some background of common recognition” (Calhoun, 1995, p. 193). This observation is also directly relevant to my next theme.

2.2.2. Knowledge/Power regimes

I detect a gradual softening in the rhetoric of ideology that has in the past been particularly associated with Foucault and Paulo Freire. Indeed Foucault, so far as I can see, is rarely mentioned in the papers of this symposium, and the Critical Discourse Analysis associated with Norman Fairclough, Henry Giroux, James Paul Gee, Gunther Kress and others seems no longer to have the hold it did some years ago. Antoon De Rycker’s use of Van Leeuwen draws marginally on Fairclough and mentions Kress. These older critical discourse theorists saw their role as using (I am almost inclined to say “manipulating”) their students in order to design “the new society” as their usually Marxist/Leninist disposition envisaged it.

Karl Maton – whose keynote paper on Legitimation Code Theory will be published in the second series – has pointed out elsewhere (Maton, 2000) that we can now see the relation between power and knowledge to be much more subtle than the standard interpretations of Foucault realised. In addition, he notes in his contribution to the present symposium that knowledge becomes no more than “a neutral medium” in these power struggles between groups rather than a focus of study in its own right. Hence, I think, the drift to the somewhat softer and more enigmatic Pierre Bourdieu, about whom we hear particularly in the paper by Roberts and Reid. But even Bourdieu in my view is vague about the specifics of knowledge and language and is highly deterministic: the power of knowledge and language stems more from the power of those with “symbolic capital” who capture “its modes of production”, as he says, using the language of economics, than it does from anything intrinsic to language itself or to the wider world with which it engages. (Perhaps the economic metaphor could do with a bit of deconstruction itself. Surely by now we have transcended the 19th century Marxian notion that economics, important as it undoubtedly remains, forms the only real “base” and everything else – including the differing ways in which the disciplines construe knowledge – mere “superstructure”. That judgement applies just as pertinently to the prevailing neoliberal economic theory as it does to Marx, both being sired by Enlightenment rationalism). A quotation from Bourdieu in the paper by Roberts and Reid reinforces my impression about his determinism when he says that the possibilities of an individual finding “true sites of freedom...[are] not that large.” Who adjudicates on what those “true” sites are, and how far they might range? Moreover, I find it significant that when Bourdieu (1990, pp. 137-138) draws on the work of J. L. Austin, whose influence receives little explicit attention in the papers of this symposium, he concentrates almost exclusively on the verdictives and exercitives. That is to say, he directs himself to those speech acts involving the giving of a verdict such as a judge, jury, or umpire does; and to those which involve the exercise of powers or influence, such as ordering, directing or appointing. In a reversal of some of those Anglo-American philosophers I mentioned at the outset, he is much less interested in the speech acts which involve those, most characteristic of academic discourse, that bear on exposition, analysis and argument.¹ Almost

¹ I think these matters much more profoundly discussed by Jürgen Habermas, incontestably one of the major modern hermeneutic theorists to have re-invigorated the theory of language, society and communication, but who finds no champion in this symposium. In Habermas’ terminology, the politico-bureaucratic “system” is increasingly wrapping its tentacles around the community’s everyday “lifeworld”, that form of language which we depend on for our daily

needless to say, these last are among those tasks which students find the most difficult to handle in their various studies – which Tim Moore’s paper explores.

In a rethink of power/knowledge regimes a major radical voice has been taken up, that of Gilles Deleuze, who emphasises *difference*, as the paper by Steve Johnson makes clear. Deleuze wants to bring about the liberation of people’s “potential”, and release their creativity. The term “potential” seems to me to be a significant shift from the older term “empowerment” (which is used by De Rycker in his paper on graduate students). Empowerment, as I think Foucault himself recognised, can in practice turn out to mean no more than replacing one group’s power/knowledge regime with that of another. (This has always been a problem for ideology critique). Unlike many of the Critical Discourse Analysts I mentioned earlier, Deleuze firmly denies that anyone can know in advance what a learner’s or a society’s potential is: it is always “becoming”, as Johnson points out, or as Ballantyne says of Ricoeur is always “creative”. So the older certainties and idealisms may be losing their hold. The future is not written in advance. I, for one – and there are various papers from differing perspectives in this symposium which argue similarly – find that liberating, not to say sound historiography.

2.2.3. Linguistic determinism: System and structure

My third theme is obviously related to the second, and more subtly and importantly to the first. I pose it as a question:

How fixed are the structures of language and the discourse communities of the university? How determinative are they of students’ chances to express or articulate themselves as human agents?

Like society as a whole, as we have just seen, language and languages are systems. Systems constrain. For example, I find, on a quite fundamental level, the APA and similar “style manuals” to be inimical to more fruitful ways to write in our discipline – they are, as Bazerman (1987) pointed out long ago, a “behaviourist rhetoric”.² But to what extent do systems constrain? Here we are in the terrain of what linguists call “linguistic relativism”, arising from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about the connection between language and thought (though it was first talked about by the Stoics, and in the 18th century by von Humboldt and Rousseau – both, on certain interpretations, “counter-Enlightenment” theorists of the kind I shall briefly explore below). There are fundamentally two positions one can take – “strong relativism”, which says language determines thought; or “weak relativism”, which says that language influences thought but does not wholly determine it. A consensus seems to have emerged that weak relativism is

social interactions – perhaps a very abstruse, Germanic re-incarnation of George Orwell – something to be feared rather than accommodated, as in Bourdieu. The application to the universities (and primary and secondary schools) is obvious, as we shall see later on with respect to Max Weber. But Habermas is more than just a sociologist. His *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1981) displays an eclectic – that is to say, Continental European and Anglo-American – fusion of sources on language, society and thought. Some of his views on the theory of language have similar roots to those of Wittgenstein, Austin and Halliday, not to speak of Gadamer or Derrida, with the latter two of whom he has had vigorous disputations. Those who think Gadamer’s hermeneutics somewhat lacking in a critical-theoretic social edge – too much *practice* and not enough *praxis* – tend to find it in Habermas. That is partly because, paradoxically perhaps, Habermas wants to save what he perceives to be the brighter scientific and democratic, rather than the dark technological and totalitarian, side of the Enlightenment experiment. Whether that is possible remains to be seen.

² It is noticeable that the rhetorical structure of the papers before us varies considerably: we are still feeling our way towards what an ALL “genre” might look like as a discipline, particularly with respect to the claims on our attention of theory and practice, critique and research. It is not that I think there should be a fixed rhetorical “method” – far from it, as my impatience with APA attests. A number of the papers before us are explicatory; and some quite anecdotal, at least in part. The former is one which the APA style encourages; the latter is one which an “ALL style” might want to debate whether it wishes to encourage. Nevertheless, it might be possible to look forward to a time when a constructive rhetorical dialogue can emerge, either, in the first instance, within the broad themes of this symposium I have tried to identify, or well outside them as the situation unfolds. Perhaps softening the scientific “research” APA style with its emphasis on “results” and “conclusions” (which the abandonment of psychological learning theories in this symposium might imply) in a movement towards that of the more discursive Modern Language Association, MLA, style or some other would be one small step. Not any or every way of constructing our writing about our subject matter is likely to be equally efficacious.

the only viable answer, if only because strong relativism implies that translation between languages and between systems of thought would not just be difficult but impossible. So, while language systems do constrain they can also be changed through human interaction with other people and, just as importantly, the objective world which our students study. The genres about which we hear so much must in principle be open to change, if only for the most part incrementally.

Sometimes a major genre shift does take place – what Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970) called in science a “paradigm shift” in response to a growing realisation that the ways of thinking and writing about a body of knowledge just aren’t solving the problems anymore. I take it that Bitzer’s notion of “exigence”, discussed in Anthony Paré’s paper, describes a similar situation – a defect or irritant in the current genre is realised to be “other than it should be” and cries out to be rhetorically responded to. These changes will usually, though not always, come from younger academics, the “young Turks”, who have worked out ways of applying pressure, intellectual and practical, on the professors and other gate-keepers such as journal editors. Karl Maton (2000) has written a fascinating account of how the field of Cultural Studies seems to find ways of regularly subverting its own genres, “stabilised-for-now” as Paré refers to them, from the bottom up. This is a good example of genre shift in recent times, where, as Paré emphasises, the traditional notion of a passive “audience” is being replaced by that of an active community or, in the plural, “discourse communities” in which the meaning of a text or genre has to be negotiated – as happens when a doctoral student such as Bronwyn James’s Clara finds herself having to “navigate” between conflicting pressures, external and internal, on what she should be writing; or when Ballantyne’s undergraduates have to come to terms with the differing perspectives of sociology and psychology when tackling similar issues, and in so doing learn the limits of “innovation”. Even so, students, as apprentice members of a community, but also as individual human agents, need no longer to be regarded as a long-suffering audience. They become, or should be encouraged to become, active participants in an “exigent” rhetorical situation.

Tim Moore’s paper points out the slipperiness of the word “critical” as it is used in academe: it means different things to different discourse communities or disciplines, sometimes, as he says, “if not exactly contradictory, at least incompatible in some way”. It is certainly the case that different disciplines – and indeed different schools of thought within disciplines – have fashioned different rhetorics which answer to their particular problem situations, and need to be learned and followed. Such variability is not to be deplored and ironed out (as positivists and behaviourist “skills” counsellors used to think) but responded to. A major part of that response is to point up the differences to academic staff, to be incorporated into their teaching. One of our own responses is to read the work and study the rhetoric not only of the grand theorists who are largely the subjects of the present symposium but also of those more localised theorists and everyday disciplinary practitioners in order to make ourselves more sensitive to these rhetorics. Thus do we find ways of using these insights in our dealings with students and with other academic staff.

If we are in a position to deal with a limited range of disciplines in a faculty or school, we can try either to marry or to confront our own theoretical interests with those disciplines with which we deal. This can be long, hard work. For example, the old positivist ban on using “I” in academic writing still seems to survive the demise of positivism itself in many disciplines. Still, by offering our own papers in regular departmental seminar programs in order to make explicit what for many academics may remain tacit (part of their intellectual furniture), and by engaging in cooperative teaching we can begin to make some difference. We need therefore to adapt our own rhetoric, without losing our own hard-won voice, to persuading the particular audience at hand – as the ancients such as Cicero and Quintilian taught us to do. On the evidence of this symposium and elsewhere there is plenty of such work now going on. As for anything further, that, it seems to me, must be up to any alliance of students and/or staff that we can find.

3. Future

It has often been suggested that theoretical developments go through a cycle. The cycle begins with everybody, more or less, agreeing that a certain “paradigm”, to use Kuhn’s (1962/1970) scientific term, is the only story in town until something happens to bring it into question. Then confusion reigns. There is a multiplicity of apparently conflicting theories until eventually in all this talk people begin to realise that they have more in common than they had at first thought. I have noted *en passant* a number of the papers before us which begin from quite different theoretical starting-points and use rather different language, but nevertheless arrive at the open-ended notion of “becoming” in dealing with the objective world we and our students have to try to understand.

Either theories do eventually come together, more or less for the time being, or some just fall by the wayside. The latter event is not always for just cause. Giambattista Vico (1709/1965) in the early 18th century defended in *On the Study Methods of Our Time* a comprehensive rhetoric against the Enlightenment’s figurehead René Descartes, and, more specifically, Petrus Ramus’ logicist and grammaticist dialectics which severed rhetoric from the curriculum. Vico lost this battle of ideas. His approach drew very few murmurs until the 20th century (see Taylor, 2009, p. 397 for a slightly expanded account of Ramus; and Schaeffer, 1990, pp. 31-32, for a more comprehensive discussion). Vico’s programme has now been given considerable intellectual substance, implicitly by many of the theorists the present symposium explores. But it was made quite explicit by the historiographer R. G. Collingwood, Gadamer, Richard Rorty and by the humanist luminary Isaiah Berlin (1979), who in *Against the Current* and other writings dubbed Vico’s almost forgotten legacy the “Counter-Enlightenment”.³ So it’s necessary to take the long view.

A jungle of theories might be an initial impression of this symposium. Yes, many theorists and theories are presented to us. For all this diversity, I discern the emergence of a few underlying attitudes to these theories. First there is the notion of “doing” academic work rather than acquiring knowledge, as Judith Butler’s and others’ performative analyses emphasise, consonant it seems with J. L. Austin. Second, there is the idea of “becoming” (rather than being), noted above. There are at least two others – the primacy of language and the centrality of practice. We must not forget that we have nailed our colours to a mast which declares we need a theory of *language* and learning – in that order – not just society or economics or politics or other things, into which these latter considerations obviously need to be incorporated. Hence my introductory epigraph from George Steiner. As Gadamer (1975/1989) says, it is only because of language that humankind “has a *world* [as opposed merely to an environment or habitat] at all” (p. 443). I noted earlier in the case of Bourdieu that his remarks on language and knowledge, while certainly sociologically stimulating, are actually rather thin. So when it comes to the crunch, the focus must be on the theory of language and learning in the practical (individual, cultural, socio-economic, and epistemic) circumstances in which we find ourselves, circumstances which emphasise the languages and ways of coming to know and understand in the disciplines, rather than making do with generic observations about learners and learning, as so many of the papers in this symposium have argued. The flow is not just one way. To stand the subtitle of this symposium on its head, we need also to examine the contribution of academic language and learning practice to theory. This is what Kate Chanock’s carefully argued paper is all about. Better still is to find ways in which theory and practice in Gadamer’s word “codetermine” one another from the outset. Tim Moore’s (2011) work on critical thinking, reported here, and Glenda Ballantyne’s on hermeneutics in the teaching of sociology illustrate such codetermination clearly.

³ Collingwood (1946, p. 69), in discussing Vico’s theories of civilisation, makes the comment that Vico believed “the learner invariably learns not what [another civilisation] has to teach but only the lessons for which [the learner’s] previous historical development has prepared it”. This looks to me on the grand scale just what such theorists as Vygotsky, Ricoeur and Deleuze are saying about individuals.

The theory of practice, though that very term might seem to be something of an oxymoron to some, is an age-old idea. It will be found in Aristotle's *Ethics*. There is scepticism, however. It has been suggested that a theory of practice is too general, a cover-all, superficial term "without theoretical coherence", as one social scientist put it. I do not foresee a time when all theoretical variations will be collapsed into something uniform, and nor should they. Theoretical coherence is an Enlightenment aim which is not necessarily attainable or even worth pursuing. If there is one insight from science which we ought always to keep in the back of our minds, it comes from the mathematician Kurt Gödel. It is called the Incompleteness Theorem: any formal system of theories, rules, procedures, practices, functions, genres – whatever you want to call them – which is wholly consistent (or coherent) *must* be incomplete; and the complement, any system or theory which *is* complete must be internally inconsistent. (For this reason, even physicists have struggled and failed to find their holy grail, an internally consistent "theory of everything"). I believe it better to aim towards a somewhat messy (or perhaps even Deleuzian "rhizomic") comprehensiveness in which as many bases as possible are covered. It is our practical experience which leads us to make *judgements* about what is important and relevant, rather than an obsession with a tidy theoretical consistency. With respect to such judgements, many theorists from both Kant and Hume (straddling the rationalist-empiricist divide) to Kuhn to Rorty to Deleuze are adamant that there is no meta-theory, algorithm, Archimedean neutral standpoint or transcendent system which enables us unerringly to get them right.

We don't want to return to a world dominated by an all-pervasive outlook which is unthinkingly assumed to be the natural order of things. I trust it will never happen again, though we must be vigilant. The pressures towards uniformity, towards what Bronwyn James calls "a simplistic and reductionist stance", particularly from government and from university administrations, have not gone away. A number of papers in this symposium (for example, Paré, James, Moore, Ballantyne) tackle this question, providing good academic and pedagogical reasons for resisting these pressures. The "iron cage" of a rationalising, technologising bureaucracy that Max Weber warned about more than a century ago shows few signs of rusting over these many years; rather, to the extent that it has rusted, it is being refashioned around us in hardened steel.

In casting my eye over the papers of this symposium I hope I have made a few observations, even found a few truths "as happy prologues to the swelling act" of the symposium theme. It is, of course, only in the papers themselves, as each of us reads them, that their bounty will be found. I am sure there is plenty I have either missed or misunderstood. But I trust I have provided something of an initial guide. I think it incumbent on all of us to read and constantly re-interpret these papers and the intellectual history behind them. This is not only because they might be relevant to our own work, but because we need a rich background of theoretical ideas in order to help us articulate the most satisfying nature of that work. We must always try to find the time and make the effort to critique the theoretical present and the past in order to inspire the future.

But given what I have said above about the nature of theory and the present bureaucratic constraints upon and within the university, I do not think that we shall achieve our aim by simply paraphrasing the fashionable theories of the moment and talking to one another about them, as important as that is in symposia of this kind and in contributions to the pages of JALL or similar journals. These are, of course, necessary testing grounds – all disciplines have them. But for us they are insufficient. I do not see Academic Language and Learning prospering by looking in on itself and developing a theoretical sophistication that is satisfying only to its daily practitioners. It cannot stand as an academic discipline in its own right – at least not in Australia, or perhaps anywhere outside North America, which has a longstanding model that many of us in this country have rejected on both theoretical and practical grounds.

The first task is to find allies amongst our peers in the disciplines in order to earn with them the theoretical and practical *authority* (rather than a fickle "power" bestowed and withdrawn from above) to speak of what we know best in concert with what they know best. We need to teach jointly and to publish either jointly or alone in those pedagogical journals read by the discipline specialists, of which there are many more nowadays than used to be the case. In looking inward we help cover and dress our own theoretical skins; but we should also be looking outward to

expose ourselves to the languages, the rhetorics and the theories which are the common “habillements” of perhaps unfamiliar ways of thinking and writing; not only in the university but in society at large, as the occasion offers. (Those working in the science disciplines have a particularly taxing task – to help deconstruct what is often loosely referred to as “the scientific mind”). In short, we need to reverse some four hundred years of history in order to restore the distinguished position the *rhetor* once enjoyed in the pre-Enlightenment university – Cicero’s, Quintilian’s and Vico’s heritage reinvented and rethought for our times. That is the ultimate task. The challenge is not what Thomas Kuhn (1962/1970) designated “normal science”. Rather, what the American philosopher Richard Rorty (1979, p. 360) calls *edifying discourse* “is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings”. On the evidence of the present symposium I can see important elements of this abnormal, edifying discourse beginning to “happen”.

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