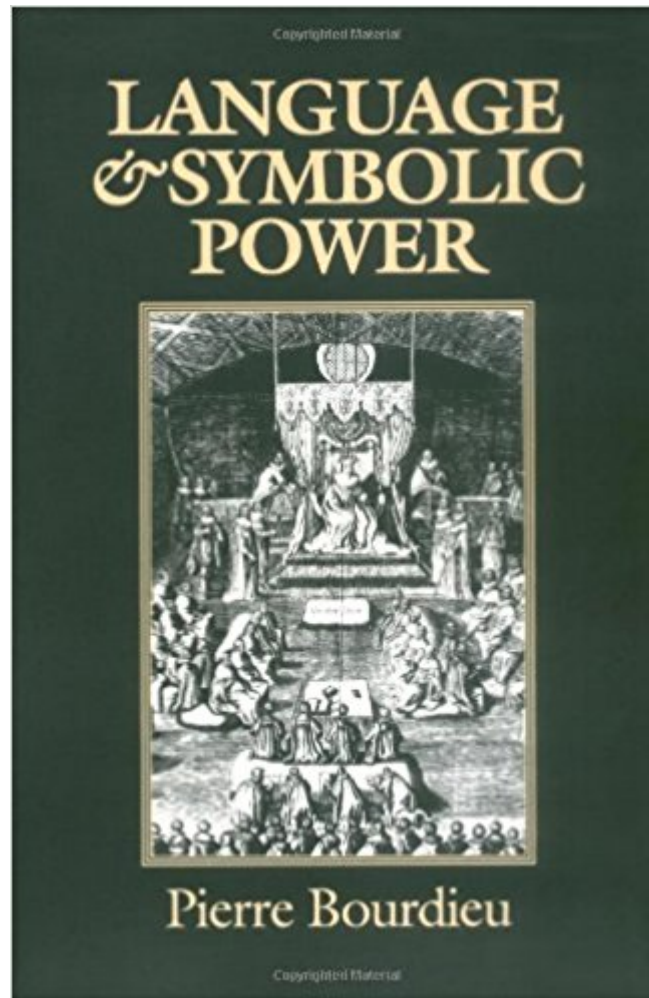




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Language And Symbolic Power



Synopsis

This volume brings together Pierre Bourdieu's highly original writings on language and on the relations among language, power, and politics. Bourdieu develops a forceful critique of traditional approaches to language, including the linguistic theories of Saussure and Chomsky and the theory of speech-acts elaborated by Austin and others. He argues that language should be viewed not only as a means of communication but also as a medium of power through which individuals pursue their own interests and display their practical competence. Drawing on the concepts that are part of his distinctive theoretical approach, Bourdieu maintains that linguistic utterances or expressions can be understood as the product of the relation between a linguistic market and a linguistic habitus. When individuals use language in particular ways, they deploy their accumulated linguistic resources and implicitly adapt their words to the demands of the social field or market that is their audience. Hence every linguistic interaction, however personal or insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce. Bourdieu's account sheds fresh light on the ways in which linguistic usage varies according to considerations such as class and gender. It also opens up a new approach to the ways in which language is used in the domain of politics. For politics is, among other things, the arena in which words are deeds and the symbolic character of power is at stake. This volume, by one of the leading social thinkers in the world today, represents a major contribution to the study of language and power. It will be of interest to students throughout the social sciences and humanities, especially in sociology, politics, anthropology, linguistics, and literature.

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Customer Reviews

This book will most likely not appeal to US students in linguistics. Because Bourdieu deals with rather abstract concepts which cover a lot of social ground (e.g., symbolic, cultural, economic capital, field, etc.) and not enough linguistic ground, some linguists will have trouble applying concepts to the actual production of speech at the phonological, morpho-syntactic, pragmatic and discourse level. He never really deals with actual production of language by speakers, so it creates a lot of work for the reader to fill in the details of what, for example, an actual linguistic habitus might look like, what its dispositions might be, and how they might be coordinated in their habitus set. However, unlike many US linguists, he assumes there is an empirical connection between language use and larger social domains; furthermore, he is able to explain the way power often operates through exclusion and devaluation (dialect analysis). One of the less abstract chapters, the chapter on Searle, is excellent. Bourdieu accurately locates the efficacy of the speech act, not in the functional form of the utterances, such as christening, ordering, requesting, etc., but in the recognition by all involved that the agent who produces the speech act has the right to be obeyed and that the material circumstances of the speech act are appropriate. Mary Jane down the street and the mayor of NY may christen a new warship using the exact same functional words, but the power of those words depends on our recognition that, in this example, the mayor, not just anybody, has the authority to name. Bourdieu masterfully argues this point, and I would recommend reading that chapter first for its accessibility and accuracy in pointing out that the extra-linguistic is as much linguistic as the linguistic.

Bourdieu's point is not to explore linguistics but rather to explore the larger impact that language has on shaping symbols, meaning and power in the social context. Symbolic interactionists and conflict theorists would probably find this book to be a great read.

Pierre Bourdieu is mind-blowing in all of his writing, but this is easily one of my favorites! The title gives you a good indication about the content of the book. If you purchase it, you won't be able to put it down before you finish reading it. I confess that even after that I re-read it several times. Yes, it's THAT good!

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