

In what ways can language be used to exercise power and to create or maintain social hierarchies? Discuss with reference to two topics or thinkers in the course.

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Language underpins social interactions and therefore embodies more than the mere conveyance of a message. This essay will argue that the use of language, in addition to interactions with it, can be considered a means of exercising power. By extension, language can contribute to the establishment, consolidation and subversion of social hierarchies.

In the context of this response, 'power' will refer to the assertion of superiority by particular groups upon those relegated to the status of inferiority. The first section of this response will supplement the aforesaid argument with a discussion of 'Orientalism' as a means of studying language while debasing the Semitic languages and their speakers. This will be followed by an analysis of the influence of Orientalist studies upon Nazi race ideology and the colonial language policies of Western imperialist powers. The second section will detail the language practices and policies of Australia's colonial period and the early-mid twentieth century, with reference to elocution as social capital and a means of maintaining social hierarchies. In addition, this essay will detail the establishment of a distinctly Australian vernacular as a means of defying the cultural dominance, and thus power, of the British empire.

'Orientalism', for Edward Said, refers to the Western practice of studying the Middle East, with a tendency of debasing Eastern cultures. With reference to Ernest Renan in particular, Said (1979) claims that Orientalism is derived from philology and can thus

be considered a demonstration of the exertion of power through the study of language. According to Said (1979, p.132), Renan's philology, understood to be historical linguistics, had been imbued with notions of modernity and European superiority, underscoring its relation to the dynamics of cultural power. Likewise, Bolton and Hutton (2000) maintain that Western language theorists, including the philologists Said critiques, have had a profound impact on the construction of identities outside of Europe, since the East had been depicted as foreign and therefore inferior. Thus, these writers suggested that the philologists and other Orientalist scholars had contributed to the power imbalances that favour Europe and its peoples.

Orientalism can therefore be considered a means of consolidating the cultural dominance of the Western sphere. Renan completed his studies on the basis of binaries and apparently categorised languages – and by extension, groups of people – into classes of superior and inferior (Said, 1979). Indeed, with his Eurocentric tendency to degrade Semitic languages and their speakers through metaphor and imagery such as “rabid monotheists” (Said, 1979, p.142), Renan had accentuated the depiction of the Semitic people as lesser beings. Moreover, Said claims that Renan asserted the Semitic languages had been “inorganic” and “ossified” (Said, 1979, p.143) and further argued that the Semitic is “not a live language”, which meant that the Semitic people were not living beings (Said, 1979, p.142). In doing so, Renan validated the European dominance over the Semitic people. Thus Renan had essentially, through his study of language, reinforced the constructs of European superiority.

Interestingly, Said's scathing critique of Renan and Orientalism can be considered a means of undermining the social distinctions and inequalities Renan had helped to

maintain. Indeed, Said (1979) positions his readers to scrutinise the philologist and his preoccupations with asserting the objective and scientific nature of his studies. Perhaps comically, Said makes repeated reference to Renan's "laboratory", in mockery of this assertion, and seems to belittle what he considers to be Renan's insistence on the position he held within philology (Said, 1979, p.134). Notably, Said derides Renan's conclusions in relation to the Semitic language's lack of 'regenerative' characteristics, implying such assumptions had been made in Renan's attempt to establish himself in academia. But most predominantly, Said notes that "Indo-European language and culture are alive and organic because of the laboratory" (1979, p.145). Thereby, Said appears to suggest that such ideas are merely the product of theorists such as Renan and lack substantiation. In doing so, Said perhaps harnesses the medium of language to oppose and destabilise the Eurocentric power dynamics created and perpetuated by 'Orientalists'.

Hutton (1999) maintains that Orientalism is essentially linked to Nazi race theory, highlighting the potential of language studies to influence the way power is exercised. As they had claimed to scientifically classify human groups (Bolton & Hutton, 2000), Orientalists accentuated claims of an Indo-European or Aryan supremacy (Hutton, 1999). In particular, Orientalism and linguistics gave rise to the idea of the original or prime Indo-European race, while validating the conception that peoples, bound by different languages, varied to the extent of having different world views. Hutton (1999) claims these ideas were exploited in Nazi ideology as a heightened form of patriotism and colonialism, underscoring the relationship between language studies and the imposition of power.

According to Bolton and Hutton (2000), the ideas of human classification, derived from the work of Orientalist linguists, can be considered foundational for colonial language policies. Imbued with the notion of Western supremacy, imperialist agendas were often justified by the concept of ‘colonial modernity’. This refers to the European assumption that importing Western technology, ideology and language into regions such as Africa and Asia could be fruitful for the colonised regions. Bolton and Hutton (2000) point out that historically, Western modes of modernising foreign cultures by assimilating them with the European had often conflicted with beliefs surrounding language in Asia particularly. For instance, Bolton and Hutton (2000) note that Western missionaries in China advocated the abolition of Chinese characters and the use of Romanised writing systems instead. In this case, Bolton and Hutton underscore the cultural infiltration of China by European imperialists who had sought to strengthen the dominance and supremacy of Western cultures. Likewise, Sarangi (2017) notes that in India there are tensions regarding the use of English as an official and/or national language, as opposed to the local Hindi language. Both examples elucidate the pervasiveness of Western culture, therefore exemplifying the potential of language policies to serve as a means of maintaining the superiority of Western powers.

Aside from the study of language as a means of maintaining power dynamics, the elocution movement imported into Australia made language serve as an indicator of one’s social status. Damousi (2010, p.13) defines elocution as “the science of delivery, voice and gesture”, or a habit of ensuring precision and effectiveness in communicative command. Elocution had become popular due to the variations in language use across Britain, with each form being tied to a particular group in society. Elocution had been essentially endorsed as the correct usage of English and was sought after by the middle

and upper classes in an attempt to distinguish themselves within the upper echelons of society (Damousi, 2010). Since elocution manuals and lessons were mostly accessible for the economically comfortable, language had been used to affirm or emphasise social standing and thus enhance social divisions.

Calls for the spread of elocution included those concerned with enhancing the British culture with the intent of consolidating the empire's cultural dominance of the world. According to Damousi (2010), enhancing the speech of individuals had been viewed as a means of ushering in new forms of social interaction, characterised by cultivation and refinement. Heightening the levels of sophistication in English speech, it was theorised that social harmony could be fostered and moral degeneration prevented. By increasing the quality of speech and thus popularising the art of oratory, it was believed that Britain could be elevated as an even stronger world power, with greater capacity to dominate culturally (Damousi, 2010). With the English vernacular raised to a higher standard, its supremacy and superiority could then be asserted, justifying endeavours to eradicate unfavourable variations of speech and, by extension, assimilate different speakers of the language into the folds of the idealised English culture. This constitutes the attempt of the British empire to enhance English oratory and speech in order to warrant the British dominance of the world.

According to Damousi (2010), elocution became a tool for cultural assimilation in Australia, with the desired effect of silencing the Indigenous population and erasing their primitive cultures. Intending to 'civilise' the Aboriginal peoples, colonisers impressed upon them the supremacy of English, in order to obliterate their supposedly inferior languages (Damousi, 2010). Disempowered, subjugated and marginalised

within a society they lacked the language capacity to navigate, the original inhabitants of Australia were rendered voiceless and unable to express themselves. Irrespective of the alleged intentions to inculcate the English language to enlighten the Indigenous communities and share the civility of European culture (Damousi, 2010), language deprivation and imposition ultimately became a language policy imbued with the imperialist exercises of power by the British colonisers.

In early Australia, elocution had been a tool for elevation within the public sphere and was therefore effective in improving an individual's social standing. In this way, competence in elocution served as social capital and as a vehicle through which a person could gain more power for themselves. Damousi (2010) notes that during the establishment of the Australian colonies, immigrants from Britain sought to re-distinguish themselves and had considered the enhancement of manners and overall civility in speech to be effective in doing so. Damousi (2010) further underscores the recognition of elocution, and the precise use of the English language, as pivotal in being assertive and commanding. Thus, through elocution, an increase in power could be realised. In accordance with this notion, through the acquisition of eloquent speech, a greater conviction in public speaking could be achieved. According to Andrew Watson (as cited in Damousi, 2010), attaining clearness in voice and intention could improve the perception of an individual before a wide audience. Thus, elocution can be considered a forum through which language use can grant an individual greater attention, support and likewise, power within the public sphere.

British elocution began to lose its support among Australians, who came to see the imitation of British speech as a hindrance to the establishment of a distinctly Australian

voice and thus identity. That is, Australians began to defy the cultural dominance of Britain, thereby challenging the social hierarchy within which the British had been supreme. Damousi (2010) notes that Australians indeed began to champion Australian speech so as to consolidate the nation's independence from the British Empire. *The Sun* articulates, "[purely Australian speech] is not a debasement, there is no cause of regret. Rather it is a reason of pride. Mimicry is a confession of inferiority" (cited in Damousi, 2010, p.223). This underscores the empowerment of Australians to resist the cultural dominance of Britain and embrace its own distinction. Likewise, A. G. Mitchell (cited in Damousi, 2010, p.258) maintained that the Australian vernacular had not been inferior to the British and was thus, worthy of being embraced and heralded. Thus, Mitchell had also discouraged imitation of British speech, unapologetically undermining the notion of British superiority. In accordance, the *ABC Weekly* (cited in Damousi, 2010, p.248) had noted that imitating the British speech would only cheapen the Australian vernacular and render it one of little value to its speakers. Therefore, Australia had essentially subverted the power dynamics Britain had sought to consolidate when imposing elocution as the proper form of using the English language.

To further consolidate Australia's independence, the distinctly Australian vernacular was also championed within the mass media. According to Damousi (2010), the elocution that had once been effective in captivating audiences and therefore exercising power had been undesirable to radio audiences. In particular, the 'proper use' of English was considered overly mechanical and lacking in the colloquial and emotive appeal of radio commentators who had used the Australian pronunciation. In the words of Beatrice Tildesley (cited in Damousi, 2010, p.249), Australian audiences disliked the "Oxford bleat" of British imitators, underscoring the newly developed preference for the

Australian voice. All in all, this rejection of the British vernacular and concept of elocution, can be considered a microcosm of the nation's defiance of the social hierarchies the British empire had created and maintained.

Thus, language can be seen as a forum through which power can be exercised. Whether through interactions with language, such as the way in which it is studied, or the way language is used or imposed upon others, power dynamics and thus hierarchies can be established or maintained. However, language can also serve as a means of defying existing power structures and destabilising social hierarchies, as has been demonstrated in the analysis of Said's critique of Orientalists and the development of the Australian vernacular.

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