



## The Study of Writing and the Study of Language

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constrained as all the authors we had read. We had to limit our claims, pull down our vanity. We had to place ourselves in history. It was a sobering thing to do.

Placing oneself in history is always a sobering thing to do. Seeing one's world, one's colleagues, one's self and struggles as the culmination of a complex series of forces most people do not imagine is not always happy knowledge. But it is, I would argue, finally liberating knowledge and a necessary precondition for wisdom in our choices. Rhetorical history goes back 2500 years, and composition studies has only gotten its name in the last decade. We are the oldest and the newest of the humanities, and it behooves us to learn all we can from where we have been in order to light the way to where we are going. That is why I am an historian.

### **The Study of Writing and the Study of Language**

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My title contains a contradiction because the study of writing must be at some level the study of written language. Yet some recent overviews of the field suggest otherwise. One apparently noncontroversial aspect of Stephen North's controversial survey of writing research, *The Making of Knowledge in Composition*, is the omission of linguistics as an important disciplinary subfield. North does not even include *language* or *linguistics* in the index. Another classification of theorists in rhetoric and researchers in writing presented by Patricia Bizzell at the 1987 meeting of CCCC also failed to mention linguistics as a major line of disciplinary inquiry. One could argue that North and Bizzell erred either by leaving out linguistics or by subsuming it under a broader heading. To argue the point, one could assemble an impressive group of North American researchers of written language who in the 1980s applied principles and analytical tools developed by linguists. To name a few, these researchers include Robert de Beaugrande, Deborah Brandt, Linda Brodkey, Barbara Couture, George Dillon, John Mellon, Martin Nystrand, Victor Raskin and Irwin Weiser, William Vande Kopple, Joseph Williams, and Stephen Witte. Nonetheless, one could also argue for the position implied by North's and Bizzell's classifications—that the influence of linguistics on the study and teaching of writing in North America has dwindled to such an extent that we can no longer speak of linguistics as a major contributor of ideas to research in writing. It's not so much that recent work on written language lacks

substance but more that it lacks a common direction. Researchers of written language do not share common goals and methodologies, nor use the same terms, nor recognize common research issues, nor even agree about the nature of language. In spite of the brilliance of certain individual studies, the whole adds up to considerably less than the sum of the parts.

The situation was much different in earlier decades of the CCCC. In the 1950s linguists published articles frequently in *CCC* and held major offices in the organization. In the 1960s when rhetoric and composition blossomed as a discipline, advances in rhetorical theory represented by the work of Wayne Booth, James Kinneavy, and James Moffett were paralleled by new directions in language study proposed by Alton Becker, Francis Christensen, Walker Gibson, and Kellogg Hunt. By 1965 Robert Gorrell saw English teachers' awareness of linguistics as the most important development of the first two decades of the CCCC, and Richard Young and Alton Becker proposed linguistics as the basis of a modern theory of rhetoric. Considerable work followed in the 1970s from lines of research established in the 1960s, including extensions of Christensen's ideas by Frank D'Angelo, Michael Grady, and Will Pitkin, and the work on syntactic development in relation to sentence combining by Frank O'Hare and Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg. The "Students' Right to Their Own Language" statement published in 1974 reflected a general optimism about the prospects for linguistics in the late 60s and early 70s, as if the problems of racism could be solved by decree. By 1980, however, linguistics was no longer seen as a panacea for resolving social inequities or for improving student writing. Even though there has been a substantial amount of research on written language in the 1980s from both inside and outside of composition studies, no work has inspired the enthusiasm raised by sentence combining, generative rhetoric, and the work on paragraphs in the 1960s.

What happened then to language study? The obvious answer is that it was swept away by the movement toward understanding and teaching writing as a process. The 1970s might be characterized as the decade of process, just as the 1960s might be called the decade of language study and rhetorical theory. By 1980 studies of writers' processes had clearly become ascendant over studies of writers' language. But the process movement itself does not explain why language studies declined in importance. For underlying reasons we must look to the discipline of linguistics itself. If we ask what happened within linguistics, again there is an easy answer: Noam Chomsky. Chomsky's theory of transformational-generative grammar influenced the study of language in North America as no other theory had in the past. Shortly after the publication of Chomsky's second major book in 1965, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, linguists were

either on board the fast Chomsky theoretical express or hopelessly behind on the slow, data-gathering local. For those in other disciplines interested in questions concerning language and discourse, generative grammar at first appeared to be a methodological breakthrough, a way of describing the messy data of language with orderly rules that could obtain universally. These researchers, however, soon encountered the limitations that Chomsky had been careful to anticipate. Language could be orderly only if it were idealized. If actual language was used as data, the orderliness of language predicted by generative grammar soon disintegrated. Chomsky insisted that language be viewed as abstract, formal, intuitive, and acontextual. His goal for a theory of language was describing a human's innate capacity for language, not how people actually use language. When asked what relevance the study of linguistics had for education, Chomsky answered absolutely none. Gradually, those interested in studying discourse came to heed Chomsky's warnings.

Had Chomsky's influence been restricted to language theory, linguists in North America might have remained more active in the study of writing. In some ways generative grammar turned out to be like other radical theories that for a time gain many enthusiastic supporters but quickly lose their impetus when the supporters begin to diverge into warring camps.<sup>1</sup> But in another way the generative grammar movement was different from the life of other radical theories. Generative grammar altered the disciplinary map. Before the rise of generative grammar, linguists were scattered in departments of anthropology, English, and other modern language departments. These linguists tended to share some of the interests of members of those disciplines, and the arrangement fostered interdisciplinary cooperation. The excitement that accompanied Chomsky's theory accelerated the formation and growth of separate linguistics departments committed to the theoretical study of formal structure in language. Theoretical linguists have tended to dismiss as "uninteresting" any applied questions about language, such as the educational implications of language theory. In their view, real linguists ask only "interesting" questions about abstract universals underlying language.

To blame Chomsky, however, for the decline of linguistics within compositions studies is not merely simplistic; it is wrong. The limitations of generative grammar were demonstrated early in stylistic studies. Researchers of language in written discourse did not cease working when they realized generative grammar was not useful for their purposes. Rather they encountered again and again a fundamental difficulty met by earlier linguists who, in the 1950s and 1960s, had ventured beyond the sentence. When these linguists analyzed stretches of language larger than a sentence,

they attempted to apply those criteria they had used for analyzing phonemes, morphemes, and clauses. In the tradition of American structural linguistics, they assumed that a continuum of formal correspondences exists between smaller and larger units. What many researchers in written language did not consider was that the basis of text structure might be radically different from sentence structure, that no one kind of structural description might be adequate to characterize text structure. Consequently, models of text structure based on a few patterns, such as those of paragraph theorists Christensen and Becker, at first were attractive but inevitably failed to account for a variety of distinctions that readers perceived among different texts. These models were confounded when readers encountered a paragraph where a topic sentence could not be readily identified or when readers with different levels of familiarity with the subject matter of a paragraph could assign differing interpretations of what is important.

Why these efforts have all floundered is because texts—unlike phonemes, morphemes, and clauses—are semantic rather than structural units. Semantics has been the least developed area in linguistics. American structural linguists took the advice of Leonard Bloomfield, who argued in 1933 that language can be studied scientifically only to the extent that meaning is ignored. The Chomskyan revolution did not overturn this bias from structuralism. Indeed, Chomsky has consistently argued (most recently in *The Generative Enterprise*) that linguists should not be concerned with semantics. When North American theoretical linguists brushed against semantic issues, they used the same methodology developed for structural description. Phonemes, for example, can be described in terms of their articulatory features. The English phoneme /b/ is distinguished from /p/ by vibration of the vocal cords, a feature that linguists describe as <+ voice>. The logic of distinctive features was extended to semantics. The noun *man* might be described by the following distinctive features:

MAN  
 [Noun]  
 [count]  
 (+ human)  
 (+ male)

Such an analysis, however, is not going to account for why a speaker today who begins a talk before an academic audience with the sentence *Every professor must deal with his students man to man* and continues with a pattern of male pronouns risks alienating a large segment of the audience. The defi-

ciency in formal semantics cannot be corrected by adding secondary connotative features.

The problem is one that Malinowski identified a half century ago but which most North American linguists beginning with Bloomfield have consistently neglected. Malinowski argued that the basis of language is meaning. He was convinced that language cannot be understood apart from the contexts of its use. Meaning, therefore, cannot be described adequately in terms of universal features but only in terms of specific functions in specific contexts. Meaning can never be fixed in the way that models of text structure imply, nor can hedges such as determining authorial intent provide the firm ground for building models of text structure.

Critiques of language from outside linguistics during the past two decades have questioned the foundational assumption underlying theories of hierarchical units of meaning in texts by demonstrating that texts are not containers of meaning but contingent events located in particular discourses with particular histories of social relations.<sup>2</sup> The paradox of these critiques, however, is that while they show the firm ground of linguistic formalism to be a mirage, they also make language the focus of inquiry since the “reality” of everyday life must be constructed in language. This argument is attractive to many who call themselves rhetoricians because it elevates the status of rhetoric to a master discipline by extending Aristotle’s concern of rhetoric with probable knowledge to all knowledge. (A few writing teachers must have smiled when, after demolishing the schools of recent critical theory one by one, Terry Eagleton calls for rhetorical analysis at the end of *Literary Criticism: An Introduction*.) But the hammer that smashes the notion of text as a container also falls against conventional rhetorical notions of writer/speaker and audience. The possibilities for persuasion are far different when the notions of *writer* and *audience* are reinterpreted as momentary locations among overlapping and competing discourses.

In much of the pedagogy and research on writing as process, language is still considered unproblematic, what Morgan calls the “neutral medium.” Language is the material the individual writer uses to express emotions or to convey information. In either case language is without political content. Some of the sharpest attacks on this commonsense view of language have come from feminist scholars who maintain that the possibility of nonsexist language is an illusion. Adrienne Rich writes that when women “become acutely, disturbingly aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never before collectively attempted to repossess” (247). The term *motherhood* typifies patriarchal control of language for Rich and other radical feminists. Dale Spender in *Man Made Language* argues that many women experience neither

joy nor fulfillment in motherhood and find themselves inadequate because “their meanings do not mesh with the accepted ones” (54). That *motherhood* can only be used positively reveals one way language helps to maintain unequal relations of power between men and women. Radical feminists claim that when women use male-controlled language, they either falsify their own experience or fall silent.

The critique of neutral language carries through to a questioning of what we teach in a writing class on Monday morning. If teachers suppress the struggle over meaning, they are at best naive and help conservative interests preserve the status quo. Those teachers and students of writing influenced by poststructuralist theory have in a sense come full circle, back to Gorrell’s claim that an awareness of language is perhaps the most important attribute of a successful writing teacher. But, of course, this awareness of language has undergone a revolutionary change. Given the very abstract nature of much poststructuralist theory, the writing teacher’s task of connecting theory to practice is daunting to say the least.

Up to now I have described the discipline of linguistics in North America as committed to formal linguistics. While many departments of linguistics in North America continue to ignore socially situated language, the spectrum of linguistic inquiry across disciplines and across continents has rapidly diverged during the 1970s and 1980s. Some notion of the scope of this work can be gathered by thumbing through the four-volume *Handbook of Discourse Analysis* edited by Teun van Dijk, which includes chapters on current issues in sociolinguistics, textlinguistics, pragmatics, conversational analysis, and other subfields concerned with language in society. Before trying to sort this mass of research in the hope of finding still another white horse to carry us forward, perhaps we should try to identify some of the fundamental issues for linguistics in the study of writing. Toward this end I find helpful some of the early reactions to formalism in linguistics and literary criticism, reactions that raise issues we still have not contemplated fully. I want to discuss briefly two of those reactions, those of J. R. Firth (1890-1960), the founder of the “London School” of semantically based linguistics, and M. M. Bakhtin (1895-1975), whose work in the 1920s and 1930s has enjoyed a revival among literary scholars.

Firth, in contrast to Bakhtin, remains relatively obscure in spite of his influence through his students such as M. A. K. Halliday. One of the reasons that Firth has been relegated to the family tree of linguistics is that many of his essays were first given as occasional papers, and at first glance, they read like after-dinner speeches. Within these essays, however, are passages of great brilliance, ones that offer insights about language that only recently have scholars of written discourse begun to accept. Firth maintained that

we are born individuals, but that we become persons by learning language. I will quote at length from an essay published in 1935:

Every one of us starts life with the two simple roles of sleeping and feeding; but from the time we begin to be socially active at about two months old, we gradually accumulate social roles. Throughout the period of growth we are progressively incorporated into our social organization, and the chief condition and means of that incorporation is learning to say what the other fellow expects us to say under the given circumstances. It is true that just as contexts for a word multiply indefinitely, so also situations are infinitely various. But after all, there is the routine of day and night, week, month, and year. And most of our time is spent in routine service, familial, professional, social, national. Speech is not the "boundless chaos" Johnson thought it was. For most of us the roles and lines are there, and that being so, the lines can be classified and correlated with part and also with the episodes, scenes, and acts. . . . We are born individuals. But to satisfy our needs we have to become social persons, and every social person is a bundle of roles or persona; so that the situational and linguistic categories would not be unmanageable. (28)

Firth here sounds very much like Bakhtin, who speaks of a physical birth as an animal and an historical birth as a person (Voloshinov 37), as well as Bakhtin's contemporary, Lev Vygotsky. Firth did not stop at theorizing but was equally concerned with the implications of a social view of language for systematic analysis. Firth believed there can be no one method of analysis adequate to explain meaning. In a later essay he wrote, "[t]he statement of meaning cannot be achieved by one analysis, at one level, in one fell swoop" (184). Linguistics for Firth was a set of schematic constructs for examining language events, but these constructs possessed no ontological status. In Firth's words the tools of linguistics are "just language turned back on itself" (181).

Firth's insistence on studying language as meaning in context was one of the sources of theory that eventually directed many researchers toward the study of language in situations, especially language used in conversations. Research on dialogues helped to correct the imbalance of attention to monologic texts, but at the same time it did not challenge prevailing methods of understanding written texts. The popularity of Bakhtin's work in the 1980s drew attention to intertextuality. To quote

Bakhtin, “the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language . . . , but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (294). Bakhtin’s distinct contribution, however, is his vision of the dynamism of language. Language is the battlefield of ideological struggle—the perpetual conflict between the centripetal forces of unity and the opposed centrifugal forces of disunity. Centrifugal forces produce the multiplicity of kinds of language that one finds in any community: social dialects, professional registers, slang, and so on, a situation that Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia*. Because Bakhtin valorizes centrifugal forces, his favorite metaphor for language is the cacophony of a big city street, not the orderliness of the academic lecture hall. Bakhtin’s dynamic vision of language complements Firth’s caveats about the methodology of linguistics. Bakhtin reminds us of the brittleness of static models of language communities.

While the proposals of Bakhtin and his circle were suppressed under Stalinism only to be rediscovered decades later, Firth’s belief that social interaction is embodied in language was taken up by his student, M. A. K. Halliday. In *Language as Social Semiotic*, Halliday asked questions such as how people construct social contexts for language and how they relate social contexts to language. These questions brought him to consider how people in different groups—both dialect groups and discourse communities—develop different orientations to meaning. Other linguists working in the systemic-functional school associated with Halliday pursued the political implications of these questions. In the concluding essay of the 1979 edited volume *Language and Control*, Roger Fowler and Gunther Kress fault sociolinguistics for considering the relationship between language and society as one of arbitrary correlation. Instead, they take a much more deterministic view, arguing that “[l]anguage serves to confirm and consolidate the organizations which shape it, being used to manipulate people, to establish and maintain them in economically convenient roles and statuses, to maintain the power of state agencies, corporations and other institutions” (190). They call for a “critical linguistics” capable of analyzing the “two-way relationship between language and society.”<sup>3</sup>

The East Anglian group of critical linguists—Roger Fowler, Bob Hodge, Gunther Kress, and Tony Trew—adopted a position similar to that of Whorf and Sapir that language determines thought. But instead of working across languages, they worked within English, linking language use directly to social structure and ideology. In this respect they followed not only the notion of ideology as an inverted state of consciousness in the early work of Marx but also a long tradition of accusing language of distorting reality that runs from the Old Testament to Orwell (and to our “doublespeak”

awards). All of these diverse positions assume a language of the real behind the language of the false. The East Anglian group used linguistic analysis to “unmask” ideology. They focused on the mass media for examples of how language can be used to obscure reality in the interest of those in power. They were able to show, for example, how conservative newspapers transformed events potentially disturbing to their ideology into “safe” readings. Tony Trew demonstrated how when white police indiscriminately shot black people in the former British colony, Rhodesia, the event was reported in *The Times* as an “African riot” and the blame was placed on the victims as a result of “tribalism” through a series of linguistic transformations.

This kind of analysis presumes a situation of doublespeak, a pulling the wool over the eyes of the reader, a “real” language behind the false language of ideology. The problem comes in sorting the real from the ideological. The younger Marx in *The German Ideology* theorized a “language of real life” that exists prior to distortion. The mature Marx in *Capital* saw ideology as opposed to science, and many of those influenced by Marx in the twentieth century have continued to define ideology as “unscientific.” When the concept of “scientific” becomes increasingly rigorous, however, what is considered ideological becomes more and more encompassing, leading finally to the dilemma some call Mannheim’s paradox. If a theory of ideology is universalized and “if everything we say represents interests we do not know, then how can we have a theory of ideology which is not itself ideological?” (Ricoeur 8).

One way of dealing with this paradox is to shift the ground of the debate from questions of knowledge to ones of being. Influential in the shift away from a notion of ideology as false consciousness has been the work of Louis Althusser. Althusser preserved a version of the Marxist “science versus ideology” distinction by granting relative autonomy to the ideological realm. He addressed the issue of how power is maintained without coercion. Althusser argued that institutions such as schools, families, churches, and legal systems reproduce ideologies by creating subject positions that give individuals the illusion of being the author of the ideology. Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, Althusser introduced the subjectivity into Marxist analysis. The term *subjectivity* is a pun. It has both the sense of agency (the subject of one’s destiny) and the sense of being subjected (the subject of a king). Althusser theorized that ideology creates a series of subject positions in a culture. Because we recognize these positions and fill them, Althusser understands ideology as a kind of hailing, as when a policeman shouts “Hey, you.”

Althusser's application of subjectivity has some similarities to the notion of a persona in rhetoric. Both take on particular traits in particular situations. The chief difference is that subjectivity is not a mask; it cannot be willed on and off. Just as for Firth's observation that we are born individuals but become persons when we enter language, Althusser sees individuals constructed as subjects from the time they begin to participate in a culture. I want to turn now to how we might combine analyses of subjectivity and critical linguistics to examine the writing tasks we ask our students to perform. As examples I will look at a pair of writing tasks that are common in professionally oriented college writing courses: a résumé and a letter of application for a job.

Nearly all business writing textbooks include these assignments. Malra Treece's *Communication for Business and the Professions* is typical of current textbooks written for such courses that take a rhetorical approach. The first chapter emphasizes writing with readers in mind by taking the "you-attitude," a frequent codification of this principle in business communication pedagogy. The "you-attitude" is defined as "looking at a situation from the viewpoint of the reader or listener" (21).

*Communication for Business and the Professions* devotes separate chapters to résumés and application letters. The chapter on résumés asks students ready to apply for a job to first analyze their qualifications:

When you plan a sales campaign, one of your first steps is to make a product analysis. You look at the product, test it, and compare it with competing brands. You then decide on your central theme, or the most important selling feature, also called the central selling point.

As you plan a job-seeking campaign, you make the same analysis about yourself. You analyze the "product," compare it with competing ones, and note how the product fits the market for which you are preparing your application. (241)

Later when the chapter turns specifically to writing the résumé, the author urges students to

*Present your qualifications from the standpoint of how the employer will benefit from hiring you.* To do so, emphasize your experiences that seem to be the most advantageous to the successful handling of the job. This orientation in a résumé is another application of the you-attitude. (250; emphasis in original)

The chapter concludes with several examples of résumés which suggest how students might present themselves. The first sample résumé begins:

**REBECCA S. ROSENBERG**

1472 Tutwiler Avenue

513-000-0000

Cincinnati, Ohio 45208

*Objective*

To obtain a position in Sales Training/Development in a business setting, preferably with Electronic Data Systems Corporation, and use ability to help others increase sales effectiveness through personal relationships

*Work Experience*

October, 1980-Present. Sales Representative, Checks, Inc., 417 Constitution Square, Cincinnati, Ohio 45230

Responsible for establishing and increasing sales through direct personal contact at approximately 200 banks in northern Kentucky.

Conducted and aided cross-selling and security training programs for bank personnel in more than 30 banks. Now writing training programs for all branches of Checks, Inc.

Following the chapter on writing résumés is a chapter on writing application letters. It also advises students to “Use the you-attitude in that you stress benefits for the reader” (267). Students are told to state their work experience in terms that “relate to the work for which you are applying” (267). Students are also told not to use the words *I*, *me*, and *my* to excess and to “avoid beginning several sentences with I” (267). We might sum up these chapters by describing them as conveying traditional rhetorical advice about audience and purpose.

From a critical linguistics perspective, however, we get a very different view of what the student is being urged to do. First, the language used in résumés is unusual. Agents are consistently deleted in the résumé descriptions: “Maintained power control packages; Performed and supervised

technical training of personnel; Completed the following Management Training Programs.” The awkwardness of these phrases indicates a highly stylized genre. The writer of the “Rebecca S. Rosenberg” résumé states that she has an “ability to help others increase sales effectiveness through personal relationships.” We understand her to mean something like: “Because I have sold services (the assumed product of Checks, Inc.) to people face-to-face, I have been able to show other workers how to do it as well.” Specific social actions are coded as abstract nouns such as “sales effectiveness” and “personal relationships,” and a series of actions she has performed during work is coded as an “ability.” Elsewhere in the chapter Treece suggests how most mundane kinds of work can be dressed up as valuable qualities. A job as a checker in a grocery store gives one “abilities” in “working harmoniously with other employees” and “courteously serving the customers.”

Treece presents the shift from a verbal style with agents represented in the text to an abstract nominal style with agents absent as following the “you-attitude,” the principle of writing with a reader in mind. But what reader can the writer have in mind? In most cases writers of résumés have little sense of who will read their applications nor do they know what “subtext” a particular job announcement might contain—the unarticulated part of a job description. If in most instances the writer cannot write for a specific reader, then how does the writer decide that it is better to write “Maintained power control packages” rather than “I fixed electric motors on my last job”?

If we think for a moment where language similar to the résumé phrases occurs, job advertisements immediately pop into mind. The same process of transforming specific experience into abstract qualities is often involved in writing a job description. The writer of the ad might quiz the current employee about what she does and then transform these actions into generalized nominalizations. Fixing an electric motor when it breaks becomes “Maintain power control packages” in the ad copy. Neither the writer of the ad nor the writer of the résumé can truly assume the you-attitude since neither is likely to know the other. Instead, résumés and job advertisements are examples of the “it-attitude.” Both the writer of the résumé and the writer of the ad locate themselves within the discourse of the institution. No one says “maintain power control packages” except those who write the institution’s official discourse and those seeking to identify with the institution.

When students come to me for help in writing letters of application, they often struggle much more than the task seems to require. Their problem, I think, is the one that Treece identifies. To be a successful job hunter,

Treece writes that you must analyze yourself as a “product” and “note how the product fits the market for which you are preparing your application.” Consider the beginning paragraph from a letter of application signed by “Walter W. Williams”:

A comprehensive educational program in accounting at the University of Hawaii, leading to a Bachelor of Science in Accounting degree, is an important qualification for beginning work in your firm. In addition, I offer competence, dedication, and ambition.  
(276)

“Williams” writes about himself as a degree in accounting in the first sentence. The student has turned himself into a product. In the next sentence, he adds features to the product: “competence,” “dedication,” and “ambition.” Exactly what these features refer to is not recoverable. Williams mentions no previous experience working as an accountant, so what is he “competent” to do? Likewise, to what or whom is he “dedicated?” And what is he “ambitious” to gain or achieve? The writer chose these features because they are valued in capitalist discourse. They indicate that Williams will be both suitably aggressive and, at the same time, a “team player.”

Suppressing self-reference in a letter of application, therefore, is not a matter of stylistic preference, nor is genre-specific advice ideologically innocent. Williams is subsumed by rather than the shaper of his language. In Althusser’s terms he has voluntarily assented to his subjectivity within the dominant ideology and thus has reaffirmed relations of power. By presenting himself as a commodity rather than as a person, he has not only made an initial gesture of subservience like a dog presenting its neck, but he has also signaled his willingness to continue to be subservient.

This analysis suggests how language supplies a range of positions that an individual can occupy while simultaneously denying possibilities for other ways of interpreting experience. Methodology from critical linguistics can be useful in helping to pose questions and in allowing more finely grained analyses. But the limitations of these analyses should be kept in mind. While at times features in a text point to relations of power, it is all too easy to reduce explanations to a single cause, such as the labor-capital relationship in scientific Marxism. Some critical linguists have recognized this deficiency. In his recent work, Gunther Kress rejects the notion that ideology can be “read off” directly from a text, contending that any text carries traces of different discourses and is inevitably open to varying interpretations.

When we move outside professionally oriented writing courses, discussions of subjectivity become much more complex and cannot so easily be linked to economic causes. Some of the best analyses of conflicting and contradictory subject positions have been in poststructuralist feminist scholarship. Because a woman commonly defines herself in terms of contradictory subject positions in patriarchal discourses—as a mother, sex object, and wage earner—she is made to feel inadequate. Chris Weedon writes, “As the subject of a range of conflicting discourses, she is *subjected* to their contradictions at great emotional cost” (34). Weedon goes on to argue that femininity is not an “essence” as it is claimed both in conservative sociobiology and radical feminism, but a momentary fixing of subjectivity that is discursively produced and always changing. “The important point,” Weedon says, “is to recognize the political implications of particular ways of fixing identity and meaning” (173).

Weedon’s argument suggests how a critical study of language in the teaching of writing might proceed beyond the obvious convergences of capitalism and education. A great deal of the energy in college writing instruction is still devoted to teaching writing about personal experience. Popular rhetorics continue to include chapters on autobiographical narratives, and anthologies of “good” student writing such as Coles and Vopat’s *What Makes Writing Good* and Sommers and McQuade’s *Student Writers at Work* are heavily weighted toward this genre. Most writing teachers would consider autobiographical writing assignments as politically neutral or even opposed to the capitalist discourse taught in a business writing class. After all, the “I” is not suppressed but at the center of the discourse. A particular kind of “I,” however, is privileged in this discourse—a unified, reflective, rational self that can interpret past experience in relation to the present self. For instance, the “invention” section of the chapter on “Remembering Events” in Axelrod and Cooper’s *The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing* tells students to summarize in two or three sentences the significance of a remembered event on their lives. In the commentary on the sample student essay, Axelrod and Cooper criticize the writer, Deborah Brandt, for not indicating what she learned from the experience. They speculate: “Perhaps the reason her writing lacks insight is that Brandt still does not have sufficient emotional distance to understand the experience” (44). Although Axelrod and Cooper admit that not every autobiography should end with a moral lesson, they never mention that the significance of the experience might be contradictory.

The ideology of the self as a rational and independent agent and the source of its own thoughts and language denies the possibility that meanings are produced by diffuse political interests. Contradictions then become the

fault of the individual. If an autobiographical narrative contains silences and inconsistencies, then the writer lacks “emotional distance.” If a woman finds staying home with children is less than satisfying, she is not a “good mother.” If some people are homeless, it is because they lack “individual initiative.” By establishing subject positions, ideologies provide “common sense” answers to the conflicts of daily life. But while ideologies beckon with their arrays of subject positions, they never fully succeed because they compete with each other. Ideologies are always stretched, torn, and patched because individuals are transversed by competing discourses—discourses associated with gender, class, occupation, education, ethnicity, and various subgroups. Ideologies are always involved in persuasion through their overt and covert claims that the established order is the natural order. Thus ideologies can be analyzed as rhetorical. Steiner recognizes the broad project for critical linguistics is “a way back to rhetoric, but not just to rhetoric as we have inherited it from antiquity. What we require is a rhetoric enriched by, and not separated from, the methodology of linguistics, where both logic and grammar have played an important role” (215). If the study of language is to become again important in the teaching of writing, it will be in this expanded notion of rhetoric that understands language as the site of struggle over socially produced meaning. This is what I take to be our charge, both in our scholarship and in our classes.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Newmeyer charts a decline in Chomsky’s influence reaching a nadir in 1970 at the high point of generative semantics only to recover dramatically with the introduction of government and binding theory. Another pervasive influence toward formalism in the 1980s has been the association of linguistics and artificial intelligence. The demand for increasingly sophisticated parsers has directed attention toward aspects of language most amenable to formal analysis.

<sup>2</sup>See Morgan for a lucid summary of critiques of correspondence theories of language. At the same time Chomsky was disposing of structuralism in American linguistics, another movement called “structuralism” associated with literary theory and anthropology rose in France. The latter structuralism is also called *semiology* and was led by Barthes and Levi-Strauss, who applied Saussure’s analysis of the linguistic sign to cultural analysis. Theoretical notions from French structuralism eventually came to the study of writing. See, for example, Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University,” which interprets the university as a textual construct.

<sup>3</sup>For reviews of work in critical linguistics, see Richardson and Steiner.

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