

What is symbolic power and what's in it for foreign language teachers?

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Outline

Introduction: Why focus on the symbolic – now?

1. Definitions : Symbolic power (Bourdieu), ethics/politics (Ranciere), culture (Bhabha)
2. Three aspects of symbolic power:
 - The power to represent realities . *The wolf and the lamb* (La Fontaine 1668)
 - The power to shape perceptions. *The crow and the fox* (La Fontaine 1668)
 - The power to mobilize people. *The snake* (Brown 1963)
3. Symbolic power in the digital age

Implications for foreign language educators: From *savoir dire* and *savoir faire* to *savoir penser*.

Introduction

- Motivation for learning FLs has changed: from functionality and economic capital to symbolic capital. Profit of distinction (Bourdieu 1991).
- Growing importance of perceptions, appearances, statuses and identities. Ex. "multilingualism" vs. "bilingualism" (Train & Kramsch in press)
- The internet as symbolic system whose algorithms both empower and constrain language learners (Mathias 2009, Cardon 2015, Rieffel 2014)
- General increase in "symbolic warfare" in public discourse (Brooks 2017)

In FL education/Applied Linguistics, focus on

Language ecology (Larsen-Freeman/Cameron 2008)

Multilingualism (May 2013)

Diversity vs. difference (Kramsch/Zhu Hua in press)

Intercultural citizenship (Byram et al. 2017)

Language, literacy & technology (Kern 2014)

Global digital language use (Gramling in press)

Symbolic power/symbolic violence (Zhu Hua/Kramsch 2016)

Three questions today:

1. How does language as symbolic system *represent, shape and create* social/cultural realities?
2. How is *symbolic power* exercised in the *political* construction of *culture*?
3. Why should language teachers care?

What is meant by symbolic power?

“Symbolic power – the power of constituting the given through utterances, of making people see and believe, of confirming or transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world and thus the world itself, is an almost magical power which enables one to obtain through persuasion and mobilization the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), but only if it is (mis)recognized as natural and legitimate.

What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them. And words alone cannot create this belief” (Bourdieu1991:170)”

Note: “Wem gehoert die deutsche Sprache?”

What is meant by politics?

Jacques Rancière (1998) distinguishes:

La politique: exercise of symbolic power to win elections and govern a country

Le politique: exercise of symbolic power in the life of a community and the development of political acumen or savviness

What is meant by culture?

Homi Bhabha *Location of culture* (1994)

Culture is the network of symbolic representations and practices fought over by social actors who seek to establish their legitimacy vis-a-vis others and to influence their perception and understanding of events.

Culture is always a site of struggle for symbolic power. As speakers address one another in the I-You space of communication, they create a Third Space of enunciation that gets its legitimacy from the institution that has made the exchange possible.

This Third Space locates culture in the political process of negotiation of meaning, i.e., in the exercise of symbolic power.

1. Symbolic power as the power to signify and represent symbolic reality

Louis XIV (born 1638, reigned 1643-1715)

Around 1668



In 1701



Marin, Louis. 1981. *Le portrait du roi*. Paris: Minuit

1994 *De la representation*. Paris: Seuil

To represent:

- To refer/signify
- To stand for /evoke a picture
in your mind
- To stage/portray/characterize
- To legitimize

(Hyacinthe Rigaud, Louis Roi de France et
de Navarre, 1701)



Jean de la Fontaine (1621-1695), poet at the court of Louis XIV. *Fables* (1668).

How is power represented
in *Le loup et l'agneau*?

How does brute force become
symbolic power?

What role does discourse play
in this transformation?



Gustave Dore, ~1862

Jean de la Fontaine *Le loup et l'agneau/The Wolf and the Lamb* (1668)

The strong are always the best at proving they're right

Witness the case we're now going to cite.

A Lamb was drinking at a brook

That was flowing downstream, pure and clean.

From the hills comes a Wolf in search of adventure

His sharp hunger had drawn him to the scene.

- "What makes you so bold as to muck up my beverage?"

The creature snarls in rage.

"You will pay for your impudence!"

- "Sire", the Lamb replies, "let not Your Majesty

Give in to unjust anger

But rather please consider, Sire

That I'm drinking – just look –

In the brook

Twenty feet below Your Majesty – if not more,
And therefore in no way at all

Can I be muddying Your Majesty's drink."

- "You are muddying it!" insists the cruel beast,

"And I know that last year you spoke ill of me".

- "How could I do that?" says the Lamb.

"I was not yet born. I am still suckling at my mother's breast."

- "If it wasn't you, then it was your brother. All the worse."

- "I don't have a brother." - "Then it's someone else in your clan,

For to me you are all the same – a curse,

You, your shepherds, and your dogs.

I have been told: I must take revenge."

And with that, deep into the woods,

The Wolf drags the Lamb and eats him up

Without any further judicial ado.

Marin asks: “Why does the wolf need to argue with the lamb over more than twenty lines before actually pouncing on him and devouring him? And why does the lamb go along with it”?

“Power” is force that has appropriated for itself the discourse of justice, that stands for justice and is therefore considered justified/legitimate.

Through language, force creates a world in which actions will be justified – an imaginary world, a moral world.

How does the wolf create such a world?

Prosecution discourse (requisitoire):

- He accuses the lamb of lese Majeste (use of Tu, no factual evidence)
- He accuses him of slander and “fake news”
- He diffames the family of the lamb
- He smears the whole shepherd economy
- He resorts to hearsay and self-pity (“grievance politics”), and casts the responsibility of his impending action on anonymous others

“On me l’a dit: il faut que je me venge” [I have been told (it): I must take revenge’]

Two possible meanings of the pronoun “it”:

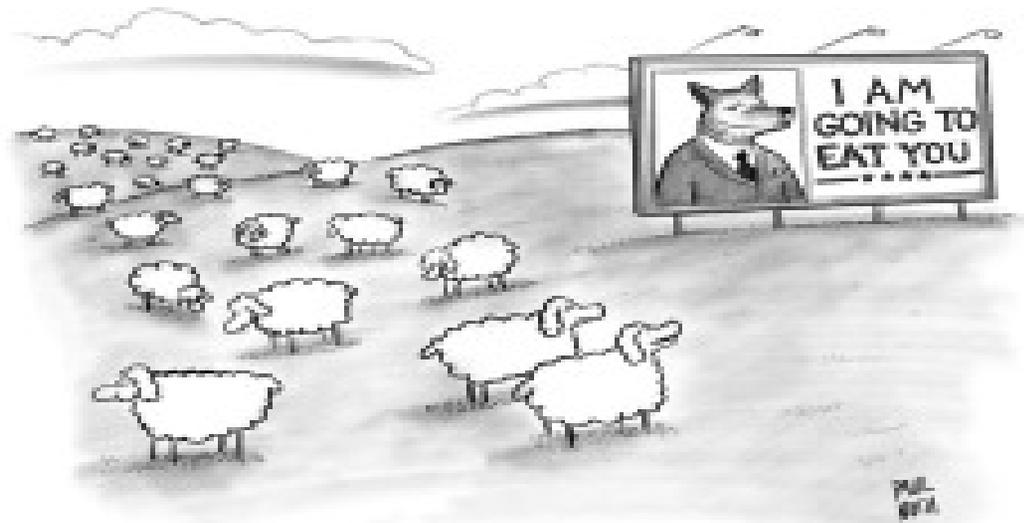
- I have been told that you are a curse, so I have to take revenge (backward anaphora)
- I’ve been told that I have to take revenge (for past wrongs) (forward anaphora)

In both cases, the actions of the strongest are justified through reference to Public Opinion and Reasons of State.

But why is the lamb portrayed this way?

- The lamb is made to be complicit of the wolf's logic
- Rationality and logic backed by institutional power > legitimate authority
- Deductive logic, axiological demonstration of the fable
- Ambiguous morality and legalistic legitimation (Lat./ex=law)
- The dilemma of the court's poet
- "All publicity is good publicity"
- "*La raison du plus fort est toujours la meilleure*" – Not might is right, but
"the reasons given by the more powerful are always the best"
- Truth is, like Humpty Dumpty will say, "a question of who is the master,
that's all." (Lewis Carroll *Behind the Looking Glass*).

Paul Noth, *New Yorker* August 18, 2016



"He tells it like it is."

Relevance to the present-day

Julie Hirschfeld Davis “Trump repeats false claims about trade with Canada.”
New York Times March 16, 2018, p.A4

- “ The latest instance of Mr. Trump bending the truth emerged when the president boasted about his disingenuous exchange with Mr. Trudeau at a recent fund-raising dinner for a Senate candidate in Missouri. There has been a dispute between Canada and the United States over potentially crippling duties on steel and aluminum that the president introduced last week and that have provoked equal parts anxiety, puzzlement and anger in Canada.
- “We do have a Trade Deficit with Canada, as we do with almost all countries (some of them massive)”, Mr. Trump wrote on Twitter. In an audio recording from the dinner obtained by *The Post*, Mr. Trump recounted how he pressed that point in a meeting with Mr. Trudeau even though he had “no idea” whether it was true.

We can reconstitute the exchange as:

- Trump tweets: *“We do have a Trade Deficit with Canada, as we do with almost all countries (some of them massive).”*
- Trump (telling his supporters about his encounter with Justin Trudeau):
“He said, ‘No, no, we have no trade surplus with you, we have none. Donald, please’. I said, ‘Wrong, Justin, you do’. I didn’t even know. I had no idea. I just said: ‘You’re wrong.’ You know why? Because we’re so stupid.”
- Trump tweets: *“P.M. Justin Trudeau of Canada, a very nice good-looking guy, doesn’t like saying that Canada has a Surplus vs. the U.S. (negotiating), but they do”.*

The *NY Times* comments on the event:

Mr. Trump's retelling drew rebukes from some diplomats and lawmakers who argued that **it reflected a dangerous penchant by the commander in chief to misrepresent the truth.** . During the conversation, the president said he and Mr. Trudeau had tangled repeatedly about the trade balance, with the prime minister saying, "Nope, you have no trade deficit" and Mr. Trump ultimately sending an aide to check: "Check, because I can't believe it." *The president then claimed that his contention had been validated, appearing to quote an aide he said had told him, "Well sir you're actually right. We have no deficit, but that doesn't include energy and timber. But when you do, we lose \$17 billion a year.' It's incredible."* (my emphasis)

"The president's admission that he's literally making things up while speaking face-to-face with a world leader should stop us all in our tracks," said Representative Eliot L. Engel, Democrat of New York and the ranking member of the Foreign Affairs Committee. "How can any other government – ally or adversary – have any confidence in what our president says **when he admits to lying?"**

Repeated focus of the press on “the truth”, but:

“Truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth. . . It’s not a matter of a battle ‘on behalf’ of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays” (Foucault 1980:132).

By focusing on Trump’s *misrepresentations* of the truth and his bullying practices, the press and the media might have barked up the wrong tree. The major feature of Trump’s view of symbolic power is that it is all *representation, perception and optics*. In Trump’s populist discourse the appearance of power is all.

2. Symbolic power as the power to shape perceptions

Gustave Doré



Le corbeau et le renard (the crow and the fox) by
Jean de la Fontaine (1668)

Master Crow, perched on a tree,
Held in his beak a cheese.
Master Fox, enticed by the smell,
Held forth more or less in these words:

“Hey! Good day, Sir of the Crow !
How pretty you are! How handsome you look!
To be truthful, if your song
is like your feathers,
You are the phoenix of the denizens of this wood.”

At these words, the crow was beside himself with joy;
And to show his beautiful voice,
He opened his large beak, letting fall his prey.
The fox seized it and said: "My good sir,
Learn that every flatterer
Lives at the expense of his listeners.
This lesson was well worth a cheese, no doubt."

Ashamed and embarrassed, the crow swore,
But a little too late, that he would not be taken in again.

(Martha M. Houle's translation in Marin 1988:94)

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In this exchange, symbolic power expresses itself discursively through

- the crow's vocal performance and the performative aspect of the fox's speech acts (Austin, Butler) as well as through the protagonists' observance of the cooperative principle (Grice)
- the fox's mastery of the pragmatics of flattery
- the intended illocutionary force and the perlocutionary effects of the fox's utterances

- Why did the crow not eat the cheese as soon as he had stolen it?
- Why does the crow fall for the words of the fox?
 - Fox: physical hunger, smell, cheese > words
 - Crow: symbolic hunger ,appearances, sound >class
- Punishment: moral embarrassment (*confus*) and social shame (*honteux*).
- Winners are those who, like the fox, can play the game of self-promotion while ridiculing the game itself (=cunning)

Discourse of flattery as symbolic violence:

The fox as sycophantic

The crow as narcissistic

Both display a certain symbolic competence adapted to the situation and the general cultural conditions (political power and its ambiguity; eulogy and parody of eulogy).

La Fontaine in the Third Space of enunciation

Relevance to the present day

In Cabinet meeting, Pence praises Trump once every 12 seconds for three minutes straight

Vice President Pence thanked President Trump for "fighting for the forgotten men and women of America" in the GOP tax plan. (*The Washington Post* Dec.20, 2017)



- “Thank you for seeing, through the course of this year, an agenda that truly is restoring this country.”
- “You've restored American credibility on the world stage.”
- “You've signed more bills rolling back federal red tape than any president in American history.”
- “You've unleashed American energy.”
- “You've spurred an optimism in this country that's setting records.”
- “You promised the American people in that campaign a year ago that you would deliver historic tax cuts, and it would be a 'middle-class miracle.' And in just a short period of time, that promise will be fulfilled.”
- “I'm deeply humbled, as your vice president, to be able to be here.”
- “Because of your leadership, Mr. President, and because of the strong support of the leadership in the Congress of the United States, you're delivering on that middle-class miracle.”
- “You got the Congress to do, with tax cuts for working families and American businesses, what they haven't been able to do for 31 years.”
- “And you got Congress to do what they couldn't do for seven years, in repealing the individual mandate in Obamacare.”
- “Mostly, Mr. President, I'll end where I began and just tell you, I want to thank you, Mr. President. I want to thank you for speaking on behalf of and fighting every day for the forgotten men and women of America.”
- “Because of your determination, because of your leadership, the forgotten men and women of America are forgotten no more. And we are making America great again.”

- Pence paused from praising Trump only briefly to also praise the other people seated around the table. **But in doing so, he made clear that it was because Trump would want him to — and that these were members of a team that Trump was savvy enough to have assembled.**
- **“I know you would have me also acknowledge the people around this table, Mr. President,” Pence said, calling them “your outstanding team” and “your great legislative team.”**
- Then he got back to the most important bit of business: praising Trump more directly.

Note the importance of the third party in any exercise of symbolic power:

- The schooled reader as recipient of the fables' moral message
- The wolf and the fox speaking to a literate readership (hurled speech)
- Trump's cabinet speaking to third party before the cameras

3. Symbolic power as the power to make meaning and to mobilize people to action

Oscar Brown Jr (1926-2005), African American singer, composer, actor, and civil rights activist, for a time member of the Communist party and active in the Black Power movement. This album (1963) contains the popular song “The Snake” performed in 1968

by Al Wilson, another African-American singer from Mississippi.



The snake by Oscar Brown Jr. (1963)

On her way to work one morning
down the path alongside the lake
A tenderhearted woman
saw a poor half-frozen snake.

His pretty colored skin
had been all frosted with the dew
“Oh well,” she cried, “I’ll take you in
and I’ll take care of you”

“Take me in oh tender woman
Take me in, for heaven’s sake
Take me in oh tender woman,”
Sighed the snake

She wrapped him up all cozy
in a comforter of silk
And then laid him by the fireside
with some honey and some milk.

Now she hurried home from work that night;
as soon as she arrived
She found that pretty snake she'd taken in
had been revived

“Now she clutched him to her bosom,
“You’re so beautiful,” she cried
“But if I hadn’t brought you in
by now you might have died”

Now she stroked his pretty skin
and then she kissed and held him tight
But instead of saying thanks,
that snake gave her a vicious bite

“I saved you,” cried that woman,
and you’ve bit me even, why?
You know your bite is poisonous
and now I’m going to die”

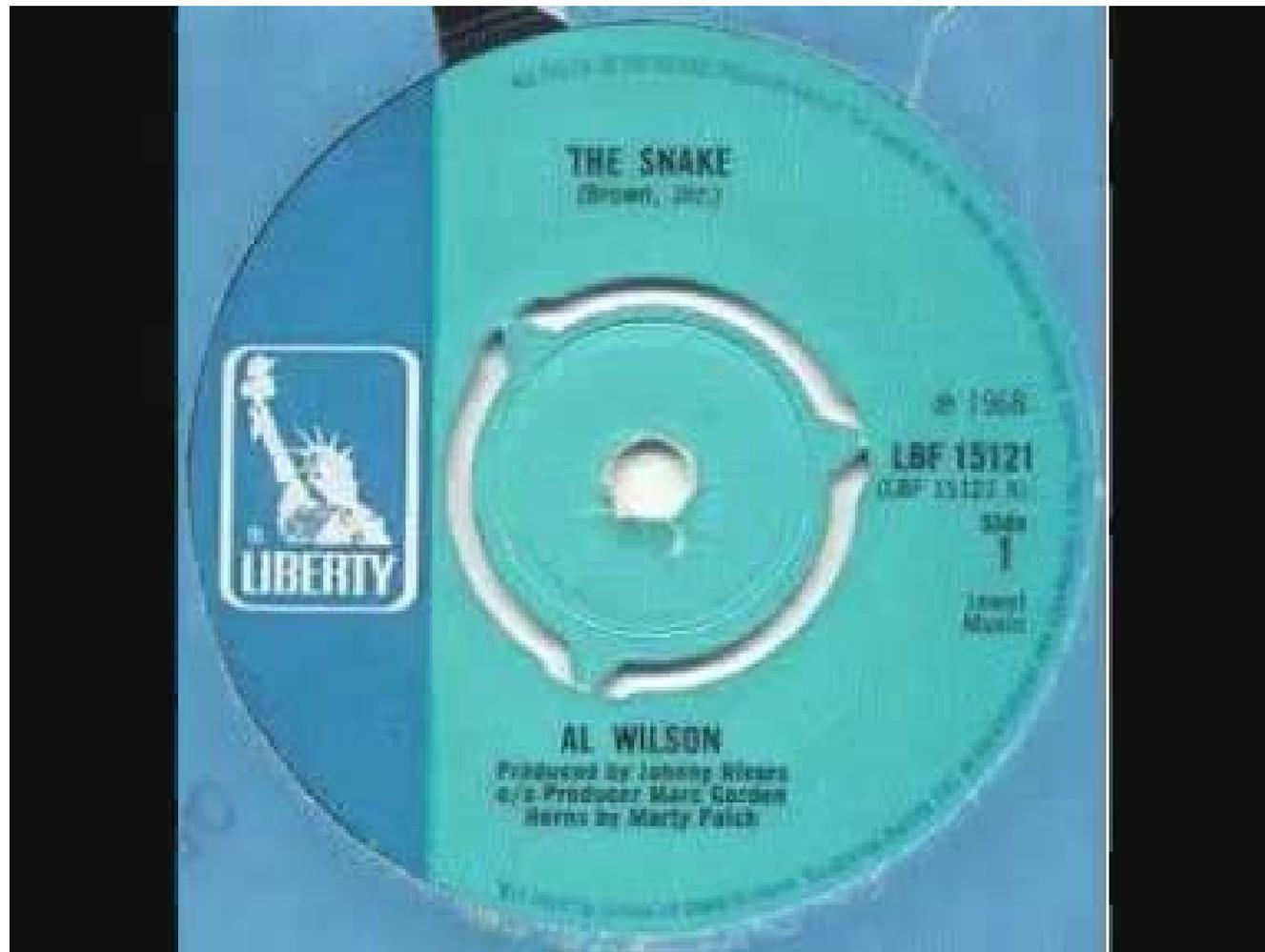
“Oh shut up, silly woman,”
said the reptile with a grin
“You knew damn well I was a snake
before you took me in”

“Take me in oh tender woman
Take me in, for heaven’s sake
Take me in oh tender woman,”
Sighed the snake

The song supported radical Black activists who participated in the Civil Rights movement (MLK) and in the Black Power movement (Malcolm X) to achieve justice for African-Americans in the U.S. Oscar Brown himself was blacklisted by record labels and clubs for his political work.

Performance by Al Wilson 1968





Oral reading of “The Snake” by Trump at his political rallies

- Reappropriated by Donald Trump as a favorite feature of his campaign rallies since 2016 without credit to Oscar Brown.
- Repurposed as an anti-immigrant, misogynist song
- The post-truth effect (Lee McIntyre 2018):
 - misuse of Black radicalism by White racism





[Washington Post Eli Rosenberg](#)

February 24, 2018

In January 2016, speaking to a crowd in Cedar Falls, Iowa, with the state's all-important caucus just days away, the candidate put on reading glasses and read the story from a piece of paper:

"I read this the other day, and I said, 'Wow, that's really amazing,' " Trump told the crowd.

After listing the dangers of refugees, terrorism and "the wrong people" coming into our country,

"You ready?" he asked an adoring crowd in Ohio.

"Who likes 'The Snake'?" he asked another group in Pennsylvania. "Has anybody heard 'The Snake'? Not that many! Should I do it again?"

Usually, the crowd cheers. Other times, it breaks into a spontaneous chant of "U-S-A!" At CPAC, the audience gave Trump a [standing ovation](#).



The daughters of the man who wrote “The Snake” blasted Trump on Sunday for twisting their father’s lyrics into a message of hate.

“The president is using the song to “serve his own campaign and climate of intolerance and hate — which is the opposite” of what the songwriter intended, one of his daughters, Maggie Brown, said [Sunday on MSNBC](#).

Trump is “perversely using ‘The Snake’ to demonize immigrants,” said Maggie’s sister, Africa Brown. “My father never stood against immigrants. He was always standing up for people, and not about separatism.”

“They found it ironic that their father – a revolutionary, outspoken black man who they believe was blacklisted by record labels for his political work in the ‘60’s, is enjoying a glancing sort of recognition through the song’s rebirth. “They wanted to pull him down, Maggie said. Now they want to pull from his stuff” (Rosenberg 2018)

How do these three stories refine our understanding of the workings of symbolic power?

In all three stories symbolic power is

- An unavoidable fact of social life (see Aesop)
- Is a struggle for recognition, honor, respect, self-esteem
- Is gained and sustained through grammar/vocabulary, performatives, and multimodal ways of making meaning and gaining legitimacy as a meaning maker.
- It is highly mediated through the technology we use to manipulate symbols.

4. Symbolic warfare in the digital age

The internet (incl. web & social media) has exacerbated the struggles over symbolic systems through its semantic architecture, the speed and scope of its dissemination of information, its fluid and collaborative construction of meaning and truth, and its ability to shape the way we think through its constant reorganization of knowledge.

The internet exercises enormous symbolic power through its ability to

- Construct the given
- Make people see and believe
- Mobilize their emotions and actions
- Offer realities that seem objective, normal, natural and legitimate
- Even though they are the product of algorithms that remain invisible and unknowable
- These algorithms make meaning not based on referential Truth, but on form recognition and symbolic matches that are constantly changing with the choices made by the users themselves.

Why should language teachers care?

...because the digital revolution is also a cultural revolution in which Language itself has acquired a new value.

- Referential (objective) truth vs. multiple (subjective) truths?
- Discovering meaning vs. making meaning?
- Getting to know the Other vs. networking?
- Representing vs. manipulating cultural reality?

So: what are we teaching foreign languages for ?

Taking *le politique* into account in foreign language education would mean

- raising learners' awareness of symbolic power/violence in communication
- drawing explicit relation of speech acts and their perlocutionary effects
- recognizing that symbolic power is based on reciprocity and the complicity of all
- problematizing the natural and taken-for-granted social order (e.g., “snakes will be snakes”; “bullies will be bullies”)
- From *savoir faire* to *savoir penser*

Conclusion

Culture in FL education today is no longer conceived as the mere *context* in which a FL gets learned and used, but a *process* by which we construct, interpret and negotiate the symbolic meaning of the world around us and of our place within it. An eminently “political” process.

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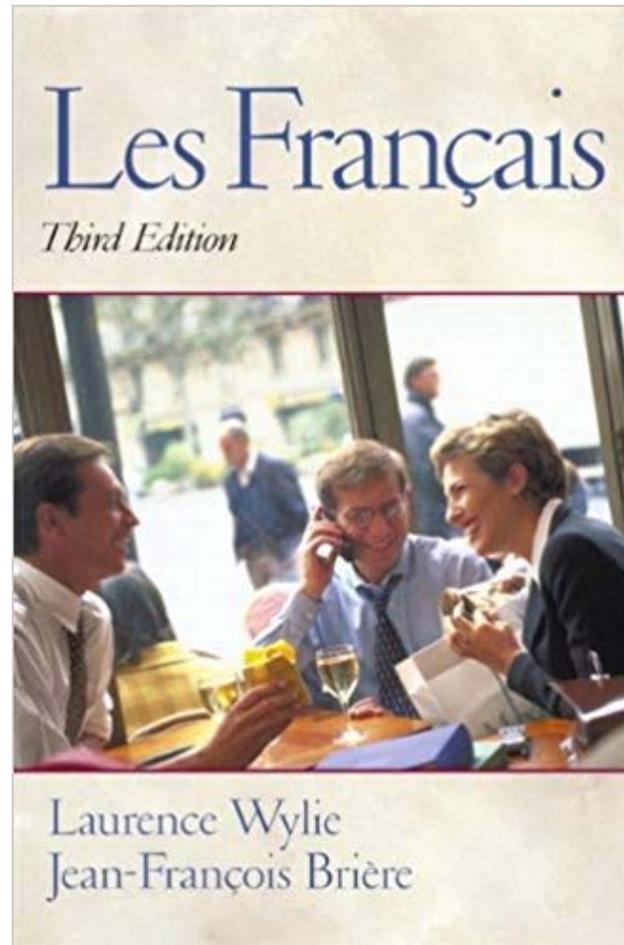
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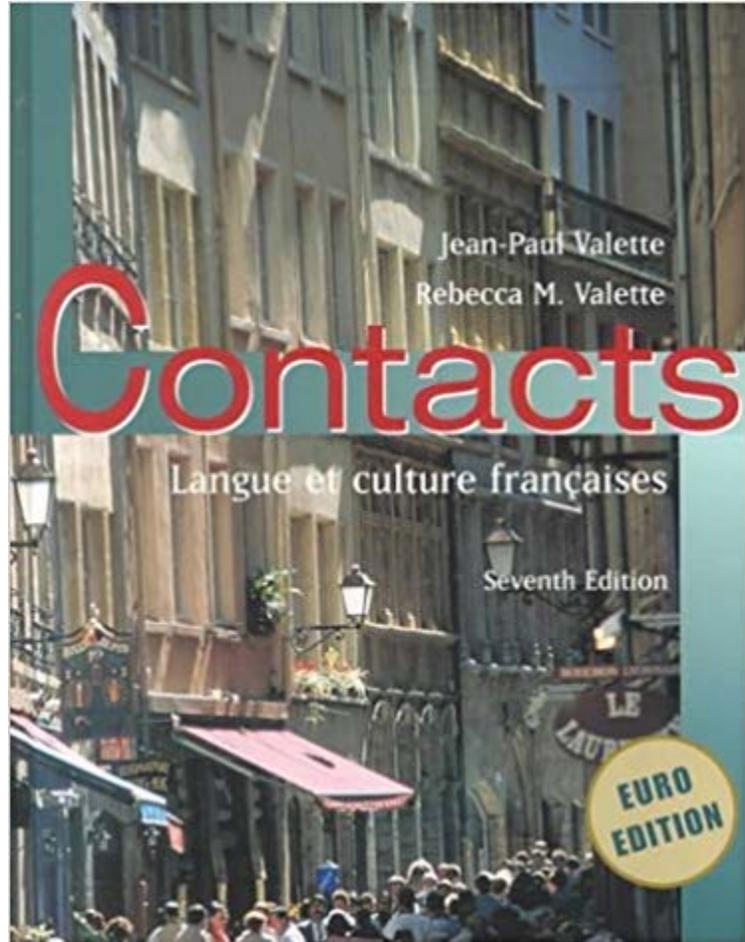
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Thank you!

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2. Symbolic power as the power to shape perceptions





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Rebecca M. Valette

Contacts

Langue et culture françaises

Seventh Edition

EURO
EDITION

FRENCH IN ACTION: Mireille and Robert at La Closerie des Lilas



In Communicative Language Teaching, speakers are have the power to communicate and interact with others, thus doing things with words, e.g., shaping their perceptions of themselves, others and the world around them.

Language

Primacy given to spoken language, pragmatics, discourse genres

Social medium for the transmission and consumption of information.

Literacy = ability to use language in various modalities in various social contexts in collaboration with others

Language learning

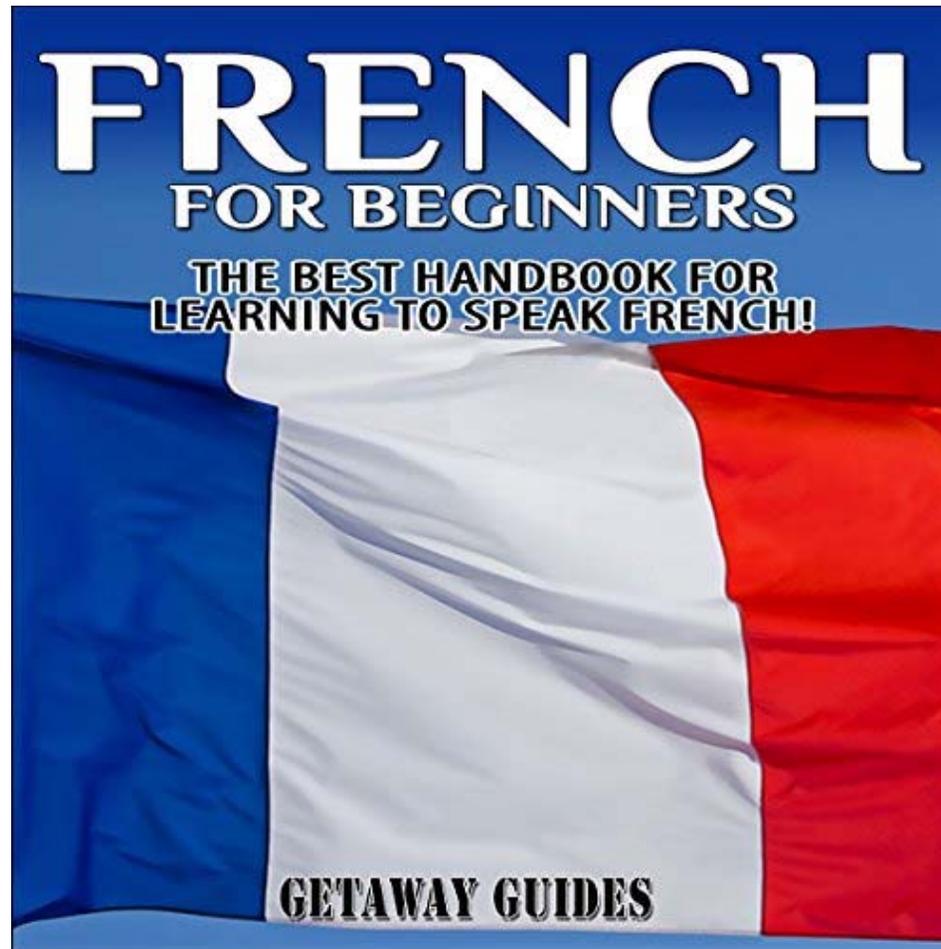
Acquisition of communication skills and information exchange strategies

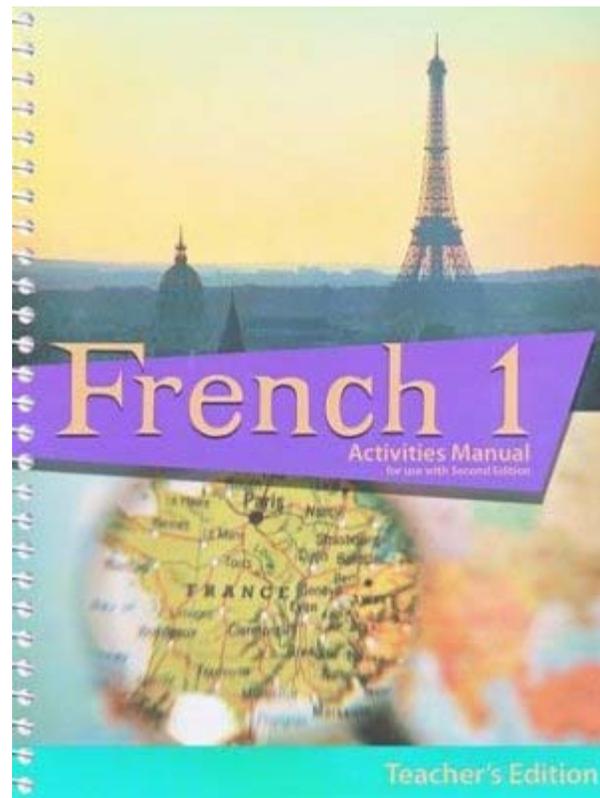
Interaction, negotiation, tolerance of ambiguity

Embodied learning as savoir faire, savoir s'engager, savoir etre

Construction of L2 habitus

1. Symbolic power as the power to signify and represent





In traditional language teaching, the textbook represents the power of institutions to impose the way they represent language, language learning, and the actors in the classroom > literate national citizens.

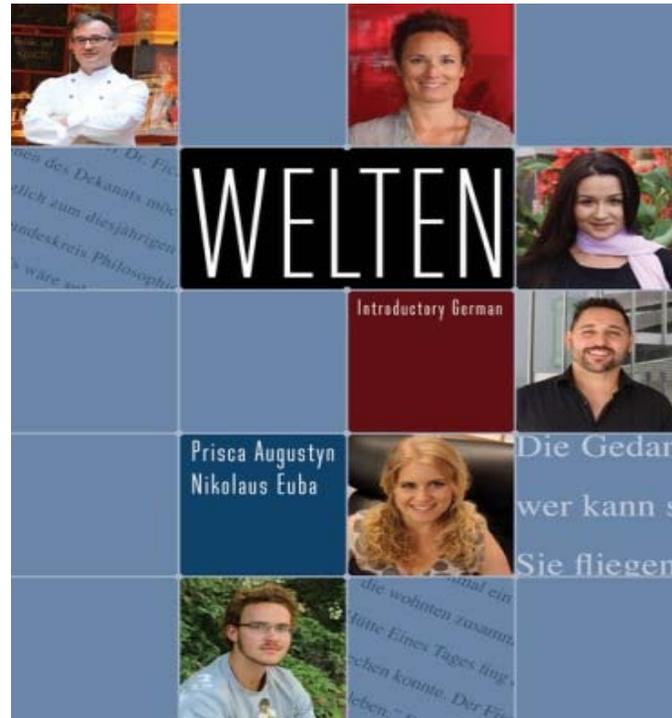
Language:

- Primacy given to the written word (*langue écrite, Schriftkultur*)
- Written texts as repositories of a speech community's wisdom
- Gateway to becoming an “enlightened citizen” in a nation-state

Language Learning

- Language competence = philological, historical, textual competence
- *Explications de textes*, translations, multiple choice tests
- Ability to manipulate linguistic structures and generic features of texts

3. Symbolic power as the power to make meaning and mobilize people to action



In Intercultural language teaching, speakers seek contact with others across multiple linguistic, semiotic, modal, cultural boundaries, both on-line and offline.

Language:

- Only one of the ways of making meaning
- Multimodality (print, oral, digital)
- multiliteracies, multilingualism
- Hypertext open to many interpretations

Language learning:

Discovery of self, exploration of identity

Creativity and self-expression, translanguaging

Participation, collaboration

Non institutional forms of learning

Remembering Bourdieu's definition of symbolic power

“Symbolic power – the **power of constituting the given** through utterances, **of making people see and believe**, of confirming or **transforming the vision of the world and, thereby, action on the world** and thus the world itself, is an almost magical power which enables one to obtain through persuasion and mobilization the equivalent of what is obtained through force (whether physical or economic), but **only if it is (mis)recognized as natural and legitimate**.

What creates the power of words and slogans, a power capable of maintaining or subverting the social order, is **the belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them**. And words alone cannot create this belief” (Bourdieu1991:170)