

Renting language in the ownership society

Inaugural Lecture

Heidi Byrnes

George M. Roth Distinguished Professor of German

Georgetown University

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In a 1996 article that appeared in *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, a pedagogically oriented journal published by the American Association of Teachers of German, Claire Kramersch, Professor of German and Second Language Acquisition at the University of California, Berkeley, posed the provocative question “Wem gehört die deutsche Sprache?” – *Who owns the German language?* She answered it in a fashion that seemed to settle the matter unequivocally: *Why, to the Germans, of course – also to the Austrians, the Swiss, to all those for whom German is the native language.* However, elaborating on that answer, she continues: “Mit anderen Worten, ‘Deutsch gehöre dem deutschen *native* speaker – *in other words, ‘German would seem to belong to the German native speaker’.* With an unmistakable edge her commentary cuts one of the most persistent – dare we say “long-lived” -- skeletons from the closet of the U.S. German teacher profession, -- the potential dominance of native speakers, the majority of whom are immigrants, as contrasted with non-native speakers, the majority of whom are American-born and American-educated.

In this context, it is of some interest that Kramersch herself fits into none of these ready-made categories. As an extraordinary near-native and yet non-native speaker of German who emigrated to the United States, she goes on to explain why nativeness is a loaded issue: among the most prominent reasons are that it inherently gives undue weight to an accident of birth, that native speakers seemingly enjoy undisputed authority and legitimacy in representing and arbitrating standards of form and use, and that they ultimately and quite strongly influence the very nature of what is theorized in language and how it is theorized.

As befits the publication venue Kramersch then devotes herself to teacher education and professional development considerations. By contrast, in my presentation today I would like to pursue the line of thinking Kramersch signaled in the title of her article, namely the notion of ownership. My reason for proposing that focus is on some level straightforward. Ownership is central to American culture and ideology; for example, it has recently been reasserted through the explicit coinage of the term “ownership society.” But ownership is also a prominent trope for understanding language.

However, at the same time, ownership has recently become a site for dramatic shifts. It is a site for shifts in all domains of life, public and private, political and economic, religious and legal. That assertion becomes more plausible if we remind

ourselves that the notion of ownership is intricately related to forms of ownership, that these change with the nature of what can be owned and is desired for ownership and that, as a consequence, **access** to forms of ownership also shifts, -- from real, delimited, and fixed and tangible forms of ownership to ever more virtual, intangible, co-owned and relationally changeable forms. And it is also a site for dramatic shifts in the ownership of language, as even a cursory look at electronic media makes quite clear. Putting the two aspects together, ubiquitous phrases like globalization, knowledge and information society, and virtual space would then get additional layers of meaning that explicitly acknowledge the role of language in these new forms of ownership.

We should therefore expect significant tensions in what happens on the ground when traditional notions of ownership persist. Also, observing these tensions should provide insights about how our understanding of language needs to shift in order for language use to be more appropriate to contemporary contexts of communication. And finally, we ought to be able to detect opportunities for addressing societal tensions that are particularly language-based or language-oriented.

These are some of the issues I want to consider with you today. These are big questions – and you and I know our limitations both here and now and elsewhere. I propose them nonetheless as worthy of some reflection – and entrust myself to the potential of language once uttered to continue its wondrous, never-ending meaning making potential.

I. Of owning and renting language metaphorically -- really!

As the title of my talk indicates I use the linked metaphors of ownership and renting as a way of framing my thoughts. I start by acknowledging the metaphorical nature of much of our thinking and of language, a recognition that is not trivial when we consider the profound effect of metaphor on our imagination, our affects and emotions, our forms of sociality, and, ultimately, our ways of knowing and being, no matter the discipline, field of inquiry or professional or personal position we hold. Therefore, how we --- specialists and non-specialists alike -- imagine language use and language itself is also not trivial. Given the role of education in shaping our ability to work with language in the information society, one should expect higher education to have particular interests in the matter and also particular obligations.

I begin by clarifying these notions a bit further, first by offering a global characterization of contemporary societies in order to highlight potential consequences in three contexts. Reflecting on these we see what disjunctures, tensions, and even contentions retaining old notions about ownership might cause and what meaning potentials we need to foreground. To elaborate on them I will turn to two scholars whose work has, in the last several years, greatly influenced my own thinking in these matters: the Russian philologist Mikhail Bakhtin and the British-Australian theoretical linguist Michael Halliday. To me, Bakhtin's reflections on language, many of which hail from the twenties and thirties in Soviet Russia, politically, socially, and intellectually turbulent times, seem to be particularly suited for a reconsideration of ownership in our times. And

Halliday's systemic functional theory of language recommends itself for two additional reasons: first, like Bakhtin, Halliday takes seriously the embeddedness of language in cultural activity by asserting that not only language use but the system of language itself is functional with regard to cultural, and that is, historical and contingent, human perspectives, interests, and purposes, that it construes them and, in turn, is reflected in them. Second, Halliday explicitly affirms that the merits of a theory of language are at least in part established by its ability to illuminate and affect practices at all levels of education. Accordingly, how the humanities as the disciplines who foreground the interpretive nature of meaning making might reconsider themselves will close out my deliberations.

II. Societal shifts and the metaphor of ownership: Sites of struggle

It is high time that I provide some specifics for the sweeping statement that major societal shifts amount to a serious undermining of powerful notions of ownership and that mismatch, dissonance, and struggle are particularly pronounced in the realm of communication and language.

1. Toward multilingual, multicultural societies

So here is a necessarily abbreviated list of trends that characterize what we have come to call the global society and, not accidentally, also call the multilingual and multicultural society:

- ❖ We live in a globalized environment within which the nature of the sovereign nation state, including its construction through national languages, is being reshaped. That means that the equation nation = language = culture, so prevalent in the European context, is seriously undermined. What was once the ideal and idealized single normed language now resides within a multiplicity of horizontally stratified and functionally differentiated languages with different roles for individuals, groups of people, and across states. Further shifts will occur across life spans and through changing forms of access.
- ❖ Extensive migrations by individuals and variously configured groups of people almost always entail changes in language use, both individual and societal, beginning with demands for different levels of literacy and different kinds of literacies within the same language, all the way to the need for groups of people to conduct their entire lives in different languages.
- ❖ As a result, what is a native and what is a foreign language, becomes blurred by contexts of use. Education plays a critical role in the maintenance, acquisition, disappearance, and functional differentiation of language, -- all processes that are, of course, linked to access and social power.
- ❖ Thus, struggles about various kinds of multilingualism become the norm rather than the exception, much less a deviation from "properly" functioning societies.
- ❖ The pursuit of tertiary education, and that includes instruction in specialized forms of language use, is no longer a privilege for the few but a necessity for the

many, thereby both increasing and decreasing certain aspects of the functional multiplicity of language use.

- ❖ And, to conclude this already long list, all of these language-based phenomena are accompanied by an expansion of literacy into multimodal forms of expression, which itself refigures the existing more language-based forms of literacy.

I have purposely chosen developments within which language plays a prominent role. By the same token, I hope you will agree that these developments are not narrowly construed “language” issues but huge societal issues. Therefore, and returning to our topic, how they reposition ownership is of great interest:

Migration of people and therefore dramatically increased language contact; movement of goods, services, and information; and repeated reconfiguration of such movements in ever shorter periods of time, heightening the effects of migration and contact -- the result is as already stated: what was construed as fixed, singular, autonomous, unitary, and owned, has now become plural, multiple, co-owned, or tenuously owned --- perhaps rented. All of these partially apt descriptors point to a foregrounding of the increasingly relational and contingent quality of our lives, in both times and spaces.

2. Responsibility and liberty in the “ownership” society – and beyond

Even as I call for acknowledging these changes by new ways of thinking about ownership, we should be clear about the need for caution and nuance. There are unifying needs that must be met; but I suspect how they will be met will need to be considerably more dynamic and contingent, exploring the special character of situated probabilistic frames of reference, as contrasted with a unitary, even metaphysically grounded, eternal truth construct. To begin to understand what needs these more probabilistic unifying forces would nonetheless have to meet, what individual and societal tasks they have to accomplish, we turn to a description of the “ownership society” as provided on the web page of the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, -- a description that powerfully resonates with established American ideology.

An ownership society values responsibility, liberty, and property. Individuals are empowered by freeing them[selves] from dependence on government handouts and making them[selves] owners instead, in control of their own lives and destinies. In the ownership society, patients control their own health care, parents control their own children’s education, and workers control their retirement savings.

In this reasoning ownership is linked to responsibility and liberty, thereby elevating personal ownership and control to desirable societal goods. One can assume that strong ideas of nationhood and the positing of a self-sufficient national framework of action, as contrasted with various dependencies, are highly facilitative if not essential to the persuasiveness of such a link and to its actual realization, thus at the very least in tension with many contemporary developments.

Leaving that aside, however, if ownership and property are no longer quite so readily graspable as this wording still seems to suggest, then how are responsibility and liberty nevertheless to be practiced? Are there other bases, aside from ownership, that might sustain them? Could we imagine evolving forms of ownership to support responsibility and liberty in these new contexts in ways more suited to them? What role might language use and different ways of being aware of language play in that effort? We will explore possible answers in three contexts.

3. *Reconsidering the conduit metaphor of language*

In a well-known article, first published in 1979, Michael Reddy investigated how we imagine, metaphorically, the nature of communicating with language. In particular, he focused on the metaphors people use exactly at the point when language communication seems to be unsuccessful rather than uneventfully successful. Here he cites expressions like:

- (1) Try to *get your thoughts across* better
- (2) None of Mary's *feelings came through to* me with any clarity, or
- (3) You still haven't *given me any idea* of what you mean

Academics who regularly critique student writing might make comments like these:

- (4) You have to *put each concept into words* very carefully
- (5) You have to *pack more thoughts* into fewer words
- (6) Insert those *ideas* elsewhere *in the paragraph*
- (7) Don't *force your meanings into* the wrong words.

From such phrasings Reddy concludes that a conduit metaphor is the interpretive framework that language itself provides for communication. Figuratively it asserts several important features for language. First and foremost, language functions like a conduit by "transferring thoughts bodily from one person to another." More specifically, words, imagined as something like containers, "accomplish the transfer by containing the thoughts or feelings and conveying them to others" (170). The result: our language use erroneously "sees ideas as existing either within human heads or, at least within words uttered by humans".

But there is more: the container metaphor also suggests the notion that "ideas and feelings [to] flow, unfettered and completely disembodied, into a kind of ambient space between human heads" (ibid.). It assumes that (1) "thoughts and feelings are ejected by speaking or writing into an external "idea space": (2) thoughts and feelings are reified in this external space, so that they exist independent of any need for living human beings to think or feel them; (3) these reified thoughts and feelings may or may not, find their way back into the heads of living humans" (171) such that we may "put them down" on paper, that we understand them to "float around" and that we may, on a good day, even "absorb them."

Reddy considers these notions to be problematic, even "confused". That is a serious verdict when nearly seventy percent of the expressions of the English language

about communication use the conduit metaphor in some fashion, therefore can be assumed to have a powerful hold on our thinking, indeed to constitute something like the bedrock over our common sense knowledge about language. Specifically,

I am suggesting, then, that ... the conduit metaphor is leading us down a technological and social blind alley. That blind alley is mass communication systems coupled with mass neglect of the internal, human systems responsible for nine-tenths of the work in communicating. We think we are 'capturing ideas in words,' and funneling them out to the greatest public in the history of the world. But if there are no ideas 'within' this endless flood of words, then all we are doing is replaying the myth of Babel – centering it, this time, around the broadcast tower. (188)

4. Ownership of language as a cultural construct

In case “conduits,” “ideas in packages,” and “empty containers” moving through the conduit language strike you as more whimsical than consequential, perhaps my second example can illustrate the very real, economic power of an ideology of autonomous ownership with regard to language. In a wide-ranging discussion of plagiarism, Ron Scollon (1995), who, as most of you know, is a member of Georgetown’s linguistics department, concludes that the traditional view of plagiarism does not hold up well in light of a number of crucial categories in discourse analysis, among them footing, enactment, social role, face, metaphors of self and communication, and innatist and social concepts of knowledge.

Rather than detailing the particulars of the flawed nature of the arguments, let me proceed right away to this question: does that insight invalidate opposition to plagiarism? Most likely not. But it does show that the arguments we generally present and, related to that, the extensive body of copyright laws that we have developed, reflect an understanding of communication that is not universal but, instead, “a cultural model which can be located in terms of a particular historical moment and a particular cultural group” (5). Scollon describes it as “a rather hefty set of assumptions about who should or should not have the right to use discourse to create individual, autonomous voices in a society” and as “fully embedded within a social, political, and cultural matrix that cannot be meaningfully separated from its interpretation” (23). At the heart of that cultural matrix stands an ideological system, prevalent particularly since the Enlightenment, that values individual autonomy and rationality and makes autonomy -- and related to it ownership -- fundamental to individual and social activity, political and legal life, and economic and aesthetic conduct as Western modernist and democratic societies have developed it.

In other words, a certain construal of ownership of words began also to construe the evolving responsible legal person and the evolving free political person. Citing Patterson’s book-length study “Copyright in historical perspective,” Scollon relates how ownership issues gradually arose in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, when, in an increasingly competitive and also variously regulated market, commercial printers sought

to secure their right to print the most profitable books. Initially copyright was not an issue of authorial ownership of words and ideas, but of assurances for printers to be able to create a commercial product. From that context arose a notion of authorship and voice for the author and the right to be heard in a certain way. Over time, the interest of both sides became enshrined in a group of characteristics we call “essayist” discourse, a kind of discourse that values analysis, originality, decontextualization, and objectivity (see Scollon, 1995, 24-25).

5. Virtual and shared ownership in contemporary society

And that leads to contemporary contexts. Here we find fierce competition in the marketplace between public domain and proprietary software and know that it is the proprietary software that is the primary target for various subversions, incapacitations, and killer virus attacks and that a system like Linux, whose open source code is freely shared, remains remarkably unscathed. We also know that some of the most contentious regulatory issues pertain to the down-loading of music and other materials – “free-loading” at its best! – all refigurations, not just simple disputes about ownership.

And, moving explicitly to the international trade and culture arena, we find George Will, in an October 12 editorial in the Washington Post, excoriating a new report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, which asserts that cultural expressions – like Hollywood films -- are not just commercial goods but also cultural products for which cultures may assert ownership so as to protect themselves against undue threats to social cohesion. Pointedly directing his scorn at France and French cultural sensibilities, Will calls that position a “dimwitted nod to ‘diversity’” in scare quotes. As a form of “cultural protectionism” it perpetuates what, to him, is the “pernicious idea” of governments being able to “sensibly define and prudently cultivate the proper content of culture and artistic expression” – in other words to own and thus to control it permanently. Will’s position is particularly ironic and indicative of shifting positions, inasmuch as in the United States conservatives oppose bilingualism and multilingualism precisely because it might destabilize the United States as a country. Thus, as expressed in the English Only movement, the distinction between individual bilingualism, which is welcomed, and societal bilingualism, which is to be avoided at all cost, is but a poor cover-up for strong claims to ownership of certain cultural products and quite material interests. As an incisive article by Jim Crawford (2005 [1996]) correctly points out, language is a flimsy front. In any case, one cannot but wonder whether such ignorance of the inseparability of robust individual and societal uses of language accounts for the abysmal language capacity of the United States, whose severe consequences are being rediscovered – yet again -- in the context of the country’s security interests.

Excursus: Three Examples

Three short textual examples will have to suffice to specify a few additional issues:

Example 1

At the Vatican, Exceptions Make the Rule

John L. Allen, Jr. *The New York Times*, Sept. 27, 2005, [Vatican correspondent of the *National Catholic Reporter*]:

The forthcoming Vatican document on gays in seminaries will unleash a wrenching debate about Catholicism and homosexuality, but one thing it is certain not to mean is that in the future there will be no gays in the priesthood. The continued presence of gays in the priesthood will be the product not just of difficulties in enforcement, or the dishonesty of potential candidates, but also of design.

Although this is a difficult point for many Anglo-Saxons to grasp, when the Vatican makes statements like “no gays in the priesthood,” it doesn’t actually mean “no gays in the priesthood.” It means, “As a general rule, this is not a good idea, but we all know there will be exceptions.”

Understanding this distinction requires an appreciation of Italian concepts of law, which hold sway throughout the thought world of the Vatican. The law, according to such thinking, expresses an ideal. It describes a perfect state of affairs from which many people will inevitably fall short. This view is far removed from the typical Anglo-Saxon approach, which expects the law to dictate what people actually do.”

Example 2

It’s ‘Private’ vs. ‘Personal’ in Social Security Debate.

Robin Toner, *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2005

WASHINGTON, March 21 - What's in a name? Would a personal account by any other name smell as sweet? Apparently not, according to strategists in the two political parties.

In the Social Security debate, one of the most ferocious struggles is over language, whether President Bush is proposing to create "personal" or "private" accounts in the program, whether he is really proposing the "privatization" of Social Security.

Mr. Bush complained last week that " 'privatization' is a trick word," intended to "scare people." Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic leader, interrupted a news conference to correct a reporter who asked about "personal" accounts.

"It's 'privatization,' " Mr. Reid said, adding that "personal accounts" was "the Republican term."

Example 3

Licence to Torture: Anthony Lewis, *The New York Times*, October 15, 2005

The most profound issue that will face the Supreme Court in the coming years is not the one animating many of the conservatives angry at Harriet Miers’s nomination to the court, abortion. It is presidential power.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, President Bush and his lawyers have asserted again and again that the “war on terror” clothes the president as commander in chief with extraordinary, unilateral power – the power, for example, to designate an American citizen as an enemy

combatant and imprison him indefinitely, without trials or a real opportunity to demonstrate innocence.

How do these three examples relate to the topic at hand? Allen highlights the crucial role of the larger cultural context to be able to function as a nimble and flexible, underspecified, and yet exuberant semiotic system. Language means in a context of culture and in a context of situation. If we are to “own” its meanings at all – we will have to appropriate those contexts that brought them on in the first place. Is this plagiarism?

In the second example, Toner shows how words are chosen in response to other words, and have their meaning because of that responsiveness. In this particular case we actually have a double responsiveness, inasmuch as the original project that provided the intellectual foundation for the government’s proposals, prepared by the Cato Institute, in fact was entitled “Project on Social Security Privatization”. Dare I call this a flip-flop?

For enlightenment I turn to Bakhtin’s observations from “Discourse in the Novel:”

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (294)

And, finally, Lewis provides an example of the kinds of power the word as metaphor can hold – double meaning intended. In recent years, an earlier and well-established metaphorical use of “war” – as we find it in such phrases as the war on poverty, the war on drugs, maybe even the war on ignorance and illiteracy, or on obesity – was extended to include a “war on terrorism”, an extension that seemed appropriate for expressing the anguished determination of the country right after 9/11 to punish those who had perpetrated this crime. But with remarkable speed and political expediency a metaphorical war, which could have been fought in quite different arenas with quite different means, just as the “war on drugs” is, was extended to a very real military war. It is this commingling of two uses of the word “war” which now threatens to affect the very constitution – in the several meanings of that word – of our government by turning the extraordinary powers that rightly can accrue to the president as commander-in-chief into the normal powers he may hold because of a “war on terrorism” of undetermined length.

Returning once more to Bakhtin, and continuing at exactly the point where my earlier quote left off, he adds:

And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property; many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his

context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (294)

Which expropriation, appropriation, interpretation will ultimately stand and which will have to be marked with quotation marks?

III. Bakhtin and Halliday – renting languaging

By choosing the metaphor of “renting language” I have obviously not completely abandoned the ownership metaphor. Instead, I have foregrounded a strong relational quality for new notions of “ownership” in language. If we half own the word, appropriation takes place, ownership shifts; rental property inherently is not owned, much less owned permanently, but comes with strong mutual obligation and advantages. Renters gain both a framework for expression that facilitates their expressive capacities, they gain the capacity to engage in responsible speech, and they gain the freedom to mean at all; furthermore, others can and, ideally, will acknowledge and take them seriously, thereby fostering and expanding everyone’s ways of thinking for speaking, thinking for reading, thinking for listening, and thinking for writing, as Slobin (1996) aptly calls this intimate link between culturally steeped thought that evolves through language. Sources of multiple identities, new sources of the self in a multicultural society.

Let me provide just a bit more of the positions taken by Bakhtin and Halliday.

1. *Bakhtin – the dialogic self*

The master trope at the heart of all of Bakhtin’s reflection on language is heteroglossia or polyphony or, as Holquist, aware that Bakhtin himself never used the word, states it, a concern for dialogism (15). Bakhtin states it this way in “Discourse in the Novel”: “Every utterance participates in the ‘unitary language’ (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces).” (1981, 272).

What is to be gained by beginning with polyphony, with multiplicity, with multivoicedness? Ultimately, and that shows the fundamental difference to a dichotomous way of thinking, it is the potential for an exquisite awareness of the social foundation of language, of the process and the extraordinary fragility of human cultural work, both on the individual and on the social plane. At the same time, such an approach foregrounds the inherent historicity of languaging and of ways of meaning and being, of ontogenetic and phylogenetic developments in language as use as the basis for language as system. It is a way of acknowledging the constitutive role of the utterance in a dialogic setting, as expressed and meant with an addressee in mind and also as understood by that addressee. And that is, finally, an exquisite awareness of the *necessity*, not the ancillary accident, of the Other.

He discusses these issues with great insight, among other works, in notes collected in “The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis”, when he focuses on the text as utterance. Among the central characterizations of text is its life “*on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects* The text is not a thing, and therefore the second consciousness, the consciousness of the perceived, can in no way be eliminated or neutralized. Understanding is always dialogic to some degree. The real object is social (public) man, who speaks and expresses himself through other means.” (1986b,106-107). The self is dialogic, is a relation.

But the dialogue is not between two parties in a simple way. “The person who understands inevitably becomes *a third party* in the dialogue ... a higher *superaddressee* (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time. In various ages and with various understandings of the world, this superaddressee and his ideally true responsive understanding assume various ideological expression (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth)” (ibid. 126).

Dialogicality so understood is not an endless and ultimately irresponsible relativity. Instead, it has two powerful anchors: the centering forces of the language system itself, what Wertsch (2006) calls “a generalized collective dialogue,” and flexible, creative, and multivocal and heteroglossic language use in the here and now, with both taking place in a simultaneity of time and space that is Bakhtin’s way of incorporating insights of quantum physics. It is within this dialogicality of the system and the unique instance, too, that synchrony and diachrony, language use and language change meet up, and that both language acquisition and language tradition, and continuity across generations in a speech community are sustained.

2. Halliday – semiotic choices in contexts of culture and contexts of situation

We have thus arrived at a theory of language for our times that would, at minimum, explicitly point to the external cultural context in its multiplicity and to its dynamic stability. To be useful for educational contexts, such a theory would also need to be accessible with a kind of transparency that enables researchers, teachers, and the general public to understand how to make nuanced choices, -- nuanced expressive choices and nuanced interpretive choices.

Let us hear, then, what Halliday, as a theoretician of language who is keenly interested in such a translation into educational contexts, has to say. In his *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1994), he refers to his orientation toward language as “functional” in three ways: it is functional in terms of how language is used in society because everything said or written occurs in some context of use; it is functional in terms of its macro-components that he identifies as the ideational component (how we understand our environment) and the interpersonal component (how we act on and interact with others). Realizing both is the textual component, which is the way the ideational and the

interpersonal metafunctions are instantiated in a particular spoken or written text; and, finally, it is functional because each element of the language is functional with respect to the whole language system, words and grammatical markers within clauses, clauses within sentences, sentences within textual episodes and so forth.

Of particular importance is Halliday's point that, as a semiotic system, language use is about choices, with meanings being expressed by choices in wording that reveal the perspectives being taken within the overall context of culture and in response to particular contexts of situation. In such an approach constellations of lexical and grammatical features take on significance; they become "registers" of language, manifested in field, tenor, and mode. Together they construe a particular situational context through the particular kind of language being used. James Martin takes the trajectory context of culture – context of situation – register one step further to the construct of genre (1985), as "linguistically realized activity types which comprise so much of our culture" (250), or "verbal strategies used to accomplish social purposes of many kinds" (251). The key distinction between genre and register is that genre can be analyzed in terms of schematic textual structures, thereby allowing genre to be investigated and understood as "how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them" (250).

Through extensive textual modeling and scaffolding it is then possible to work toward the educational goal of making meaning-making transparent for both teaching and learning. From the side of the teacher, Cope and Kalantzis note that "a genre approach to literacy teaching involves being explicit about the way language works to make meaning" (1993, 1). From the perspective of both teacher and learner, genre teaching, according to Christie (1999), "offers the capacity for initiating students into ways of making meaning that are valued, " for example in English-speaking communities, and also for "reflecting on and critiquing the ways in which knowledge and information are organized and constructed in the English language" (762). For foreign language teaching such an approach can realize what Kramersch, in another context (1997), referred to as the privilege of the nonnative speaker, linguistic foreignness, and what Kern (2000) explores as an essential ingredient of the acquisition of second language literacy as a process of socialization into beliefs, attitudes, values and ways of thinking which can occur when students have multiple experiences in multiple contexts with multiple textual genres and, thereby, being to capture the multiplicity of contemporary societies (cf. 36-38). As many of you know, this is the approach the curricular and pedagogical project in the German Department, entitled "Developing Multiple Literacies," strives to realize.

IV. Locating the humanities in educating for multicultural societies

As I conclude, let me go back to the central notions of ownership of language and of the suggestion that a dialogically constructed notion of languaging might be an appropriate way of constructing responsibility and freedom in the contemporary multilingual, multicultural, and multireligious. In such a world our intellectual and educational interest is to enable students to work with a multiplicity of expressive forms,

in the context of different social languages in professions and institutions and different ideologies, such as disciplinary, political, or religious ideologies.

If such an educational goal is to become a reality, then the notion of a genre-based literacy has much to recommend itself. Indeed, according to Hasan, literacy pedagogy may well be the most crucial pedagogic action (1996a): semiotically grounded, it is all about the ability to “‘see’ a phenomenon as 'standing for' something other than itself“ (379). In the ongoing battle about scientific truth, metaphysical truth or hermeneutically discerned truth, one would then not need to talk about what constitutes reality or what is “mere” illusion in language or culture, what is objective truth and what is relativism. As she states elsewhere, “Rather than speculate about the ‘real’ nature of physical reality as it must appear to a mind uninformed by semiosis and hence unevolved by culture it seems far more helpful to say that confronted with the world – both the world outside and the one inside the organism – human beings proceeded to make sense of these phenomena; they developed means of communicating about these phenomena” (1996b, 21). Language as socially situated choice for meaning making is that system.

Unfortunately, neither in the sciences nor in the humanities is this the prevailing interpretation of how we go about knowing. In a comprehensive discussion of the topic, entitled “The Crisis of the Humanities and the End of the University,” David Pan (1998) interprets the role of the humanities in the university to be the consequence of an inappropriate assumption about the universality of knowledge that led to a decoupling from particular sociocultural interests, part of the marginalization of religion in higher education. At that historical moment, the humanities fashioned themselves into the left over placeholder for universal moral values. However, multiculturalism has exposed the humanities as themselves representing a particular value system that is closely linked to the nation-state and, more generally, to the value system of secular Western societies.

For that reason, the repeated appeal to the humanities and to interdisciplinarity as a solution to our problems is a questionable response to the current situation of multicultural and pluralist societies that wrestle with the role they should accord to beliefs, values, and religion in public spaces. For that reason, too, it would appear that the exhortation by Robert Scholes, then president of the MLA, in a 2004 Newsletter is incomplete, if for no other reason than it does not sufficiently recognize the limitations of the humanities with regard to capturing the cultural groundedness, or what I have called the ideological positioning of multiculturalism and multilingualism. Recognizing two powerful ideological systems of value, one that is materialistic, technical, and pragmatic and another that is spiritual and fundamentalist, Scholes states

What we must do . . . is to occupy vigorously that middle ground between a pragmatism without principles and a fundamentalism with a rigid and restricted set of principles. We need to insist on the value of dialogue, in literature and all other texts, and we need to incorporate the sacred texts of religion and political belief into our curricula, along with texts from the newer media.

In the light of how we have interpreted meaning making in language in our exploration today, that middle ground does not exist in the way the humanities have idealistically fashioned it for themselves. That is true despite Scholes's otherwise attractive recommendation that "we need to teach strategies of interpretation and the decoding of ideology across this entire range of textual objects. We must teach how language works, how texts work, how culture itself works."

Rather than a neat reserve of the middle ground, what is likely to exist are overlapping discursive spaces – Discourses with a capital D as Gee calls them (2004), rented spaces as I have called them -- that carry the inevitable quality of ideology as interpretive frameworks (see Gee; also Pan's discussion of Max Weber's position). If that is the case, a metalinguistically reflective acquisition of a rich array of social languages within ideologically marked Discourses might actually bring us closer to the foremost educational task facing multilingual societies. Gee refers to that task as enabling learners to become moral agents in the contemporary world as they appropriate the "political geography of Discourses" (31), -- a world that is characterized by and requires from its citizens the acquisition of multiple literacies. I have called the task renting language in an increasingly multicultural and multilingual ownership society.

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