

Check Your Language! Political Correctness, Censorship, and Performativity in Education

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RESEARCH AND PHILOSOPHY

During the 2003 Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, the role and position of philosophical inquiry in the field of education were much discussed. In many North American faculties or schools of education, philosophy departments are shrinking or disappearing, and philosophers are asked to justify conceptual work in a time when “data-driven policy” requires applicable empirical research. Yet it is precisely because of the enormous trust placed in “scientific” research in education that philosophical inquiry, for instance into the conceptual bases or ethical implications of the research, is important today. The view that philosophy serves a function in the analysis and clarification of the concepts underpinning “scientific” research is not new, of course, and in past decades has been defended especially by analytic philosophers.

In this essay, I take not an analytic but a poststructuralist philosophical perspective to argue that philosophical inquiry is valuable for a critical reading of and response to educational theorists’ and researchers’ claims said to be supported by research. In particular, I examine claims by the Canadian Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS) and American educational historian Diane Ravitch, that restricting the language that can be used by educators and in educational materials constitutes unacceptable censorship.¹ Both the SAFS and Ravitch argue for freedom of language use in education, but neither grounds the research in an analysis of the central concept: language. A closer look reveals that both the SAFS’s and Ravitch’s claims are based on a representational conception of language. This view of language as neutral mirror and messenger does not do justice to the complex effects of language use and restrictions thereof. I propose that a discursive view of language offers a stronger framework for analyzing the problems of censorship of speech and writing in education. In particular the concept of performativity, as elaborated by J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler, offers a nuanced way of understanding the force of linguistic acts, and the problems surrounding censorship. If speaking and writing are considered as acts, that is, if it is acknowledged that words do not just *mean* something, but also *do* something, the evidence solicited and presented by the SAFS and Ravitch does not unequivocally support their conclusions that attempts to prohibit or change certain language in education are misplaced.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM: FREEDOM OF WHAT?

In July 2003, the graduate students in my faculty received a disturbing email from the SAFS. The message read as follows:

A major Canadian newspaper is considering an article or a sequence of articles on cases of indoctrination on Canadian university campuses. What they have in mind is to describe incidents where students have felt intimidated to adopt a particular ideological viewpoint

about society or themselves. These pressures might have occurred in the classroom, during orientation week at the start of the school year, or at other campus venues. Specifically, incidents where students have been obligated to take part in classroom exercises to make them feel guilty about their or their group's alleged prejudice/racism toward minority groups or women, to experience what it is like to be treated badly as minority persons or women, and so on, are useful. Examples of speech codes, zealous enforcement of politically correct behavior, sex harassment or date rape tribunals are of interest.

This call for student experiences of (attempts at) “indoctrination” disturbed me not only because of its rhetoric and selective critique, but also because of its implicit and problematic assumptions about language. Although there is much in the email that deserves a close reading, including the use of the word “ideology” and the construction of certain victims through the exclusion of other victims, my interest was raised especially by the mention of speech codes and political correctness as examples of indoctrination. “Speech codes” I take to refer to rules about what words can and cannot be used to characterize individuals and groups, especially women and members of minority groups. “Political correctness” I take to mean a set of guidelines about what words are and are not considered socially acceptable to use in reference to individuals and groups, especially women and members of minority groups. A speech code, then, can be considered political correctness codified in rules, presumably with sanctions. As Herbert Kohl has pointed out, the way the term “politically correct” is used today by groups such as SAFS differs considerably from its use in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, when “the term ‘politically correct’ was used disparagingly to refer to someone whose loyalty to the [United States Communist Party] line overrode compassion and led to bad politics.”³

SAFS makes no distinction between rules that outlaw certain language and attempts to influence or change language habits. For SAFS, any suggestion that particular language should not be used infringes upon teachers’ and students’ freedom to use whatever language they like in the course of, and for the purpose of, teaching, learning, and research. This argument rests on the view that language is clearly distinct from acts. After all, SAFS is unlikely to claim that teachers and students should be free to *do* whatever they like in the course of, and for the purpose of, teaching, learning, and research. In fact, so the argument would go, speaking and writing deserve greater freedom precisely because they are *not* acts. Like in the well-known “sticks and stones” adage, speaking and writing are considered only to refer to and represent acts, not to constitute them.

CENSORSHIP

SAFS is certainly not alone in this representational view of language. In *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict what Students Learn*, educational historian Ravitch displays a similar view of language. Ravitch aims to unveil how, in her own words, “the sensible principle of removing racist and sexist language turn[ed] into [an] effort to delete whatever might annoy or offend the most agitated imaginations” (*LP*, 18). Ravitch takes aim at both left-wing (feminist and multiculturalist) and right-wing (religious) pressure groups, and discusses censorship in both testing materials and textbooks. The attempts at “censorship” from right-wing pressure groups are typically about topics; they restrict *what* students and teachers talk and write about. The left-wing pressure groups are typically more

interested in language and images; they restrict *how* students and teachers talk and write about any topic.

At the end of the final chapter Ravitch writes quite plainly what she believes: that whoever feels “offended” should simply stop whining. She agrees with Jonathan Rauch, whose “advice to the offended,” in Ravitch’s words, “is to be thick-skinned” (*LP*, 161). “Sometimes words do hurt,” Ravitch shrugs, “but we learn to live with that hurt as the price of freedom” (*LP*, 162). Not only in this passage but throughout the book Ravitch ignores opportunities to give a more nuanced account of the power of words to do harm. She ridicules the belief in “the power of the word” held by both left-wing and right-wing pressure groups, but does not explain why this belief is mistaken or simplistic.

Pressure groups on the right believe that what children read in school should present [an idealized] vision of the past to children and that showing it might make it so....Pressure groups on the left feel as strongly about the power of the word as those on the right. ...They want children to read only descriptions of the world as they think it should be in order to help this new world into being (*LP*, 63).

Ravitch has undeniably done her research. She has contacted several publishing companies to ask for their bias review guidelines, and has examined many other primary sources. No amount of research, however, can compensate for a poorly developed conceptual framework: language, although it is the central concept in *The Language Police*, is left untheorized. But although there is no explicit theoretical framing of language, it becomes clear quickly that for Ravitch, language is representation. For instance, when Ravitch discusses the guidelines used by Riverside Publishing for passages and questions on standardized tests, she takes issue with the warning against “community setting stereotyping”:

It is a stereotype to show African Americans living in an urban environment. It is a stereotype to show Caucasians living in an affluent suburb. Since these “stereotypes” represent reality for significant numbers of people, writers must either omit any community setting, or always write counter to the stereotype....Denying reality is a common feature of writing against stereotype (*LP*, 27).

Ravitch suggests here that language is the innocent messenger, simply relaying a reality that is outside its sphere of influence. Language throws up its hands and says, “Don’t blame me. I just tell it like it is.” In this picture, changing language makes no sense if the reality which it represents has not changed already. In the *representational* view of language, language is a neutral medium and mirror, conveying and reflecting reality as it is, and if one wants to change reality, one should do it through deeds, not words. If language is representation, the only problem with language arises when it fails to represent reality accurately: when it becomes falsehood, or else nonsense. Language and material reality are, in this view, clearly distinct, and reality always trumps language. But this is too simplistic an account of how language works, and Ravitch must to some extent agree that it is simplistic, because she acknowledges the removal of racist or sexist language as a “sensible principle.” Without a solid conceptualization of language, however, she is left without criteria to support her distinction between the reasonable efforts of the past and today’s allegedly unreasonable efforts “to delete whatever might annoy or offend the most agitated imaginations” (*LP*, 18).

The *discursive* view of language offers a more sophisticated account of what language does. In this view, language is considered to be not merely reflective but constitutive of reality. Moreover, the meaning and force of language cannot be understood outside of its cultural and historical context. Treating language as discourse challenges the simplistic portrayal of language as neutral medium, acknowledges the meaning and force of what is linguistically absent as well as what is present, and allows for an analysis of the workings of power through language. It is to the discursive view of language that I now turn.

LINGUISTIC ACTS

Ravitch chooses not to make use of years of scholarship in speech act theory by authors such as Austin, Derrida, and Butler. That she would steer clear of the latter two is no surprise, given her condemnation of “university faculties infected by postmodernism, relativism, and other fashionable –isms” (*LP*, 126). Austin explained that words not only *mean* something, but also *do* something. He used the term “performative” to indicate “that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something.”³ Austin began his inquiry with obviously performative formulas such as “I promise” and “I thee wed,” but he concluded that more utterances have performative qualities than might appear at first glance. In the course of his inquiry, he discovered that the distinction between speaking and acting is not as clear as it might have appeared, and he used the term “speech acts” to indicate that speech can also be understood as act.

Derrida pointed out that what Austin wrote about the spoken word was just as valid for the written word: both speech and writing have meaning as well as force.⁴ Derrida also argued that the “total speech act” that Austin claimed was central to his inquiry, extended beyond the present utterance into future and past. The “total (speech/writing) act” not only includes the present context, but also each context in which the word(s) could be used in the future. The repetition of a word in a new context is a repetition that alters: an iteration. Thus, every word is “iterable,” and every “total (speech/writing) act” extends into the future. And the “total (speech/writing) act” also extends into the past: a word has meaning and force only because it cites, in one way or another, a previous use in a previous context.

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation.”⁵

In other words, each spoken or written word, in order to be intelligible, must refer to previous uses of itself (citationality), and each spoken or written word, once released by its speaker or writer, can be re-used and changed in the process (iterability). The changed meaning and force of the term “political correctness,” as addressed earlier in this paper, is a case in point.

Butler has further theorized the concept of performativity, especially in relation to the construction of gender identity. She emphasizes that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual.”⁶ Austin had pointed out that “illocutionary acts rely on the force of *convention*, which dictates that in certain circumstances, the issuing of a particular utterance is itself the performance of an act (and not merely

a locutionary one).⁷ Butler underscores the importance of convention for understanding performativity.

Performativity is thus not a singular “act,” for it is always a reiteration of a norm or a set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.⁸

Linguistic acts not only work because of conventions, they also reinforce and perpetuate them. With each repetition and reiteration, the convention grows stronger and makes digression by new linguistic acts more difficult.

And the convention is not only reiterated, it is also concealed, disclaimed, dissimulated. Derrida has observed that performative force often rests on the dissimulation of the convention upon which it rests. Discourse can legitimate itself “by denying its performative power and rooting it in a constative self-representation.”⁹ The characterization of groups and individuals functions along these lines, denying its own performative power and passing itself off as constative. Both the SAFS and Ravitch argue against political correctness and speech codes, presumably because these intervene in traditional language, language perceived as natural, in ways that seem not only unnecessary but invasive and far-fetched. However, neither the SAFS nor Ravitch analyzes how the language that seems self-evident, innocent and descriptive today established itself performatively. It seems to me that both the SAFS and Ravitch have fallen for performativity’s dissimulation, for its disguise as “naturalizing effect.”¹⁰

Ravitch writes that previous efforts to identify and exclude “any conscious or explicit statements of bias against African Americans, other racial or ethnic minorities, or females, whether in texts or textbooks, especially any statements that demeaned members of these groups... were entirely reasonable and justified” (*LP*, 3-4). But if the sole standard for language use is representational accuracy, and if those offended by language should simply learn to be thick-skinned (*LP*, 161), what can explain Ravitch’s condoning of these earlier efforts at restricting language use? It seems that Ravitch does, after all, believe that linguistic acts can inflict real harm, that it can be reasonable to restrict these acts of linguistic violence just as one would restrict acts of physical violence. It seems that she does understand implicitly, even if she will not admit it explicitly, that repeated pejorative “representations” of certain individuals or groups are not just inaccurate representations, but indeed have performative force in constituting the (self-) conceptions of these individuals or groups.

A discursive view of language allows for an understanding of the workings of power through language. When Butler summarizes performativity as “that power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration,”¹¹ she underscores a conception of power not as held by individuals, but as present in and distributed through language and social institutions. In questions of censorship and the protection of academic freedom, the question of power cannot be ignored. Censorship is a term typically used when those with more power (for example, the state) restrict the language used by those who are less powerful. The Academic Freedom Committee of Human Rights Watch, characterizes “threats to academic freedom” as follows:

Educators, researchers and students are frequent targets of state-sponsored violence and repression. In the most notorious cases, governments bent on imposing a monolithic state ideology have disproportionately targeted teachers and educated individuals for imprisonment, torture and murder. More commonly, governments use intimidation, physical abuse and imprisonment to silence campus-based critics and dissidents, and censor teaching, research and publication on important subjects.¹²

In this account, threats to academic freedom are threats by relatively powerful state governments to the freedom of relatively powerless teachers and researchers. In the email I reproduced at the beginning of this paper, the SAFS expresses concern about pressures on students to avoid language deemed prejudiced and offensive. Apparently, the SAFS believes that these restrictions by relatively powerful teachers and researchers to the freedom of relatively powerless students constitute threats to academic freedom. But do they? One of the ways state governments exercise their power is through hegemonic discourse, discourse that supports the ideology institutionalized by dominant society. Academic freedom is threatened when no *counter-hegemonic* discourse is tolerated. The SAFS, however, is concerned about instances where the freedom of students to participate in hegemonic discourse is allegedly threatened by the *counter-hegemonic* discourse of certain faculty members. Herbert Kohl's observation about this is that

the academic-freedom issue these days is being used to mask the desire of neoconservatives to exert control over ideas at the university and...prevent the rethinking of the curriculum from a world rather than a Western European perspective. In this light the defenders of academic freedom are the ones who are taking a rigid, 'correct' line and trying to shut up students and other professors who are proclaiming that there are fundamental problems about the way universities have traditionally defined what it is necessary to know in order to be an educated person.¹³

CENSORSHIP RECONSIDERED

A nuanced understanding and consideration of the concept of performativity would have helped Ravitch explain to what extent the claims of the pressure groups make sense — and where they go off the rails. The pressure groups' implicit claim that language has force is not so outrageous. The claim, however, that a word, even in a single occurrence, brings into being that which it is said to describe, is based on a serious misunderstanding of the role repetition and convention play in performativity.¹⁴ As Butler notes,

To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body....In philosophical terms: the constative claim is always to some degree performative.¹⁵

If pressure groups indeed believe, as Ravitch contends, that writing textbooks and test questions in which “there is no dominant group, no dominant father, no dominant race, and no dominant gender” (*LP*, 63), effectively and single-handedly brings into being a world in which there is no dominant group, no dominant father, no dominant race, and no dominant gender, then performativity is misunderstood and the pressure groups in question will be sorely disappointed. If, however, these pressure groups believe that the performative force of language implies that language is iterable — in other words, that it can be repeated in ways that change it — then their attempts to dislodge, shift, recontextualize, reinscribe, and reclaim

language are not self-indulgent whims, but rather strategic uptakes of the concept of performativity.

Ravitch is right to address simplistic understandings of the force of language, but by denying language's force altogether, and offering an equally simplistic representational understanding of language, she weakens her own argument. Although herself a historian, Ravitch does not address the importance of teaching students linguistic and philosophical history, the history of words, expressions, concepts, and ideas. If students are taught the historical traces that language carries, and its possibilities for change, language can be used more thoughtfully and, if desired, attempts at resignification can be made.

Both the SAFS and Ravitch, moreover, would benefit from Butler's coherent analysis of the problems of outlawing language.¹⁶ As a measure by itself, banning certain words, images, or phrases has problematic ramifications. First, in the process of banning language, the banned language tends to get repeated; the undesirable language has to be identified, named, hence reiterated. As Butler writes, censorship efforts by public institutions "are compelled to restage in the spectacles of public denunciations they perform the very utterances they seek to banish from public life."¹⁷ For instance, in the educational publishers' "bias and sensitivity guidelines" to which Ravitch refers, the publishers list, and hence repeat, the biased and insensitive language they ask their authors to avoid.

Second, by outlawing certain language (or imagery) completely, the possibility of strategic uses of iterability is foreclosed and the agency of the victim is reduced. Butler cautions against banning discursive acts which are not under sovereign control — and indeed very few discursive acts follow the Althusserian model of sovereign, divine interpellation. For instance, Butler argues against censorship of pornography, because it would preclude reading pornography's visual text *against* itself.¹⁸ Likewise, censorship in education takes away the possibility of teaching students that they are not merely cast by, subjected to, texts, but that they are subjects with agency who can dislodge and resignify texts.

Third, when language is banned, the sanctions against its use fall on individual users. Although individual subjects undeniably have a responsibility in the perpetuation of language (and imagery) that inflicts harm, a simple ban on present uses of the language or image in question denies the citational chain that lends the contested utterance its force. About racist speech, Butler writes,

This phantasmatic production of the culpable speaking subject...casts subjects as the only agents of power. The racial slur is always cited from elsewhere, and in the speaking of it, one chimes in with a chorus of racists, producing at that moment the linguistic occasion for an imagined relation to an historically transmitted community of racists. In this sense, racist speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy, as it surely does.¹⁹

In other words, simply banning racist language addresses only the responsibility of the current language users. Such a ban, however, masks the fact that the racist language was already available for use, that it had a history of meanings and uses, and that it is this history which is brought to bear on the subject(s) of racist language whenever this language is reiterated.

CONCLUSION

Academic freedom is an important value that deserves to be defended, and both the SAFS and Ravitch have taken action against true threats to academic freedom. For instance, in 2001 the SAFS wrote to the University of Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Medical Research regarding the withdrawal of an offer of employment to Dr. David Healy, after Dr. Healy criticized drug companies (for example, Eli Lilly) for avoiding experiments that may show that there are problems with their anti-depressants (for example, Prozac).²⁰ And Ravitch publicly criticizes the attempts by the religious right to ban any and all direct mention of evolution or indirect references to evolution, such as dinosaurs or fossils.

However, the "one size fits all" approach to questions of academic freedom and censorship in education lacks nuance and does not make the necessary distinction between, on the one hand, attempts to change language habits in order to reduce language's wounding force, and, on the other, attempts to silence counterhegemonic voices by censoring what they wish to say or how they wish to say it. The claims made by Ravitch and the SAFS underscore the need for solid conceptual work to underpin research and the conclusions purportedly drawn from it.

Poststructuralist language theory offers conceptual work that refines the debate around political correctness, speech codes, and censorship. And, as is emphasized by poststructuralist thinkers, an understanding of context is crucial. The SAFS focuses on higher education, Ravitch on K-12, but in both cases education is the context of the discussion of restrictions to language use. It carries beyond the scope of this paper, but Ravitch's and the SAFS's underlying assumptions about education and its aims are worth examining.²¹ I would maintain that the purpose of students and teachers coming together in an educative encounter and effort is not to vent opinions, but rather to examine them. Freedom of inquiry is not the same as freedom of expression, and education is not a soap box.

Ironically, the strongly rhetorical use of language by both the SAFS and Ravitch, relying on persuasion rather than evidence, underscores that language is used for its force as well as its meaning. Ravitch claims that "by expurgating literature, we teach [students] that words are meaningless and fungible" (*LP*, 165). On the contrary, the efforts of pressure groups illustrate that language matters a great deal, which is precisely why both freedom of language use, and freedom from language's harm are values to be discussed with great care.

1. SAFS is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in 1992. See <<http://www.safs.ca>>. Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict what Students Learn* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). This book will be cited as *LP* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. Herbert Kohl, "Uncommon Differences: On Political Correctness, Core Curriculum, and Democracy in Education," in *I won't learn from you' And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 103.

3. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 6-7.

4. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and J. Mehlman, in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

5. Ibid., 18.
6. Judith Butler, "Preface," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xv.
7. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 114 (emphasis added).
8. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 12.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy I*, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 33.
10. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 8.
11. Ibid., 20.
12. Human Rights Watch "Academic Freedom" <<http://www.hrw.org/advocacy/academic/>> (21 October 2003). Human Rights Watch is an international, independent, non-governmental organization, dedicated to the protection of human rights.
13. Kohl, "Uncommon Differences," 105.
14. The only exception is a sovereign divine performative such as, "Let there be light!" See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994).
15. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 10-11.
16. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
17. Ibid., 129.
18. Ibid., 69.
19. Ibid., 80.
20. SAFS Letter to Dr. Paul E. Garfinkel and Dr. David Goldbloom, 23 April 2001 <<http://www.safs.ca/issuescases/camh.html>> (21 Oct. 2003).
21. See Diane Ravitch, "Education After the Culture Wars," *Daedalus* 131, no. 3 (2002): 5-21.