

Toward an Activist Theory of Language

David I. Backer
West Chester University of Pennsylvania, USA
dbacker@wcupa.edu

At the time of this writing there is a presidential campaign happening in the United States.¹ The campaign has been unique in a number of ways, the novelty of its political discourse chief among them. What candidates in both major parties have said—whether advocating socialism in a country hostile to it, or referring to one another’s genitalia during televised debates—has disturbed many in the public sphere, both in the U.S. and around the world. President Barack Obama shared this unnerved reaction. He spoke on the subject at Syracuse University in New York on March 28, 2016, at the award ceremony for the Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting. What he said relied on the idea of truth, and the extent to which political campaigns, journalists, and other citizens are concerned with it: “When our elected officials and political campaigns become entirely untethered to reason and facts and analysis, *when it doesn’t matter what’s true and what’s not*, that makes it all but impossible for us to make good decisions for future generations.”²

According to President Obama, in the course of a political campaign, a candidate or other citizen may become “untethered to reason and facts” such that “it doesn’t matter what’s true and what’s not.” The implication here is that contemporary presidential campaign discourse has become separated from reason and truth in just in this way. His usage of the term “true” is ambiguous, though we might guess at the theory of truth he intends. The word “untethered” implies that a discourse where “what’s true and what’s not” matters is connected, a part of, or otherwise linked to a domain of things that exist about which we might speak truthfully. In other words, that statements and claims and arguments—specifically in political campaigns—aim at corresponding to the world such that they are “factual” claims and

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² Obama, as quoted by The White House, “Remarks by the President,” para. 13 (emphasis added).

statements. Interestingly, President Obama goes on to claim in that speech that candidates, when thus untethered, are merely jockeying for position in a game of power—saying whatever they can to get the requisite attention which will launch them into the nomination and then the presidency. But what if this jockeying for position—attempting to vindicate one’s own status or vision of the world—has a theory of truth itself? It could be that, in political contexts, one must “untether” oneself from the notion that true statements correspond to a reality in order to vindicate one’s position through discourse. It could be that there is a theory of truth in this untethering; a theory of language whose paradigm stipulates that “what’s true and what’s not” are precisely those statements which successfully vindicate one’s position or vision of the world under a specific set of political circumstances.

On such a theory, one must untether from reason and facts and analysis in order to speak statements with which others can make decisions for future generations: vindicating one’s ideology seeks, presumably, to achieve an office from which one can guide the course of events. Speaking truly, on the theory of truth just proposed, gets one to such an office. This chapter introduces one approach to such a theory of language, what I call an “activist” theory of language. Thus the chapter serves as a kind of primer for that theory, sketching some important ideas that gesture towards a fuller one. To do this, I present the Althusserian Marxist philosopher of language Jacques Lecercle’s notion of “correctness,” drawing from his *Marxist Philosophy of Language*. A correct statement—like a slogan—names the present conjuncture (a Gramscian term) and condenses it in such a way as to vindicate an ideological position. In this way, the activist theory of language shares some qualities in common with speech act theory (though differs from correspondence and consistency theories of truth), which is not a theory of truth so much as an account of certain kinds of sentences that are actions themselves.³ For the activist theory of language, the paradigm of truth stipulates that true statements are correct statements: those which vindicate a particular ideology successfully. While it may be disturbing, what frontrunner Donald Trump has said and continues to say in this campaign cycle, for example, has certainly been effective in vindicating his political position. According to the activist paradigm, he has spoken correctly and therefore truly; whether the public sphere (or the president) likes it or not.

Towards an Activist Theory of Language

According to Lecercle, correctness, as a value of statements, is one way of understanding the implications of Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism in the philosophy of language. Truth-as-correctness says (following the French Marxist Louis Althusser) that “a correct philosophical thesis is one that enables adjustment to the conjuncture.”⁴ Further elaboration of the important term “conjuncture” will follow in the coming section. A statement is true if it is correct, according to Lecercle, which is to say that the statement permits understandings and actions which accord—are “adjusted to”—a set of contemporary political and social forces. A correct slogan for instance, following V.I. Lenin, identifies the moment of conjuncture and

³ Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, 40. I would like to thank Jason Hannan for many helpful comments on the original version of this chapter, including this one.

⁴ Ibid.

“names the political task corresponding to the moment of conjuncture.”⁵ Naming the political task appropriate to a particular set of circumstances is to tell the truth on this theory. A correct statement is also one that “condenses and embodies the concrete analysis of the concrete situation.”⁶ Lecerle continues: “The implicit Leninist slogan here is ‘without correct slogans, no successful revolution.’”⁷ In other words, correct slogans are necessary for successful revolution and, by extension, successful revolution is one way to determine whether a statement is correct or incorrect; and therefore true or untrue.

“Conjuncture” is a crucial term here, since correctness requires that statements condense and embody the conjuncture. Antonio Gramsci writes the term “conjuncture” in the *Prison Notebooks* as he interprets military history, going back to Caesar’s time in Rome to his own 20th twentieth-century Italy. The term “conjuncture” has a military connotation, referring to “a combination of real circumstances” forming “a moment of the system of relations of force which exists in a given situation.”⁸ The conjuncture can include things like “the qualitative condition of the leading personnel.”⁹ Generally speaking, “strategic preparation,” which keeps the conjuncture in mind, “tends to reduce to zero the so-called ‘imponderable factors’—in other words, the immediate, unpremeditated reactions at a given moment of the traditionally inert passive forces.”¹⁰ The conjuncture is therefore a set of “factors” regarding the who, what, when, where, and how of existing political forces, particularly in response to possible threats to their current balances (what I will call the “status quo”). This set of factors can also include “the relations between international forces . . . to the objective relations within society—in other words, the degree of development of productive forces; to relations of political force and those between parties; and to immediate (or potentially military) political relations.”¹¹

Naming a conjuncture entails a kind of reality or fact. Conjunctural facts, following Gramsci, Lenin, and Althusser, are facts of struggle—in a Marxist context, class struggle. Again, the term emerges from discourses on “strategic preparation of the theatre of struggle”¹² and refers, in a Marxist usage, to “the balance of forces between the classes in struggle.”¹³

“Struggle” for present purposes may be understood through the lens of contradictions and crises¹⁴ in society which over time populate a conjuncture. A conjuncture is therefore more than just a status quo. It is the conflicted aspects of a status quo, the cracks where the status quo begins to break down and to which the forces devoted to maintaining that status quo flock in attempts to seal the fissure. For instance:

A crisis occurs, sometimes lasting for decades. This exceptional duration means that incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and that, despite this, the political forces which are struggling to conserve and defend the existence of the structure itself are making every effort to cure them, within certain limits, and to overcome

⁵ Ibid., italics mine.

⁶ Ibid., 97, italics mine.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 217.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 197

¹² Ibid., 217.

¹³ Lecerle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, 101.

¹⁴ See Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions*.

them. These incessant and persistent efforts . . . form the terrain of the “conjunctural,” and it is upon this terrain that the forces of opposition organize.¹⁵

Various struggles over the working day during the industrial era, beginning in an organized fashion in the late 19th century with the birth of the labor movement, are paradigm cases of Gramsci’s “terrain” of conjunctural struggle. Such struggles arise around an “incurable structural contradiction” where certain “political forces” seek to prevent, through defense and conservation, other political forces (“forces of opposition”) from changing and threatening a status quo. The length of the working day has been one site of struggle for generations, composing one central feature in the terrain of capitalist conjunctures. The struggle itself comes about from a contradiction in capitalism. In Karl Marx’s *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx points to an “antimony” between two groups in a capitalist economy. The first group are capitalists who own the means of production, including the productive force of labor power purchased from workers with wages. The second group are workers who act as sellers of their labor power. The capitalist buys labor power from the worker, who sells it for the price of the wage. However, “the peculiar nature of the commodity sold [labor] implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser, and the laborer maintains his right as seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to one of definite normal duration.”¹⁶ (p.243) According to the law of exchanges, the purchaser has a right to the commodity purchased—the employer can stipulate how long the working day must be. Also according to the law of exchange, the seller has the equal right to sell that commodity at a certain duration—the worker can stipulate how and when the labor is expended, particularly by demanding (through striking, for example) that the working day be eight hours rather than ten or fourteen. “Hence is it that in the history of capitalist production, the determination of what is a working day, presents itself as the result of a struggle.”¹⁷ (Ibid.)

For the activist theory of language, this case becomes paradigmatic when one considers the truth or falsity of statements regarding the length of working days. In a hypothetical scenario between an employer and employee, the two have equal rights on the law exchanges to demand that the working day be of different lengths. The employer might say “the working day is ten hours long” and the employee might say “the working day is eight hours long.” Who is correct? How long must the working day be? The notion of correctness requires that there will be a struggle, however quick or prolonged, which determines the truth or falsity of these statements. If the employees capitulate or do not otherwise organize themselves into something like a union which then, through collective bargaining, demands a certain length to the working day, then the employer’s statement will be correct. If the employees do organize and successfully push for a contract which stipulates a certain length of the working day (and the employers agree to this contract), then the employees’ statement will be correct. It will be true, in other words, that the employees’ statement about the length constitutes the working day. The truth of the statement making reference to the working day is thereby decided by struggle in the conjuncture, and the side vindicated in the struggle is correct. By extension, the language with which the employees’ enunciate their case—in pamphlets, chants, songs, etc.—are also correct because, with this language, they vindicate their side of the struggle. The workers’ stipulation of the working day’s length as well as their campaign language is therefore true because it is correct, which is to say that they vindicated their side of the opposition in a conjunctural struggle. These conjunctural

¹⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 178.

¹⁶ Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p.243.

¹⁷ Ibid.

struggles are how correct statements get their meaning in general: “[It is] the moment of the conjuncture and the conjuncture that allows it to make sense. The conjunctural character of meaning is the content of the concept of correctness.”¹⁸

Correctness is a value which describes the way in which these statements are true. Since correctness in this sense refers to the extent to which a statement names and condenses a conjuncture, it is not circular to claim that true statements, for the activist theory of language, are correct statements. Much like performativity theory (though importantly different, as I will show) a statement “in the last analysis . . . is ‘true’ if it becomes a new reality, if the forces of opposition triumph.”¹⁹ Such statements come about “in a series of ideological, religious, philosophical, political, and juridical polemics, whose concreteness can be estimated by the extent to which they are convincing, and shift the previously existing disposition of social forces.”²⁰ Vindication, in this context, is precisely achieving such a “triumph” where “shifts” occurs in the existing disposition of social forces. Language which vindicates a side in a conjunctural struggle shifts the balance of existing forces in society, decisively creating a triumph for that side in the struggle.

Yet the terms of the activist theory of language go beyond vindication. Certainly vindication is grounds for correctness. If a side in a conjunctural struggle achieves its aims while working within the contradiction at that part of the conjuncture, then statements describing their vindication will be correct and therefore true. There is a distinction here between two kinds of correct statements according to the activist theory of language. One kind of correct statement is true because a side in a conjunctural struggle has been clearly vindicated. The working day example is one such case. When a group of employees go on strike with a demand for a shorter working day, there is a clear moment (the signing and enactment of the contract) when the truth about the working day gets decided in struggle. The struggle for that demand ends. A simple activist theory of language would say that only those correct statements clearly decided in a struggle can be true and false. This simple version of the theory would have to proffer a third value, like the “undecided” value of an anti-realist theory of truth, and say that all statements in undecided struggles are neither true nor false. But there are many struggles whose demands are less clear and less likely; struggles which are ongoing, out of which language emerges which distinguish perspectives in conjunctural struggles.

A modified activist theory of language, a more inclusive version of the theory, would say that there are some correct statements whose truth results from gains made in the process of vindication within a conjunctural struggle, though no single side has clearly won. Thus the importance of naming the conjuncture, calling for the appropriate action, and embodying the conjuncture. Correct statements according to this inclusive activist theory of knowledge are those that name the terrain of a conjuncture, embody struggle, and call for appropriate action. These criteria may be sufficient for a statement’s correctness, despite the fact that one side in the struggle has not been vindicated. The simple activist theory of language might claim that vindication is necessary and sufficient for correctness. In other words, a correct statement must emerge from a clearly vindicated side in a conjunctural struggle. Certainly (the simple version says) statements which embody, name, condense, or call for appropriate action within a conjunctural struggle are necessary for correctness; but they are not sufficient. The modified

¹⁸ Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, 98.

¹⁹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 178.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

inclusive version of the theory is less demanding. Rather than requiring “clear vindication” through a procedure like collective bargaining and contract arbitration (or elections or revolutions, perhaps), the modified inclusive activist theory of language could require one or a combination of naming, condensation, embodying, or calling for appropriate action in a conjunctural struggle when it comes to correctness. Each version has benefits and drawbacks. The benefit of the simple version is that there is a clear line between true and false statements. A drawback might be that there are many statements which are as-yet undetermined, since there is no procedure that can say a side has been vindicated. A further drawback of this version is the question of procedure: how do we know what is an appropriate way to determine a side has been vindicated? A benefit of the modified inclusive version of the theory is that it can be used flexibly to say that certain statements are true or false depending on the extent to which they name the conjuncture, embody the conjuncture, condense the conjuncture, or call for appropriate action within the conjuncture.²¹

For example, there may be statements which achieve interpellative saturation in public discourse, a saturation which evinces the statement’s correctness even though there has not been a clear vindication of one side in a struggle. For Louis Althusser, interpellation is the “function of ideology,”²² or the way in which ideology propagates. The French word *interpellation* means “to hail” and, the process of ideological hailing, as Althusser intends it, “recruits” subjects from among individuals. Interpellation makes individuals subject to ideologies, in other words. Althusser writes that “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way as to ‘recruit’ subjects among individuals . . . or ‘transforms’ individuals into subjects . . . through the very precise operation that we call interpellation or hailing.”²³ The now classic example of this transition from individuality to becoming a subject of authority is the hailing of a citizen by a police officer. While walking down the street, a police officer says “Hey you!” to a citizen and that citizen turns around, facing the officer. Interpellation has partially occurred here, completing in the officer’s examination of the citizen’s national papers to ensure the person is French and not some outsider. The citizen in this case has become a subject of the state, hailed by the commanding gaze of one of its representatives. Althusser narrates the situation: “There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out, ‘Hey, you there!’ An individual . . . turns around, believing-suspecting-knowing that he’s the one—recognizing, in other words, that he ‘really is the person’ the interpellation is aimed at.”²⁴

The purpose of revisiting this idea in the history of Marxist philosophy is to emphasize the importance of language to interpellation. The ideology gives the interpellation “Hey, you there!” its meaning. Lecercle echoes the Althusserian aphorism that ideology is allusion more than illusion, for instance. In an activist theory of language, ideology furnishes statements with meaning.²⁵ Vindicated ideologies compose the meanings of words and statements over time. As mentioned above, it is a matter of debate what criterion is best for deciding when a certain ideology has been vindicated in conjunctural struggle. The phrase “interpellative saturation”

²¹ Building out the activist theory of language further would require specification for each of these processes: condensation, naming, embodying, calling for appropriate action, and adjustment. I gesture towards specifying what each of these might mean using examples below.

²² Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 190.

²³ *Ibid.*, 190.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

was offered, by which is meant a certain critical mass of individuals have been recruited to an ideology such that certain statements have spread so widely as to indicate a kind of vindication. For the simple version of the activist theory, an election might be a reasonable way to determine the correctness of certain statements. When Donald Trump surges in the Republican presidential nominating contest and supporters repeat his talking points and slogans, his success is a criteria by which we can determine whether what he says is true. The phrase “Build a wall!” has successfully interpellated many of Trump’s followers and interlocutors. Given his success in the media, the ways in which conversations about the election tend to focus on Trump, it may be the case that his discourse has achieved interpellative saturation. For many, what Trump says embodies the conjuncture—the contradictions and tensions of the present moment—and condenses this conjuncture, naming appropriate tasks to vindicate their side of certain struggles.

The simple version of correctness would require that Trump win the general election and become president before saying whether these statements are correct. In this case, the election serves as the procedure by which we can determine if a side in a struggle has been vindicated. The modified inclusive version of the theory however might say that, independently of the outcome of the election, Trump’s name, his slogans, and his ideas have achieved an interpellative saturation which imbues statements from his campaign with truth. They are correct because they have spread, propagating his ideological stance at the site of a number of structural contradictions (which the Republican Party establishment—against Trump—is currently working to cure, as Gramsci would say).

To further clarify, I have not specified the exact differences between statements that condense, embody, adjust, or call for action with respect to their conjunctures. These terms describe criteria for correctness of a statement in the activist theory of language. If a statement condenses a conjunctural struggle, it is a possible candidate for correctness. If a statement helps speakers adjust to the conjunctural struggle; if a statement embodies that struggle; if a statement calls for an appropriate action within that struggle—each of these describe the qualities of potentially correct statements (for the modified inclusive version, of course). Lecerle, in *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, articulates these qualities, but does not build them out. Looking at some of Donald Trump’s slogans, the differences take shape. “Build a wall!” clearly demands an action at the conjuncture of immigration policy. In one vignette, white students chanted this slogan at a basketball game where their mostly white team played against a team with minority students.²⁶ *Call to action* demands that certain things happen in the conjunctural struggle. “Make America great again” condenses the conjuncture (implying the other slogan that “we don’t win anymore”²⁷): the United States has lost its power, prestige, or value, and the Trump campaign will restore these to the nation. *Condensation* succinctly expresses a conjunctural struggle. “We don’t win anymore” (one of Trump’s critical tropes) or “they’re chopping off heads”²⁸ (in reference to the Islamic State) make the conjunctural struggle felt in a visceral way, embodying the situation. *Embodying* makes the conjuncture felt.

Consider other phrases, like “We are the 99%!” This exclamation was a flagship slogan during Occupy Wall Street, a global movement responding to oppression, mostly in the form of income inequality and distributive injustice.²⁹ From Al Gore’s utterance of “the wealthiest one

²⁶ “High School Basketball Fans Chant,” *Talking Points Memo News*.

²⁷ “Trump: We Don’t Win Anymore,” *Reuters*.

²⁸ Berenson, “Donald Trump Defends Torture at Republican Debate,” *Time*.

²⁹ Weinstein, “We Are The 99% Creators Revealed,” *Mother Jones*.

percent” in the 2000 United States presidential campaign³⁰ to Joseph Stiglitz’s title “Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%” in a *Vanity Fair* article in May 2011,³¹ to David Graeber’s utterance of the same when describing the motivations for a New York City General Assembly,³² to the widespread utterance of the slogan during demonstrations in the cities internationally. The statement “We are the 99%!” enabled adaptation to the conjuncture: it helped citizens adjust to the reality of the conjunctural struggle between the wealthy and the working class. *Adjustment* clarifies the terms of a struggle. Certainly the phrase implies a call to action as well, gesturing towards a task appropriate for that conjuncture: collective action against the financial institutions which perpetrated the crisis.

Similar analyses are possible for “Oxi!” from the Greek debt crisis, and phrases from the Black Lives Matter movement such as “I can’t breathe!” The Greek people, in an unexpected referendum held by the Leftist party Syriza, voted by majority against another cycle of loans with austerity conditions from the Troika.³³ The word “Oxi” (Greek for “No”) comes to name a site of struggle between the status quo of debt financing, German economic hegemony, and single-currency policies of the European Union. “Oxi” is a call to appropriate action primarily, demanding a “no” vote to a referendum which asked the Greek people whether the nation should forge another austerity plan with the Troika. Incidentally, while the Greek people voted “Oxi” on that proposal the Syriza government went on to make an austerity plan under pressures from both within and outside their coalition. In that case, no meant yes, so to speak, and “Oxi” was incorrect.

In the second phrase, Eric Garner, a middle-aged Black man from Staten Island, New York, was seized by five white police officers, one of whom used a chokehold maneuver on Garner, which eventually killed him. The arrest (murder) was recorded on camera. Garner was supposedly selling a cigarillo and yelled “I can’t breathe!” while the officer choked him.³⁴ The phrase, as it was adopted by activists, names the suffocating institutional racism in United States, manifesting now as police brutality. Millions chanted “I can’t breathe!”³⁵ This phrase embodies the conjunctural struggle between the Black community and White policing (and the criminal justice system in general). Suffocation is a physical happening, something that occurs to the body, but which also represents the inability for members Black community to survive and thrive in United States society. According to the modified inclusive activist theory of language, these statements are true to the extent that they are correct: the extent to which they enable adjustment to the conjuncture, identify the conjunctural moment, name the task best suited for that moment, and condense and embody that moment.

There is another distinction to be made here between a strong version of the modified activist theory and a weaker version. The strong version would stipulate some combination of the criteria elaborated above: condensation, call for action, adjustment, and naming the moment. The strongest activist theory of language a correct statement to condense and call for action and

³⁰ Gore, as quoted by ABC News, “Prepared Remarks of Al Gore’s Acceptance Speech.” Gore said that “under the tax plan the other side has proposed, for every ten dollars that goes to the wealthiest one percent, middle class families would get one dime. And lower-income families would get one penny.”

³¹ Stiglitz, “Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%.”

³² Graeber, “On Playing By The Rules.”

³³ Cassidy, “Oxi: A Historic Greek Vote Against Austerity,” *The New Yorker*.

³⁴ “Protests Erupt in Wake of Chokehold Death,” *CNN*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

adjust and name the moment, such that if the statement does not meet any one of those criteria it will not be correct. Weaker versions of the theory replace the “ands” here with “ors” in the criteria for correctness, the weakest being that a statement is correct if it condenses or calls for action or adjusts or names the moment. The simple activist theory of language will ask for evidence of vindication, rendering this question of strength or weakness moot regarding the criteria for correctness in the modified inclusive theory.

A basic articulation of the activist theory of language would be that it’s paradigm of truth is “truth-as-correctness.” Two varieties of correctness have been elaborated. The first version of correctness requires a clear procedure to determine whether a side in a conjunctural struggle. The correct statement, according to the activist theory, is a conjunctural reference: the extent to which it is “convincing” and shifts the previously existing disposition of social forces; names the moment in a theater of struggle; names, adjusts, condenses, and/or embodies the conjunctural struggle; or becomes a new reality. The activist theory of language, according to Lecercle, thus understands correctness as successful interpellation, but widely successful interpellation. If a statement is correct, then a certain ideology has been vindicated by its proponents such that those activists have achieved an interpellative saturation in public sphere discourse. The cases mentioned previously from Occupy Wall Street, Greece, and Black Lives Matter might be examples here. These statements achieved a certain saturation in the public sphere.

Considerations

One might be tempted to claim that the activist theory of language presented here is a relativist position with respect to truth. Take Althusser’s idea of interpellation. If an individual is hailed and recruited by a particular ideology, does that mean, according to the correctness paradigm, that the statements riding the interpellation are true? If so, the activist theory claims that true statements are true insofar as someone believes them to be true. But this is not what the activist theory is saying. The correctness paradigm requires that a statement names and condenses a conjuncture and creates a certain “saturation” of interpellations throughout discourse. The landscape of discourse must shift, so to speak, and the statements which compose that shift are correct and therefore true. Those fighting in the struggle learn to speak a certain way about the contours of the conjuncture, learning to understand the politics of their situation in a particular way. This discourse may be offensive, meaningless, or absurd to those who are impartial or on the other side of the struggle.

The labels “pro-life” and “pro-choice” from the abortion debate in the United States are examples. Anti-abortion activists speak as if they are on the side of life, casting the pro-abortion side of this struggle as being against life, since the former consider abortion murder. Pro-abortion activists speak as if they are on the side of choice and freedom, casting the anti-abortion side as being against choice, since they advocate women’s ability to decide whether or not she should have an abortion (rather than the government). Activists have learned how to craft these terms, cast the struggle in a certain way to vindicate their positions at the struggle. The activist theory of language accounts for the truth of statements containing these adjectives (“Being pro-abortion is pro-choice”) if they name the conjuncture and spur shifts in the struggle in which they are uttered. Both of these adjectives (pro-choice and pro-life), having crystallized as the labels for the sides in the struggle, are to some degree correct. Again, the way to determine that degree is a matter for consideration. Supporters, successful legislation, or other measurements could in fact measure interpellative saturation. So can usage: if the Oxford

English Dictionary adopts a new term, if a meme circulates on Facebook, if “everyone is talking about it,” all these scenarios indicate interpellative saturation.

Another point: an activist theory of language is inherently educational. In struggle, words change meaning as activists teach speakers to speak differently. A recent example is the recent shift from uttering “illegal immigrant” when referring to persons living in a country without legal permission to do so, specifically in mainstream journalistic media. Though some refuse to utter the new term, keeping to “illegal immigrant,” the widely-accepted term of art is now “undocumented immigrant.” Kathleen Carroll, Senior Vice President and Executive Editor of the Associated Press, explained that

The Stylebook no longer sanctions the term 「illegal immigrant」 or the use of 「illegal」 to describe a person. Instead, it tells users that 「illegal」 should describe only an action, such as living in or immigrating to a country illegally.

Why did we make the change?

The discussions on this topic have been wide-ranging and include many people from many walks of life. . . . Those discussions continued even after AP affirmed 「illegal immigrant」 as the best use.

A number of people felt that 「illegal immigrant」 was the best choice at the time. They also believed the always-evolving³⁶ English language might soon yield a different choice and we should stay in the conversation.

Carroll mentions how “many people from many walks in life” participated in the “discussions” and “conversation” around whether to use “illegal” or “undocumented” when referring to persons living in a country without permission. These people in their walks of life may be understood as occupying opposing positions at a struggle in the conjuncture. This particular struggle is over treatment of immigrants in the United States. One side of the struggle learned to think and speak a certain way about this struggle in order to vindicate their position within it: a welcoming treatment of immigrants, institutionalizing a frictionless and easy path to citizenship. The other side of the struggle also learned to think and speak in ways that vindicated their position: the harsh treatment of these immigrants, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to become citizens. The former term, illegal immigrant, implies that a person is a thing that can be illegal, which the conservative side of the struggle (such as Republican Governor of Arizona Jan Brewer) maintains as both sensible and sensical.³⁷ It is easier to treat an immigrant harshly if the person somehow, in their entirety, is against the law and therefore obviously wrong to make a citizen. On the other hand, if a person is thought of as being “undocumented,” then the implication that the person could become documented is built into the utterance, instituting within the term itself the possibility of citizenship. It is easy to see the struggle at this conjuncture in the AP’s back-and-forth decisions regarding the correct terminology. At first the AP decided to continue using “illegal immigrant,” but as the discussion continued, the organization decided to make the change.

The way Carroll describes the “always-evolving English language” and how the language

³⁶ Carroll, as quoted in Colford, “‘Illegal Immigrant’ No More,” para. 2–6.

³⁷ Planas, “Jan Brewer Will Keep Using the Term ‘Illegal Immigrant,’” quotes Brewer as saying, “Well I’m sorry but I believe that if you break the law and you’re an illegal immigrant and you’re in this country illegally, that you are an illegal immigrant. . . . We know they’re human beings, we know that they’re our brothers and our sisters, but we believe in the rule of law and we can’t afford it and we certainly can’t afford the criminal element” (para. 6).

“might soon yield a different choice” bespeaks the struggle-oriented quality of usage. It is interesting that she attributes the new option’s emergence to the English language and not the activists who worked tirelessly to learn, craft, and disseminate this usage. It is as though the language speaks rather than speakers speaking the language. In any case, the AP made an informed decision to change its usage, learning to speak differently about persons living in a country without permission to do. The “accurate” usage is now to call such persons “undocumented.” In a debate between the two sides of this struggle, a conservative might say “illegal immigrant” and we might expect the progressive side to respond by saying something such as, “No, these people are not illegal immigrants but rather undocumented immigrants.” The latter contests the truth of the former’s utterance, claiming that a proposition containing the term “illegal immigrant” is false. Rather the truth of this claim rests on a claim to “correctness” or “accuracy” in accordance with the idea of a struggle within a conjunction. Engaging in this struggle on one of its sides requires an educational activity in learning new ways to speak that vindicate the speaker’s side.

While activists learn to speak in certain ways, correctness requiring a kind of educational activity on the front end of activist utterance, there is another educational aspect of this theory: the consequences. In the above example, speakers learn to utter new phrases and terms—learn to speak correctly—when one of the sides in struggle is able, through language and action, to vindicate their side of the struggle. Impartial readers, persons, and organizations learn to speak differently when one of the sides is vindicated: and vindication, in this case, is almost identical to that educational activity. The extent to which a side speaks correctly is directly related to the number of people who learn to speak in their terms. Another way of putting this educational insight is to say that activists are teachers, and speakers not explicitly involved in the struggle but who learn to speak differently from activist speech speakers are students. When the victorious side of the struggle emerges, speaking its new learned discourse, new and unfamiliar terms, phrasings, utterances, and enunciations proliferate throughout the conjuncture and the wider society. It is a discursive way of thinking about historical, political, and social change. The movement of “We are the 99%!” from occupation to occupation, newspaper to newspaper, and mouth to mouth, shows how individuals *learn* to speak those words in a certain way. That change involves the changing of minds and hearts as struggles move forward, and occurs through discourse. Che Guevara, in describing the Cuban Revolution to Uruguayan readers in 1976, described Cuban society at that time as a gigantic school.³⁸

A contemporary example of this notion of the gigantic school of revolution in language comes from Jill Soloway, the creator of the television show “Transparent.” In a recent profile in the New Yorker, Ariel Levy writes of an interaction with Soloway about gender-neutral pronouns.

“A really interesting thought exercise is to say ‘they’ and ‘them’ for all genders,” Soloway instructed me [Levy]. . . . I pointed out that strict grammar forbids using the plural pronoun for a single person. . . . Soloway shook her head vigorously. “All of the magazines and newspapers need to begin to do this,” she said. “The language is evolving daily—even gender reassignment, people are now calling it gender confirmation!” She was getting excited. “The promise of this revolution is not having to say ‘Men do this, women do this.’ . . . In a few years, we’re going to

³⁸ Guevara, “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” para. 20.

look back and say, “When we were little, we used to think that all women had vaginas and all men had penises, but now, of course, we know that’s not true.”³⁹

Here is a complete example illustrating the activist theory of language, and its educational quality, at the juncture of gender and transgender struggles. Soloway, a feminist, “instructs” Levy in avoiding usage of traditional gender categories “man” and “woman.” Soloway teaches Levy not to obey the “strict grammar” which “forbids” a certain way of speaking. That “strict” grammar, interpreted through the activist theory of language, ideologically preserves the gender binary used by one side of the struggle over gender. It is “false” to refer to a singular person with a plural pronoun, in this case, to the extent that it vindicates those seeking to preserve the traditional gender pronouns and ultimately the gender categories to which they refer. Soloway is aware of the politics of this grammar, noting that “the promise of this revolution,” the successful upending of traditional gender binaries, is “not having to say” that the binaries exist. She understands that truth and falsity are values decided by the correctness of statements, and that correctness is determined by the vindication of one’s side in a conjunctural struggle (rather than grammar rules). A consummate activist, she says that magazines “need” to learn to use the gender-neutral “they.” This “need” comes from Soloway’s activism, a desire to upend the gender binaries, the way in which the word ‘they’ embodies, names, and alters the conjuncture to vindicate the feminist position. Soloway becomes excited at the prospect of such changes in the language, noting that the “evolution” of the language (happening “daily”) maps to the social change for which she fights. She mentions another example of this evolution in the language containing the promise of revolution: the difference between “gender reassignment” and “gender confirmation.” The former vindicates the traditional patriarchal position, which works from the presumption that one’s given gender, one’s assigned gender, is the more authentic. For the patriarchy, a transition marks a “reassignment.” The latter term, however, “gender confirmation,” privileges not the assigned gender but rather the transitioned gender as being the more authentic, vindicating the transgender community’s position against the patriarchy. The transgender community would dispute the truth of the statement “a transition will sometimes require gender reassignment,” arguing that it is *incorrect* to refer to that procedure as a “reassignment.” Rather, it is correct to call it a “confirmation” of the person’s gender. (The same analysis holds for the prefix *cis* when referring to people who continue to identify with their patriarchally assigned genders. Transgender activists would say that it is incorrect to call myself a “man,” for instance, since this is the gender I was assigned at birth. Rather, it is more accurate to say that I am a “cisman.”)

Soloway’s final line in this interaction marks another educational insight. Immediately after thinking through the political changes in language, she speculates that in the near future society will reflect that it has learned important lessons about gender binaries. The reflective formulation “we used to think that women had vaginas and men has penises, but now, of course, we know that’s not true” points to an educational shift in the assignation of truth to statements containing gender binaries. This “truth” is not the truth of correspondence, coherence, poetry, or performance. Rather it is the truth of accuracy—correctness—according to a vindicated group who struggled successfully against an existing balance of powers, victorious in their conjuncture, teaching society the truth in the process.

³⁹ Levy, “Dolls and Feelings.”

Precedents

There are many precedents for the activist theory of language, and ways to clarify its paradigm of truth through contrasts with other paradigms. Lecerle's thinking is heavily influenced by Michel Pêcheux, another student of Louis Althusser.⁴⁰ Foucauldian and Butlerian notions cast subjectivity as being composed of discourse, such that the body is “inscribed” with meanings.⁴¹ Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology, drawing from psychoanalysis, claims that ideology is a linguistic quality which gives a sense of reality to fantasies about society.⁴² Valentin Volosinov, writing in Russia just after the revolution of 1917, anticipated this linguistic turn in theories of ideology; Lecerle also draws heavily from him. For Volosinov there is a difference between the physiological qualities of a thing and its “image.”⁴³ The physiological qualities of a thing become apparent when it is considered as identical with itself: a hammer has a wooden handle with a metal head shaped thus and so, for example. The image of the hammer appears, on the other hand, when it is considered identical with other things: the USSR, for example. The symbolic meaning of a thing is always ideological, as opposed to its physiological aspects. Claiming that anything linguistic has ideological quality means that imagined aspect of utterance is necessary to it. Whenever we speak about something we refer, to some degree, to its image. The distinction is meant to be intuitive rather than complex and laborious to make. While the physiological hammer has certain physiological qualities it will appear to different people with different imagined qualities, and these differences map to ideological difference. That “hammer” can mean both the physical and imagined qualities of the object (that it might equally be spoken of as a thing with a wood handle and metal head used for building and symbolizing the USSR, or the god Thor, or John Henry for that matter) expresses the notion that language is ideological. These images accrue within a particular social context, where production and political life are arranged in particular ways. It is obvious that discourse happens within authoritarian societies, capitalist societies, communist societies, and any other manner of social-political arrangement, and that those arrangements will influence and be influenced by the discourse spoken within them. The social milieu composes the imagined aspects of meaning and vice versa.

Signs . . . are particular material things; . . . any item of nature, technology, or consumption can become a sign, acquiring in the process a meaning that goes beyond its given particularity. A sign does not simply exist as part of reality—it reflects and refracts another reality. . . . Every sign is subject to the criteria of ideological evaluation. . . . The domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present, too. *Everything ideological possesses semiotic value.*⁴⁴

Signs are material “segments of reality” in addition to being “shadows” of reality. They are things in the world like tables or iPads or pens. A sign however, unlike mere “items of nature, technology, or consumption,” presents something else: a sign presents something other than

⁴⁰ Pêcheux, *Language, Semantics, and Ideology*.

⁴¹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*.

⁴² Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*.

⁴³ Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10, Volosinov's italics.

itself, “another reality,” the presentation of which can occur in a reflective and/or refractive mode. I say presentative and not representative intentionally, as one possible reading of the above passage is that signs may “distort” reality or be “true to” reality. Yet Volosinov also writes that a sign reflects and refracts “another reality,” giving the impression that there are only “other” realities presented by signs, rejecting the notion that there is one single reality which signs may successfully or unsuccessfully represent.

The hashtag is one contemporary example of this difference between the physiological and the imaginative aspects of meaning. There is a difference between the proper name “Bernie Sanders” and the hashtag #BernieSanders. The former refers to the presidential candidate who is a democratic socialist, has white hair, is a senator from Vermont, etc. The hashtag, however, originates within a particular discursive community, which utters it in order to label, name, or participate in collective examination of a set of beliefs, questions, or themes: socialism, democracy, racial justice, banking reform, etc. The hashtag “links up” with the social context of the word or phrase’s utterance. The difference between the physiological and imaginative aspects of meaning is like the difference between a word or phrase and its hashtag equivalent. In other words, terms are hashtagable because they are ideological, not because they refer to certain physiological qualities. It is the ideological quality of language which permits any word or phrase to become a hashtag. The contemporary correlate to Volosinov’s distinction between a thing’s name-as-identical-with-itself and name-as-image is the retweeted, hyperlinked, and “liked” signification of a word, phrase, or statement. The fact that any word, term, or phrase can potentially become a hashtag is one way of expressing the inherently ideological quality of language. Language is not entirely ideological, but there is an ideological aspect of language. The activist theory of language takes language to be ideological in this way, and the decision procedure within that theory which assigns values to statements draws from that ideological quality of language.

Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* contains a theory of language which could be a relative of the activist theory presented here. Lyotard politicizes the late Wittgenstein as a response to Habermas’s *Legitimation Crisis* and the latter’s concept of the ideal speech act.⁴⁵ Whereas Habermas assumes that scientific discourse (inquiry, generally speaking) involves an exchange of denotative statements that aim at truth, Lyotard responds that this exchange can only occur because certain connotative statements are presumed beforehand. In other words, there are always rules of a language-game within (and due to) which any inquiry takes place. Since, in Lyotard’s view, the socio-political context (e.g., the consensus of postindustrialism) determines these rules, inquiry corrodes within itself since truth now must rely, to some degree, on the (victorious) rules of the postindustrial language game. Lyotard claims there is a “general agonistics”⁴⁶ in discussion: a struggle over what rules will be put in place; a battle between those who accept a consensus and those who do not accept, or are not initiated into, that consensus.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ See Lecerle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language*, 45, for the Marxist response to Habermas’s philosophy of language. Lecerle claims this response turns Habermas on his head, following the way Marx’s philosophy of history is said to be an inversion of Hegel’s.

⁴⁶ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 10.

⁴⁷ Ranciere’s work on disagreement and dissensus might be seen as an extension or development of this argument as it applies to democratic political theory and aesthetics. That is, what it means to disrupt the sensibility of an

Lyotard's precedent raises an important point. The activist theory of knowledge has much in common with the theory of performativity popularized by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin distinguishes the performativity of certain statements in two ways: "A. they do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all, are not 'true or false'; and B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as 'just', saying something."⁴⁸ Statements involved in accepting marriage vows, naming a ship, bequeathing, and gambling are examples where "issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action."⁴⁹ While performativity describes the ways in which words do things, it is not a paradigm of truth. The activist theory of language might be thought of as a variety of performative statements which, if they do certain things (vindication or saturation), can be thought of as true or false.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The activist theory of language and its paradigm of truth-as-correctness, while similar to the ways in which certain performative statements function, is importantly different than two (arguably obsolete) paradigms of truth: correspondence and coherence. A statement might be true because it refers to something. This something might be observable phenomena, for example. In this case a statement is true because it *corresponds to something*. On the other hand, a statement might be true because it is consistent with a set of axioms or linguistic habits, like a language-game. The state is therefore true because it *coheres* with other statements. Contrast these paradigms with the activist theory articulated here. Clear vindication or interpellative saturation may be observable and testable with quantitative or qualitative economic data, but ultimately these processes do not converge on a correspondence to empirical phenomenon, natural laws, or real objects. The truth of statements will depend on the extent to which it names the conjuncture and alters it. Certainly there may be an interpretation of "real" where that which is real is that which is *correctly* referred to. The activist statement is true because it does something, like the performative procedure, but may also be said to be true based on what it does.⁵¹ This activist truth will, in contrast to the consistency theory, be true precisely because it is inconsistent with the existing set of statements on the other side of a struggle in the conjuncture.

As Valentin Volosinov wrote in the final sentence of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, we might say that the activist theory of language calls for "a revival of . . . the word that really means and takes responsibility for what it says."⁵² The activist theory of language described here is a theory of this precise kind of *responsibility*: when we speak there is an ideological quality to our language which, over time, has resulted from struggles within the conjunctures of society. Meanings have been decided by vindication over time. Our speech patterns, styles, forms, and other discourses tell a history of struggle. Speaking responsibly in

exclusive consensus (*ochlos*) such that the *demos* appears. See *On the Shores of Politics, Disagreement, and The Politics of Aesthetics*.

⁴⁸ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 5–7.

⁵¹ Lecercle, 2006, 129.

⁵² Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 158.

this sense means speaking with an awareness of the accuracy and correctness of our statements, that their truth is to some degree decided by conjunctural struggle. Truth is not only decided through correspondence with real objects, consistency with stipulated axioms, poetic expression, or performative utterance. Truth is also decided, in the public sphere, through an activist procedure of struggle.

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