The Power of Language

A Medium for Promoting Social Justice and Equity

I n this chapter, we explain the grounding ideas of this book, including key concepts such as *social justice*, *language of possibility*, and others; we hope to establish a shared understanding of these ideas and concepts and their associated words. This is especially important because many of these terms vary in their interpretation. Our intent is to be as transparent as possible with meanings and to model what we advocate throughout the book.

IN WHAT WAYS IS LANGUAGE A TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE IN SOCIETY?

For reflection: To what extent are you aware of your language use in everyday interactions? Do you monitor yourself carefully, or do you speak spontaneously? What factors in the social situation tend to make you monitor your language more?

The idea that language can be a "trigger for broader social change"[1] has been around for a long time. Yet surprisingly, it rarely shows up in preparation and inservice programs for teachers and educational leaders. In this book, we place this idea at the very center of what educators in a democratic society do on an everyday

basis. Every day, proactive educators try to make their educational institutions healthy, positive environments that challenge all students to develop their skills, knowledge, and ability to relate positively to others. They also attempt to right the effects of past injustices and to intervene in present ones. None of these actions would be possible without language. Educators use language to communicate their expectations of students, faculty, and parents; to discuss policies, praise people, propose changes in curriculum, indicate that they are listening, carry out disciplinary action, and for a host of other actions. Whether spoken, written, or signed, language is the medium through which educational leaders make their intentions known to others. Everyone who plays a formal or informal leadership role in education—including teachers, principals, school board members, community leaders—uses language as a medium for their actions; however, when speaking spontaneously, we usually don't have time to think carefully about *how* we say things. We just hope that our words come out more or less they way we intended.

Yet by moving toward a greater awareness of language, we can in fact use language to embody changes we believe in. Language embodies a potential for change when it is linked to larger social forces. In the United States, changes in the names of ethnoracial groups co-occurred with civil rights action and a movement away from a classification system based on skin color (black, yellow, brown, white) that was used to justify a social hierarchy based on race; "African American," "Asian American," and other ethnoracial labels became part of everyday discourse in the 1960s along with demands for equal rights and recognition. The shift in language from *Black* to *African American* was significant because it moved from an emphasis on skin color (a racialized feature) to a dual emphasis on origin (African) and current nationality (U.S. American).[2] As a society of mostly immigrants, we now have available language that tells us something about people's ancestry, a more meaningful piece of information than skin color, which in any so-called racial group always ranged along a broad continuum anyway. It is also helpful to include *American* because a visiting professional from Korea may have little in common with a third- or fourth-generation Korean American.

The case of Guatemala's Maya people also illustrates this point. When European explorers in 1492 mistakenly thought they had landed in India, they dubbed the local people they encountered "Indians." This label not only connoted the wrong continent but was also used

as a derogatory, demeaning name to distinguish those claiming European lineage (who tend to be of lighter complexion) from those of more indigenous heritage (who tend to be of darker complexion). In the 1980s, the indigenous people of Guatemala began to systematically assert the right for a name disassociated with such baggage. The struggle to adopt the name *Maya* was linked to a broader struggle for basic civil and political rights. Currently, the use of Maya for people of indigenous heritage has become widespread in that country, and at the same time, the Maya have claimed other rights.[3]

1. The Relationship Between Language and Thought

For reflection: Think of a time when you realized that you saw the world differently from someone who spoke a different first language than you. What was the difference? Do you think your first language was involved in structuring these different ways of thinking? How much freedom do we have to think outside of the structures and words our first language provides?

To understand how changing language shapes our thinking, we need to go back a bit in history to consider the claim made in the 1940s by Edward Sapir, a linguist, and Benjamin Whorf, a fire insurance salesman who was a student of Sapir's. They developed the idea that the language we use actually determines the way we think.[4] What they meant is that speakers of different languages actually think differently, due to the differences in the way languages express actions, things, and so on. For example, the Hopi language, unlike English, expresses many concepts related to nature as movements (actions) rather than static entities. In Hopi, one cannot talk about a wave as a thing; one can only talk about the motion it produces, using a verb that roughly translates in English as "waving." Sapir and Whorf's theoretical claim was that underlying structural and semantic differences among languages lay down certain thought patterns early in childhood. Hopi speakers, they claimed, are likely to think more in terms of action and motion than English speakers— who for their part tend to think more in terms of things.

This claim that our language determines our thought patterns became known as the "strong form" of Sapir and Whorf's hypothesis, and it led to the corollary that people are like prisoners of their language. They cannot ever really acquire the thinking patterns of

another language.[5] But as you might imagine, there were many challenges to this claim, in part because people can and do acquire other languages and in many instances do learn to think in the new language. In multilingual societies, it is normal to speak more than two languages from early childhood onward. Paraguay is one of many such cases. There, inhabitants speak Spanish and Guarani languages nationally, as well as a local variety of Spanish that is mixed with Guarani, even though the indigenous Guarani people no longer exist as a distinctive community. If language absolutely determined the way we think, we wouldn't be able to translate from one language to another. Granted, there will always be concepts which are difficult or even impossible to translate. But by and large, professional translators do a remarkable job.

Most linguists these days accept a modified version of Sapir and Whorf's theoretical claim. Instead of saying that our primary language *determines* the way we think, the modified version says that our primary language (or languages, in the case of childhood bilinguals) *shapes* or *influences* the way we think.

2. Language Reflects Existing Cultural and Physical Realities

For reflection: In what ways does your school categorize students? Do all schools you know of use the same categorization system as yours? Are different systems used by students versus faculty and staff? How can you explain the differences in categorization, if any?

Most of us can readily accept the notion that language reflects (or expresses) our cultural and physical reality. After all, one of the functions of language is to enable us to talk about the things of our world and the actions we perform in it. So, for example, if it is important for us to distinguish among different types of rocks, our language develops ways to express those distinctions. We can talk about differences that reflect the substance of the rock, such as granite versus marble; the size and shape of the rock, such as pebbles versus boulders; and so on. Eskimo languages make, for instance, fine distinctions among many different kinds of snow, obviously reflecting the need for people in the arctic environment to describe distinctions that make a difference in hunting prospects, travel conditions, and other activities that are contingent on the weather. Such distinctions would not be so

important to people living in a warm, urban environment; therefore, a more limited number of snow words are adequate.[6]

In a school environment, we have words not only for the things that are important in that environment—such as desks, whiteboards, and computers—but also for classifications of people such as students, teachers, administrators, and so on. Many of these seem natural—they have been ingrained in us since childhood, so much so that it is difficult to think about schools without these categories of objects and people.

3. Language Also Constructs Our Cultural Realities

It is somewhat more difficult to accept the notion that we *construct* our world through language. In other words, language doesn't just reflect or express what is already there, like the kinds of rocks or snow in our environment. It also enables us to create categories, labels, and relationships that are different from the ones used by people in other cultures—or even people who to a large degree share our culture!

We see this variation when we look at kinship systems around the world. In English, the word *uncle* denotes any of a number of different relationships. An uncle can be the father's brother, the mother's brother, the husband of the father's sister, the husband of the mother's sister, and even sometimes an unrelated person like "Uncle Sam." It's not that English speakers can't express or understand these differences—obviously, we just did! But it took us longer; we had to use more words to say it. In Chinese and many other languages, each of these specific relationships has its own special term. In most Latin American societies, on the other hand, an uncle or aunt can simply be an intimate, close friend to the father or mother. This type of uncle or aunt has somewhat less moral responsibility toward the niece or nephew than blood-related uncles and aunts.

Why does this variation exist? Anthropologists argue that in Chinese, different roles, responsibilities, and privileges are accorded to different types of "uncles." Therefore, it's important to make the specific relationship overt, and what better way than to give each relationship its own label? An English speaker raised without this particular kinship system can understand the basic relationships in terms of biological lineage and whether the relationship is on the father's or the mother's side. But the same

English speaker, unless it has been spelled out, will not understand the system of roles, responsibilities, and privileges associated with each of the terms for uncle that the Chinese speaker grew up with. In sum, the English language concept of "uncle" doesn't map exactly onto the Chinese concept.

How does this relate to constructing our world through language? The example from different kinship systems demonstrates that when it comes to social relationships, cultures vary in the ways they classify family members. This variation tells us that there is nothing fixed about the way we classify relatives. It is only through custom and tradition that kinship terms become fixed in their meaning. When we travel or live in another culture, we come to realize that these meanings are only customary in our own culture, and the shifting nature of language and its connection to "reality" becomes evident.

We've established so far that the language we use shapes or influences how we think about the world. But so far, we've been talking about very different languages, like Hopi versus English, Spanish versus Guarani, and Chinese versus English.

4. Making Changes Within the Same Language

For reflection: What happens if we make small adjustments in the words we use to communicate with people who share our language? Have you ever tried to change the way you refer to certain groups of people? How did it work out? Did you feel the change better reflected your intentions? Or were you just doing it to be "politically correct"?

Here, we consider three examples:

1. *Getting rid of gender bias:* In the 1960s, feminists began to encourage writers to use nonsexist language. Among other changes, writers were urged to stop using the masculine pronoun *he* as the generic pronoun (when they really mean he *or* she). Instead, they started consciously using *she or he* (alternating the masculine and feminine pronouns, or using *they* instead) because they wanted to signify that the male pronoun was not automatically privileged as a default for signifying both men and women; they wanted their language to reflect women's agency and participation in all spheres of life.

At the time, many people thought that this small shift in language use by a few individuals couldn't possibly change anything; it seemed so trivial. Even today, there are people who think these changes are just "window dressing." But looking at this situation more carefully, one can argue that this is exactly the sort of change that *did* develop into something broader. Making the English language less male-centered was part of a broad social movement. This little change was connected to lots of other little as well as bigger changes; people such as Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and many others were working hard to advance women's economic and political power in the United States and other countries. Doing so involved not only empowering women; it also meant calling attention to the subtle ways in which we assume male privilege, and language was one very tangible way to see and hear those assumptions, which in English were manifested in terms like *chairman* and *policeman*, as well as the generic pronoun *he*.

While language changes by themselves were not responsible for the changes that came about in society as a result of the women's movement, they were part of the package. Language changes helped usher in a different consciousness, creating an awareness of how male privilege was taken for granted—men made more money than women and held more decision-making power in matters of foreign policy, the legal system, and other arenas. So language changes were a transformative force, absolutely necessary for changes to take hold, but not sufficient by themselves. They had to be linked with other actions, such as policy changes in companies regarding equal pay for equal work, establishment of publicly supported day care centers, and so on.

2. *Minding our metaphors:* According to George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist at the University of California, Berkeley, "Thinking differently requires speaking differently."[7] For the past couple of decades, Lakoff has been studying the way common everyday metaphors "frame" or inform our perceptions of social reality.[8] For example, in his 2004 book *Don't Think of an Elephant,* he discusses the metaphor behind the phrase "tax relief." Usually when we use the word *relief*, we are referring to relief from some type of illness or affliction. Taxes in this phrase are framed as an affliction that requires us to seek relief (in the form of lowered taxes). Anyone who lowers taxes (thereby reducing the affliction) is viewed as a hero or

heroine. Anyone who opposes the lowering of taxes is seen as a villain.

Imagine, however, that we use a different metaphor—and therefore, a different frame. Instead of seeing taxes as an affliction, we use the metaphor of taxes as membership dues. Everybody who lives in the United States is a member and, as such, receives many benefits—public transportation system, public schools, public health, police, and so on. Like a member of any club, we pay dues for that membership. This shift of metaphors, says Lakoff, can affect the way people think about taxes.

Another person who has studied the use of metaphors is Otto Santa Ana, author of the 2002 book *Brown Tide Rising.* In this book, Santa Ana documents the use of metaphors for Latinos in the *Los Angeles Times* over a ten-year period. The most dominant metaphor for Latinos, he finds, is that of a flood or rising tide that spreads and inundates the land—in other words, a disaster (as in "a flood of new immigrants is impacting our city"). He argues, as does Lakoff, that these images trigger conceptual frames or sets of related associations that negatively affect the way we perceive Latinos. A flood evokes a deluge that spreads uncontrollably, destroys the land, and causes residents to flee for higher ground. Framing Latino immigrants in this way leads to negative feelings about all Latinos. Santa Ana suggests that a different metaphor, that of enrichment and productivity, would send a much more positive message. For example, "In the American Southwest, the immigrant stream makes the desert bloom."[9] Here, the metaphor of water is used in a positive sense as a giver of life and enabler of human activity.

3. *Changing language in education:* The same type of changes we have discussed above can be applied to education. Herve Varenne, an educational anthropologist, wrote in 1978 about a new principal at a high school who sent a memo to teachers a few weeks after his arrival at the school. The memo, which infuriated the teachers, started off as follows:

> There is something intriguing about a teacher surplus which now exists in our country today. It permits us to be very selective in education. It enables us to assign teachers better. It even lets us replace some teachers we should not have hired in the first place. Possibly, at long last, it can stimulate us to be serious about individualizing education.[10]

It's easy to see why the teachers were infuriated. Not only were they cast as dispensable objects, like products in the marketplace that are overproduced, but they were also implicitly excluded from the "we/us" group with whom the speaker identified himself. The teachers were not seen as active agents in any of these sentences, only as passive recipients of the actions of the we/us group (presumably administrators).

Now let's look at a contrasting example to see how a more collaborative leader described the work of teachers and parents. In this excerpt from an interview, Mark Waters[11] is talking about the planning that went into the Chinese language program at his bilingual elementary school:

> They [teachers and parents] reached some wonderful accommodations and plans that one brain could never have come up with, but five brains could figure it out, and that's one of the hallmarks of what happens here—that everybody gets their oar in the water and keeps paddling until we figure out how we're going to get it going in the same direction, and it works.[12]

In this excerpt, teachers and parents are cast as active agents. Waters used the metaphor of paddling a canoe to depict their collaborative effort, and he included himself as one of the "paddlers."

These two examples suggest some of the language choices that are available to educational leaders. By using us/them constructions consistently (as in the first excerpt), a leader polarizes the situation, both reinforcing differences that may really exist, and at the same time constructing an even stronger line of separation between the in-group (us) and the out-group (them). If an educational leader uses this polarizing discourse regularly, it becomes *normalized*— meaning that most people simply assume that this is the way things are, without reflecting on why or how, or if things could be different. Furthermore, when an educator consistently puts a certain group of people in a passive position, as receivers of actions by other people, the educator implicitly takes away the possibility of the passively framed group acting as agents.

On the other hand, if an educator consistently describes the school community as an inclusive "we" or as people engaged in a dialogue or a joint project (e.g., paddling a canoe together), then the focus shifts toward understanding, communication, and shared goals, with everyone having an active role to play. Of course, other behavioral and institutional changes have to be consistent with this small

change in language; otherwise, the change in language is merely a trivial attempt to be politically correct or to "sound inclusive" while still continuing to act in other ways to polarize the community.

5. Toward a Language of Possibility

For reflection: Do you ever invent new words or phrases instead of using language that you think is demeaning or contrary to your goals as an educator? Make a list of any such words or phrases. What were you trying to show or do by using them? Do you think you achieved the effect you desired?

It is one thing to critique existing language as sexist, ethnocentric, racist, classist, and so on but entirely another thing to offer constructive alternatives. In our personal lives, we all know people who are good at telling us what *not* to do but seldom offer suggestions for what *to* do.

Critique is necessary as a first step in social change. But an important element of critique is that we say what is wrong *and* offer suggestions for improvement. Being critical is not only being negative; a critical friend also gives you positive feedback and suggests what you might do to improve. Language becomes transformative when it offers alternatives to the status quo and incorporates them into ways of thinking and discourse, thereby carving out new or different categories, relationships, and ways of representing the world, and opening up the possibility of transformative practices.

Paolo Friere, a Brazilian educator who is known for the development of critical pedagogy,[13] introduced the term "language of possibility," which has been taken up by many others in slightly different forms. Otto Santa Ana, noted earlier in this chapter, speaks of the need to create "insubordinate metaphors to produce more inclusive American values, and more just practices for a new society."[14] The use of a language of possibility is embodied in the efforts we described earlier—the claiming of a higher status name by the Maya of Guatemala, removing male privilege and inserting gender neutral terms, portraying immigrant Latinos in California as enriching rather than inundating the land, and using inclusive rather than polarizing language in education.

When critique of existing language and instances of language of possibility are tied in a systematic, coherent way to a larger social

movement, then we can say that *language is being used as a transformative force.* In other words, people recognize and use the power of language to shape and change our existing systems, be they social policies, education, environmental practices, health care, or other domains. The guiding question for us in this book is, "How can we use the transformative power of language to advance educational equity and social justice?"

We next turn to the meanings of these very terms—educational equity and social justice.

WHAT ARE EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE?

So far, we have suggested that educational leaders ought to use language as a medium for transforming the status quo. But this can lead to the dangerous conclusion that all transformations are equally desirable or that change should happen for the sake of change.

Rather than seeking change blindly, we believe educators need to have a vision of what they are aiming toward. This vision has to incorporate values; education is never a value-free enterprise. Even the teacher who claims to teach "only the facts" is a purveyor of values, choosing not only *what* content to teach and what to leave out of the curriculum but also *how* to teach (e.g., instructional approaches can convey a value of individualism, collaboration, or competition). Of course, in certain eras, such as the current era of high stakes testing, teachers become more constrained in what they can teach and how they teach it. They still make choices, but those choices narrow or widen depending on the political and legal conditions of the time. And the political and legal decisions that affect education also promote or discourage certain values.

In this book, we openly advocate for educational transformation that aims toward equity and social justice.

1. Equity Versus Equality

For reflection: What do the words equity and equality mean to you? Write down the understandings you have now. After reading this section, did your understanding change?