Dr. Dickson's Notes for Chapters 4-7 of *Beyond Grammar* (Harmon and Wilson, 2006)

First, thank you to everyone who submitted their Top 5 lists and discussion paragraphs for their assigned chapters. Your notes demonstrate that those of you who completed the assignment have a good grasp of the core concepts and ideas of the chapters. It had been my intention to create an opportunity for you all do discuss these chapters in depth in class. But in lieu of that, and in the interest of time management, I am going to offer you a bit of an overview to supplement the ideas and examples you highlighted in your Top 5 responses so that you can add these notes to your own ruminations on the ideas presented in the readings.

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INTRODUCTION:

In these notes we are going to look at a **core theme** that runs across all four chapters:

ACCESS TO POSSIBILITY.

We will look at how access to possibility is enabled or limited by the particular speech contexts focused on in the readings: hate speech, gendered language, dialects and second language learning. I will be taking a **synthetic** approach in gathering up examples and themes from across the four chapters in order to explore this overarching theme. Among the threads you might like to follow up on are these:

1. The power of naming;
2. The significance of **reductive** definitions of identity and value, particularly of the "Other";
3. The significance of unconscious or unexamined language use;
4. The role of language in the negotiation of social relationships: hierarchy, belonging and difference.

We will take as our starting point a few powerful assertions:

1. The by-now axiomatic statement that "Language is never neutral: language can create, reinforce, and reinscribe patterns of thought" (93);
2. Catherine McKinnon's definition of subjugation as "doing someone else's language" (qtd. 109);
3. The warning that the enforcement of particular forms English within a **deficit model** can act as "a means of cultural control, while simultaneously withholding [access to language] as a means of critique and agency" (207); and
4. The aspiration that all learners are provided with "opportunities to develop critical literacy abilities, to question and critique, and to use the language for social action and transformation" (207).

These statements together offer a set of grounding assumptions about the ways that language is implicated in social experience through systems, policies, beliefs and behaviours that determine who has access to the power of language, who will be heard, and whose complex humanity will be visible in language.

PART ONE: ACCESS TO POSSIBILITY

ACCESS TO POSSIBILITY is a broad concept that appears in a variety of ways in the readings. It makes a clear appearance in the discussion of gender equity, for instance, which is defined as a state in which "the attributes and contributions of all, regardless of gender, are honored and valued and where language choices and discourse practices **open rather than close possibilities for all**" (99, my emph.). Here, the focus on gendered language can be expanded to encompass all of the topics represented in these four chapters, since race and economic, educational and citizenship status are all sites where language use and discourse practices can open up or limit someone's ability to contribute, to be heard, and to **live their full and complex humanity**. This contribution and full life may manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as someone's access to educational opportunities, employment, and the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship, and their ability to exist in a safe environment, to freely pursue their aspirations, and to tell their own stories in their own voices.

When examining a given speech act, we can do well to ask ourselves:

Does this use of language expand or limit the user's or target's access to possibility?

SOME EXAMPLES

1. Derogatory Language/Derogatory Ethnic Language (DL, DEL): by **reductively defining** the Other according to a single attribute or imagined quality, DL/DEL, including sexist language, denies the full range of human complexity and variation within an identifiable group. The Other is reduced to a caricature or stereotype. Their own understanding of and capacity to tell their story in their own voice is appropriated and disclaimed by someone with more social power;

2. DERACINATION/DEHUMANIZATION: DL and DEL often ascribe to the Other animalistic or inhuman qualities that diminish their humanity. More subtle and institutional practices also have this effect. The "English only" policies of some school systems seek to replace the immigrant learner's original language with the new language as a means of **assimilation**. The emphasis on Standard English as a **prestige dialect** promotes a narrative of disparagement of language variation. The overall effect is to strip away "cultural and linguistic connections" that constitute a person's identity (203). We have seen this in the early history of English, in the sacking of Lindisfarne and Jarrow monasteries by the Vikings and in the demotion of English by the French after 1066, and more recently here in Canada where the residential school system stripped First Nations people of access to their languages and histories. Such practices **separate people from the stories that constitute their identities and humanity**.

3. GATEKEEPING: Furthermore, practices such as these separate people from access to power. Because of the close link between language, culture and identity, non-standard or second-language speakers are disadvantaged because they not only have to learn a new language or language variation, but also have to adopt a new "identity kit" that goes along with being acculturated (or raised within) a specific language community. Therefore, systems that classify students "based on language results in limited access to the forms of power already enjoyed by those with the 'right' linguistic credentials" (171). For example, in Michigan, parents of African American students sued the school board, claiming that "Equating linguistic difference with cultural deficiency and cognitive deficiency limited students' access to the programs provided for standard English speakers" (172) because AAE (African American English) speakers are regularly sorted into remedial streams that cut them off from broader employment and social opportunities. English Only assertions that all government and educational materials should appear only in English disenfranchise new citizens and erase their voice in the national conversation.

These examples demonstrate how deeply implicated language is in the everyday lives of human beings. Language can open or close a door to the future, to citizenship, to employment and to selfhood.

PART TWO: THE DEFICIT MODEL

Underlying discourses and language acts that limit access to possibility are deep-seated attitudes toward and assumptions about the Other, who is often measured against an "ideal" or cultural myth of superiority and found wanting. The phrase "broken English" used to describe the English of immigrant and second language learners can be analogically expanded to include anyone who must accept someone else's standard as a measure of their worth. Women who fail to adopt the more linear and aggressive speech associated with masculine communication practices may find themselves operating in a kind of "broken English." AAE speakers who enter into the school system may be considered to use a species of "broken English."

As Catherine McKinnon says, subjugation is "doing someone else's language" which, in this case, means choosing between adopting the language of the dominant and prestige group or risking the invisibility and diminishment associated with various vernaculars and dialects. As we argued above, such a choice means that many **people are trapped between "options" that, in different ways, separate them from their full humanity and limit their access to possibility**. We can see this debate in the early history of English, when authors like Geoffrey Chaucer or early modern Humanist scholars had to choose whether to write in their native English or to use the prestigious French or the *lingua franca*, Latin, in order to find their readership.

At its foundation this situation is defined by a key myth about language that Harmon and Wilson challenge throughout their book: **THE DEFICIT MODEL OF LANGUAGE**.

The **deficit model** assumes the superiority of one dialect (usually marked as Standard English) over all other variations. All other variations and dialects are measured against that "standard" and are therefore considered to be "substandard" by comparison. It would be like me saying that I am 5'4" and therefore everyone who is not 5'4" is deficient because they are too short or too tall. There is nothing inherently bad about being 6'2" or 5'2"; it just depends on whether you want something from the top shelf or need to get through a small door. In the case of language, variation and dialects are judged substandard because they are assumed, in comparison to SE,

- To lack structure and grammar;
- To be the product of "laziness";
- To limit the speaker's access to complex thought and ideas;
- To indicate cognitive deficiencies.

In the case of immigrant and second language learners, their proficiency in their home language is assumed to limit the speed with which they acquire Standard English and thereby to hinder their assimilation into the dominant linguistic community.

These grounding assumptions instigate a system of education and gatekeeping based on **a culture of "correction,"** and, often, shaming and deracination. Rather than seeing language variation as **a range of possible communicative assets**, it is viewed in the **deficit model as deviation from an ideal**.

Harmon and Wilson conclude that language discrimination in favour of SE that disparages language variation is based **not on the quality of a given language variety but on xenophobic attitudes toward the speakers of that variety**. The assumptions about the *people* are projected onto assessments of their language. This projection is motivated by a fear of the Other: "Legitimizing non-mainstream varieties gives voice to people who have historically been voiceless, and many fear that doing so sets a dangerous precedent and undermines their own power" (175). The culture of correction in the deficit model is about limiting the access to possibility for some people and opening it up for others.

To go back to my example, if I don't want you in my clubhouse, I'm going to argue that you are too tall to come in. If I don't want you to share my cookies, I'll put them up higher than you can reach. In both cases, the issue is that I don't want you to have my stuff, not whether being taller or shorter is inherently better or worse.

PART THREE: DEBUNKING THE DEFICIT MODEL

Harmon and Wilson systematically debunk the myth upon which the deficit model is based, demonstrating that non-standard dialects have just as much structure and just are just as grammatically developed as SE. They argue that SE is not dominant because of any inherent superiority but because it reflects the operations of power in society. **SE is a prestige dialect not an ideal one**. This is an important distinction. Claim to the status of the ideal represents the interests of only one particular language community, usually **the dominant group**: "Standard expectations of language use are determined by those with the greatest sociopolitical/economic power" (165). This distinction between prestige and ideal exposes an underlying normative power, for example, in the classroom: "When the dominant culture's assumptions about language and literacy become the standard by which teachers measure *all* children, middle-class discourse patterns become naturalized norms" (170, my emph.). The operations of power that support the normalized standard go unquestioned, often to the point that non-standard speakers internalize the standard and disparage their own speech.

These assumptions motivate the acquisition of SE as a means of accessing the very system that disparages language variation in the first place, as non-standard speakers recognize that "language used 'properly' will imbue them with cultural capital affording them special privileges and setting them apart from the lower classes they consider to be their social and intellectual inferiors" (165). The adoption of prestige language practices offers users the potential for social mobility in ways that can encode deficit model assumptions that their "home" varieties are something to be left behind.

SO: Does this use of language open or limit the user's access to possibility?

Certainly it does open access, in one sense, because mastery of SE can open doors to education, employment and social mobility. Does this access, however, enable the non-standard speaker to live fully in the complexity of their humanity? This is a question worth debating, and the answer depends upon whether you are assessing the issue from within the deficit model or in resistance to it. Fundamentally, the answer rests on **whether or not one language variety is expected to be replaced by another in order to ensure "success**."

There are some clues in the experience of second language learners and "code-switchers."

Contrary to the assumptions of the deficit model, second language speakers do not experience an inhibition in the acquisition of their second language because they keep strong ties to their first; rather, they find that their cognitive and critical skills increase relative to those who are forced to give up one language for another. Far from having a "deficit," learners who are taught in a fully bilingual context have extra facility with language. **Code-switchers**, people who have a fluency in and ability to successfully navigate within and across multiple speech communities, are also **able to more deftly meet the expectations of a wider range of audiences without giving up one community for another.**

PART FOUR: REDEFINING "GOOD ENGLISH"

The experience of these adaptable language users offers an example of a model of language variation that is "additive" not "subtractive" as in the deficit model. In an additive model, language variation is seen as an **expansion of linguistic possibility** and thereby redefines what is considered **GOOD ENGLISH**.

Harmon and Wilson define "good English," not as an adherence to a particular standard or prestige variation but, rather, in terms of what the speech practice **is designed to do**. Good English is "a process of accommodation in language use that **fulfills our purposes** with language and **meets the needs of our audience**" (162). (Those of you in ENGL 300: Theory will hear an echo of Plato here, who argues in *Phaedrus* that good uses of language are those that can respond to the needs of various audiences or different kinds of "souls."). Paul Roberts fleshes out this definition, identifying good English as "whatever English is spoken by the group in which one moves contentedly and at ease" (qtd. 163). He considers "good" English to be "successful" English, those usages that are "marked by success in making language choices so that the fewest number of persons will be distracted by the choices" (qtd. 163).

Thus, "good English" is English that is **appropriate to context** (again, Theory readers might call this the "decorum" model of English). It is language usage that enables the speaker and listeners to **successfully establish and negotiate social relationships**.

EXAMPLE:

So, in a university classroom, particular language practices are considered "appropriate" to particular contexts, such as a formal paper that is expected to conform to the standards of a scholarly community. Other exercises such as group work, learning journals or creative remix assignments open up spaces for other kinds of language variation. A formal written lecture such as this one adopts a scholarly tone, whereas a lecture in face-to-face classroom would provide a mixture of formal and more vernacular language usage. Your professors code switch regularly as they "read the room" and adapt their speech to the needs of students who might signal confusion or excitement, or to create a particular relationship among themselves, the material and the students. You code switch when you enter the classroom and again when you meet your friends for coffee. None of the dialects we use in these situations is inherently superior, only more or less appropriate to the genre and the expectations and needs of the audience.

In the "additive" model of language variation, no one is expected to sever their connection to language variations upon which are grounded their identity and the stories of their lives. As an aspiration, we educators might hope that students are able **to expand their communicative repertoires in order to increase their access to possibility by acquiring greater capacity to move through and between a wider range of speech communities** with comfort and ease. But that aspiration rests on **the redefinition of "good English" as language use that is successful in a particular context,** not one that is measured against a singular ideal or that demands that one dialect replace all others.

This definition of "good English" is intended to create greater **access to possibility**. Its emphasis on an awareness of context and the social forces that shape our relationships with others and with language requires a degree of awareness and a willingness to **examine the ways that language uses us as well as how we use language**.

PART FIVE: INVISIBLE AND VISIBLE IDEOLOGIES: CONTACT LENSES AND EYE GLASSES

An attentive reader might notice how often in these four chapters the authors refer to acts of **unthinking** use of language: "unthinking… passively"; "without investigation"; "not intended to be racist"; "without the listener's conscious knowledge."

Access to possibility as a theme in the readings also turns **on the distinction between unexamined and examined usage of language** which is in turn connected to the ways that ideology is encoded in and disseminated through particular language practices.

To explore this idea, it is helpful to begin with the distinction between eye glasses and contact lenses.

Eye glasses are lenses you wear, that are external, and that are apparent. Eye glasses change how you see, and you can see them and are aware of them. In terms of ideology, eye glasses are like the conscious choices you make to follow one belief or another. For example, your choice of political or religious affiliation is a visible ideology.

Contact lenses, on the other hand, sit very close to your eye, so close that you cannot *see* the contact lens when you are wearing it. Contact lenses change how you see, but you can't see them. In terms of ideology, contact lenses are the unexamined or "naturalized" ideologies that shape your beliefs and actions. For example, social norms and pragmatics are contact lens ideologies. Dr. Owen talked about the pragmatic differences between hearing and deaf people. Hearing people "duck" if they walk between two speakers; deaf people generally don't. This is because there are two different ways of thinking about the relationship between vision and speech operating in these situations. Until the last century, the idea that the pseudo-universal "man" referred to all humans was a norm that reflected an unexamined patriarchal ideology.

Often, norms and "contact lens" or invisible ideologies go unnoticed until someone points them out. People who most benefit from a norm are the least likely to "see" it. White middle-class people are asked to "check your privilege," for example. In our current pandemic situation, the contact lens of invisible privilege is being made visible on social media where the "boredom" of lockdown is revealed to be a weird kind of luxury for the well-off; the working classes don't have the opportunity to "get bored" because they have to keep working as cleaners and grocery store staff—the "essential services" that are usually invisible to those who enjoy class privilege. Likewise, the advice to wear a mask in order to protect public health is revealed to be a privilege of white people, since people of colour and Muslims have a long history of being persecuted as a "criminal element" or "terrorists" for covering their faces. Therefore, white people have more **access to the possibility** *of health* than do people of colour. The pandemic is shifting that formerly invisible ideology of class and race privilege (contact lens) to a visible one (eye glasses).

In our textbook, we can see this distinction in the descriptions of "hatemongers" and "spectators" in the context of hate speech. "Hatemongers" actively adopt and purposefully deploy reductive DL and DEL for the purposes of exercising power over those identified as "Other." This is an "eyeglasses" ideology. "Spectators" might not actively or even consciously adopt the ideology behind hate speech, but may unthinkingly use language in a way that is shaped by that ideology, such as referring to something as "retarded" or demeaning a man for "throwing like a girl." This is a "contact lens" ideology, one that is normalized and goes unnoticed until something makes us see it.

A commitment to **access to possibility** requires attention to both visible and invisible forms of ideology. As students of language, we have some extra skills that allow us to see how those invisible forms are encoded in the deeper structures of language.

PART SIX: NAMING, INTERPELLATION

We know from the examples of hate speech how powerful naming can be. Reducing someone's complex existence to a slur or a demeaning and disempowering label limits their access to possibility. But there are some deep structural qualities of naming that are more invisible and therefore arguably more powerful because they go unexamined and therefore unchallenged.

One of these deeper structures of language is **interpellation**. This process was described by Antonio Gramsci who argued that identities are shaped by the way that people are **interpellated** or "hailed" by society in such a way that they "feel compelled to shape their identities to fit the particular context in which they operate" (168).

This “hailing” can take place in obvious and subtle ways.

When you shout “Hi!” across the street at someone, that is an obvious kind of hailing. On a more subtle level, at the level of interpellation, that shout establishes a particular identity for the person you are addressing: the person you are shouting at is probably someone you know, and they are “hailed” into the identity of an acquaintance or a friend. If you shout “Hey, you!” at someone, they are probably being “hailed” in a different way, asked to occupy a particular identity as, for example, someone who is doing something wrong that you want to stop. “Hi!” and “Hey, you!” are speech acts that interpellate the addressee into different kinds of identity.

We can see this process operating in our conventions of address, for example. If someone addresses me as “Miss Dickson” they are “hailing” me into a particular identity that is different from the one I am called to occupy when they address me as “Dr. Dickson.” The first form of address situates me in a patriarchal ideology in which my identity is determined by my marital status, while the second interpellates me into an ideology in which my identity is determined by my career or education. The first closes my access to certain kinds of possibility by making my identity dependent upon someone else; the second opens my access to possibility by locating my identity in a discourse of personal achievement and social contribution.

“Hailing” someone as a First Nations person calls on them to occupy a different identity than if they are “hailed” as an “Indian.” The former calls them into a relationship with settlers on the level of sovereign nations with particular rights and obligations; the latter calls them into a colonial relationship in which they are named by the colonizer who, at the moment of contact, misidentified Indigenous North Americans as Indians of South Asia.

You experience this interpellation, too, within the university. The arrangement of seats in the lecture halls in building 7 “hail” you as a particular kind of student, one who faces the expert and occupies the position of the receiver, not the source, of knowledge. If students are referred to as “customers” of the university, they are being hailed into an ideology that assumes that education is something that can be purchased like a commodity; a diploma is like a luxury good available to people with purchasing power.

PART SEVEN: SENSE RELATIONS

Harmon and Wilson talk about the deep grammatical structures that shape our social relations and identities. The “pseudo-universal” term “man” is one example. The use of the passive voice is another, in which statements like “mistakes were made” and “a woman was raped” can be used to erase the actual agent of the mistakes or rape as a means of evading responsibility for that action.

We can also see operations of ideology embedded in other sense relations. For instance, you will recall that **collocation** is a sense relation that governs how words “anticipate” or “invoke” other words. We might “melt with relief” but would not “melt with rage,” for example. “Melt” has pretty strong collocation in that only certain words are likely to “go with” it comfortably.

That sense of comfortable “going with” can point to unexamined operations of ideology in our language.

Which collocation of “high-powered” seems correct?

This is a high-powered housewife.

Or

This is a high-powered businessman.

What ideological assumptions govern the collocation of “high-powered?” There is a gender ideology operating here that assumes that so-called “women’s work” is not associated with power. There is an economic ideology that identifies power with things that go on outside the domestic sphere.

The examples of interpellation and sense relations demonstrate that there is no aspect of language that is free from social forces and that there is no aspect of social life that goes unaffected by the language we use to navigate it. Unexamined language use limits our **access to possibility** by curtailing our ability to engage consciously with language as agents.

PART EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Harmon and Wilson assert: “words’ power comes primarily from users who have the social, political and economic means to create and enforce categorizations and definitions…. [and] from persons’ *noninterrogated use of or acquiescence to* the categories and definitions others have determined as well as to the hierarchical attitudes these convey” (98, my emph.).

Chapters 4-7 of *Beyond Grammar* demonstrate that our effective use of language goes beyond mere fluency. If we are to use language in ways that open up **access to possibility**, we are required to exercise **critical literacy** that makes us aware of our “contact lenses” so that we can examine what is unexamined and make conscious choices about how we use language and how we are used by it. Critical literacy can in this way “lead to greater social power” (207).