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# The Materiality of Language and the Pedagogy of Exchange

*David Bleich*

## **Pedagogy as the Exchange of Language**

The childhood acquisition of language takes place in a teaching situation: a child living among older people and hearing the language from (some say) before birth.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes the child is told how to say things; sometimes others hear new formulations by the child. Often they are humorous as they are permutations of what older people say. Others repeat these permutations as stories about the child or in new situations. From the earliest moments of its use, language is being *exchanged*: offered, repeated, re-offered, constituting a relationship. The actual words and phrases are taken from others, put into new contexts, sometimes changed, and then repeated. Although it may not seem that way to adults, the teaching and learning of language is mutual, collective, and reciprocal, as well as individual. It is neither just reciprocal nor just individual but both.

The school/college subject of language use includes pedagogy. To use the language means to teach and to learn it. Most parts of the academy, however, by tradition and through its practices of classical values, have separated “knowledge” of anything from the pedagogical practices that pass it on. Thomas Kuhn noticed this fact in his influential *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962. The teaching of science, he observed, takes place through its presentation in declarative textbooks that portray knowledge as fixed. Students learn established “scientific law.” However, the practice of science, especially its “revolutionary” investigations, is subjunctive, uncertain, and depend-

ent on collective agreement as to the vocabulary for the (new) facts; in principle, it can include teaching. Nevertheless, most academics take for granted that there is “research” and there is “teaching,” and the two are decisively separate.

Even though many subject matters should be understood as including their pedagogy, in this essay I will only bear in mind this general problem rather than treat it comprehensively. I am going to focus on why *language use* as a formal subject matter necessarily includes its pedagogy. I will discuss how this conception of the subject combines literature, literacy, and rhetoric into a common location that changes how they are researched and taught in the university. I will try to describe the subject so as to suggest its role as a possible model for other subjects. Because other subjects already depend on uses of language to articulate knowledge and to achieve consensus about this knowledge, I will consider briefly how language use, differently conceived, helps to recognize a stronger role for pedagogy in other subject matters.

One of the traditional problems of language and literacy pedagogy may be framed as the difficulty of teaching what everyone already knows fairly well: the use of language. As a result, teaching has centered more on literacy than on the use of language as a whole. There are enough apparent departures of writing from speaking to have urged the isolation of writing pedagogy from teaching other issues in language use, including literature. Furthermore, schools and colleges as they are now run require accomplished writing in a relatively narrow range of genres, as opposed to a more general understanding of language. In addition, this separation has been rooted in values that date back to classical and premodern periods when only very few people were literate and the vast majority was not. Literacy has been a capability of the most privileged members of society. Because of this social circumstance of literacy, writing in the West has been sacralized: texts are holy; authorship is inviolable; when texts are not formally sacred, they have still been entities to which only few people had access. The results of these features of premodern literacy are felt today in universities through various expectations of uniform writing styles, fixed templates of academic reporting, an often obsessive need to *train* students to emulate existing academic language-use mores, and a separation of rhetorical and literary study (in which the “sacred” texts of literary genres are not allowed to mix with the common, ordinary texts students produce in their composition courses). Under these circumstances, writing pedagogy becomes “direct instruction,” a style in which a series of directives is given to students; they try to follow them until they have complied. Much, perhaps most, writing pedagogy is an attempt to secure compliance with uni-

form styles of writing. This pedagogy is the opposite of the interactive, inter-subjective pedagogy that accompanies the exchanges through which we acquire language to begin with.

Most writing pedagogy, therefore, removes an essential feature from the universal means of acquiring language. It makes writing seem like something other than language, and not alive. Few question this situation and even fewer oppose it. I therefore want to give reasons for changing the subject of writing to the subject of language use, for restoring the closeness of speech, writing, and reading to one another and to their common, though unconscious, pedagogy of exchange. Toward this purpose, there are two issues: the materiality of language and the genre idea.<sup>2</sup> The materiality of language is a Kuhnian paradigm that converts language from a transparent medium to a palpable aspect of social relations. The genre idea, as currently discussed, is a consequence or aspect of this paradigm. In exploring materiality and genre here, I move from the philosophy of language to literary uses of genre theory to show how genre is currently understood as being apart from materiality. I think, however, that the conception of language use combines the two, thus revising the disciplinary tradition that separates literature from writing and both from language. Together, the materiality of language and the genre idea represent a new foundation for the understanding of language, a subject now better understood as (and called) *language use*. This new subject includes its pedagogy, which I am calling a pedagogy of exchange.

### **Materiality and Genre**

The many recent discussions of genre suggest that this path of inquiry has several sources that overlap with the sources of the modern versions of the materiality of language. These common sources include Ludwig Wittgenstein's understanding of speech ceremonies, schemata, and conventions as "language games" and "forms of life"; M. M. Bakhtin's idea of speech genres; J. L. Austin's speech act theory; and Tzvetan Todorov's idea of discourse genres.<sup>3</sup> This overlap looks like the development of a Kuhnian paradigm shift regarding what language is, a shift that urges materiality and genre as constitutive aspects of language. Nevertheless, it is also the case that discussions of genre in the pedagogy of rhetoric and literacy after Wittgenstein, Bakhtin, and Todorov do not recognize a fundamental role for the materiality of language. This omission reduces the use-value of the genre idea. The materiality of language is part of a concept of genre and renders the genre idea more versatile in teaching, an issue to which I return later in this essay.

In genre-alone scholarly discussions, there is uncertainty with regard

to how to move toward pedagogy. The idea of the materiality of language reduces this uncertainty because it directs attention to the local uses of language in the processes of discussing genre and society. “Materiality” is understood in contrast to “transparency,” which is the principle that language is an inactive conduit to something beyond it, usually referred to as *meaning*. Some who view language as active still presuppose that language units from words to texts have “meaning” that can be independently articulated. To adopt the principle of materiality, however, is to view language as meaningful only within the interpersonal and collective contexts of its use. As Julia Kristeva (1989 [1981]: 18–42) describes, the materiality of language also refers to the breath, the sound, and the other necessary physical features of speech and writing. The full range of contexts in which language appears is material in that speakers are alive, functioning, changing, and interacting. There is no sense that language is meaningful outside the situations of its use.

Even though two theorists identify the sources for contemporary genre theory as Wittgenstein and Austin, these theorists do not recognize the philosophers as working toward (or out of) a sense of the materiality of language.<sup>4</sup> The likely reason is that a materialist sense of language runs contrary to the classical Greek and Roman uses of language and rhetoric. In the West, there has not been an alternative to the classical mindsets. Materiality emerges from Hebrew and other non-Western cultures (Boyarin 1992).<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew example is simplest to explain, but the language function is similar in the several societies discussed in the Boyarin volume. In Hebrew, the word for *word* and the word for *thing* are the same: *davar*.<sup>6</sup> The English *to speak* means something like *to enthing* (to materialize). While this fact has many possible consequences, the interest for us is that verbal and symbolic “meaning” cannot be articulated in ways other than how the words actually used articulate their sense. Interestingly, this materialist principle is very much behind Cleanth Brooks’s New Critical concept of “the heresy of paraphrase,” introduced in 1942: if the poem can be paraphrased with the “same” meaning, why write the poem? Yet materiality did not catch on in criticism any more than it did in philosophy. However, we can see the principle clearly articulated in certain poetry *classrooms*. For instance, sometimes in poetry pedagogy, students come to see that any way other than saying what a poem says formulates a *different thought* from what has been given in the poem. Then readers discuss how the different thoughts, now a function of the group discussing the poem, help to teach the poem. Materiality describes or identifies the condition of the historical uniqueness of *language use in interpersonal situations*. Language cannot be considered in isolation from living situations. I will return to pre-

sent a more comprehensive view of the pedagogical consequences of materiality, of which this approach to reading poetry is but one illustration.

Another approach to materiality is connected to the English word *matter*. In physics matter is paired with energy as the two entities that make up everything in the universe. Of the two, matter is considered to be *substance*, while energy is not palpable—a force of some sort that cannot be touched but only felt and calculated. In philosophy, matter is paired with *mind* as the binary that underlies the philosophical approach to understanding existence. Mind, like energy, is not palpable; it is, for some, spiritual. The German word *Geist*, which means *spirit*, is sometimes also translated into the English *mind*. In the West this “spirit” is sometimes “holy,” sacralized, placed in a transcendental, nonmaterial category. It leads some people to describe a place where souls go after the material body dies. The concept of the materiality of language means that words, like everything else, are rooted in matter as trees are rooted in earth. Words, like trees, are matter, and because of this, they always matter, even though they are different from other matter as trees are different from earth.

Even from this brief explanation, it is possible to see how alien the idea of linguistic materiality is in the West, which, in an overwhelming number of instances, views language as existing in a special category, separating the human species from other living species and exalting it, claiming that privilege is related to our “heavenly” origins—our having been created by God, to whom our souls or spirits are destined to return. In the West, language acquired this transcendental dimension of its identity.

Western philosophers discovered materiality belatedly. The most dramatic case is that of Wittgenstein. As Marie McGinn (1997: 35) describes, Wittgenstein first tried to explain language by postulating “an idealized system of propositions, constructed by means of logically proper names of simple objects, which he believes must lie behind the familiar sentences of our ordinary language.” The relation between a system of “elementary propositions” and a “system of possible atomic facts [was] held to underpin language’s ability to represent the world.” Presumably, both of these systems were derivable by inspection.<sup>7</sup>

By 1945, Wittgenstein rejected this idea and substituted something entirely different. McGinn (1997: 51) writes:

“To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (*Philosophical Investigations*, Section 19). The idea of language as a form of life, like the idea of a language-game, is to be set over against the idea of language as an abstract system of signs; it again serves

to bring into prominence the fact that language is embedded within a horizon of significant, non-linguistic behaviour. Thus, just as the term “language-game” is meant to evoke the idea of language in use within the non-linguistic activities of speakers, so the term “form of life” is intended to evoke the idea that language and linguistic exchange are embedded in the significantly structured lives of groups of active human agents. . . . The concept of life . . . applies . . . to historical groups of individuals who are bound together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices. . . . [I]t is this vital connection between language and the complex system of practices and activities binding a community together that Wittgenstein intends to emphasize in the concept of a “form of life.”

Most of the *Philosophical Investigations* gives a wide variety of demonstrations of how and why language is a “form of life.”

The key to the materiality of this idea is the decision to understand that language is not separable from the behaviors of real human groups. In contrast to transformational generative grammar, which follows the principle that language “competence” (knowledge) can be separated from “performance” (use), language as a “form of life” rests on the belief that one cannot remove “language” from its site of use and study “it” alone. The concept of language in Wittgenstein’s early work sought to remove the system of propositions and the corresponding “facts” from the interpersonal, intersubjective, social scenes in which they did or could have existed. They were *abstracted*, a term that means *removed*. To put it another way, the process of study lies always *within* the language-using society. There is no sense in which the language one tries to understand can be thought of as located outside the living situation in which the thinker (who is all the while using the language) is working.

Wittgenstein’s “form of life,” which describes language in use, redirects attention to language so as to urge us to think of it now as something different from what it was thought to be in the West since classical times. However, while genre theorists have appropriated Wittgenstein and other language philosophers, the idea of materiality has been overlooked or, at best, not recognized in rhetorical theory. Carolyn R. Miller provides a useful case in point. Miller, an early proponent of genre theory in the study of rhetoric, applies the “form of life” idea to genres without recognizing the materiality it has for Wittgenstein. Her 1984 essay “Genre as Social Action” has been cited by many who have recognized the value of the genre idea. In a follow-up essay written ten years later, “Rhetorical Community: The Cultural Basis of Genre,” Miller (1994b: 69) suggests that rhetorical forms such as those found in courtrooms (for example) are those “which we might want to conceive of . . . as a

form of life.” She describes such genres as cultural artifacts and proposes that “we see genre as a specific and important *constituent* of society, a major aspect of its communicative structure, one of the structures of power that institutions wield” (71). Miller has overtaken Wittgenstein’s “form of life” idea, understood genre in these terms, and reinserted genre into a wider conception of society. However, as in her previous essay, she seems to move away from understanding the *language comprising the genres* as material—even though this looks like a materialist description of genres. In her essay, this movement is shown by her characterization of her idea of a “rhetorical community”: “A rhetorical community, I propose, is . . . a virtual entity, a discursive projection, a rhetorical construct. It is the community as invoked, represented, presupposed, or developed in rhetorical discourse. . . . Like genres, rhetorical communities ‘exist’ on a discourse hierarchy, not in space-time. They exist, however, at a much higher level of cumulation than genres” (73). Reasonably, Miller (1984: 35) understands genres as socially constructed and part of a “hierarchy” of speech contexts whose low end is “experience” and whose high end is “human nature.”<sup>8</sup> Significantly for this discussion, she views genres and rhetorical communities as virtual, rather than material, entities. The sticking point is in the idea of the virtual. She has moved traditional “inner” subjectivity, which also had been given a virtual status, to a collective or intersubjective status. Her thinking suggests that what had been once thought of as the *impalpable spiritual* is now the *virtual socially constructed*.

In this process, the materiality of these different collectivities and constituencies is not a factor: Miller urges us to understand society in terms of the virtual hierarchy she describes. This feels unnecessarily constraining, especially if classrooms are the communities in question; I would not want to place “experience” on a lower level than language, speech acts, locutions, or human nature, for that matter. In the classroom, experience is articulated to a specific group of people in specific language and speech acts, all combined into the scene, context, or situation of that day, that week, that course, and so on (that is, whichever purview is chosen for study). Social construction takes place consciously as we students of the classroom decide what categories shall enter our curricula. Furthermore, decisions regarding how to construct or reconstruct our experiences, individually or collectively, still result in recognizing the materiality of the experiences and the materiality of how we describe them. This means that there is no “virtual” zone in our deliberations or in our experiences. The process of social construction would not take place to begin with if there were no materiality or palpable weight to our classroom experiences, if we did not feel them. I assume that the philosophy



of social construction *presupposes* the materiality of language; then, social constructions are human choices made in order to change specific material experience.

Another circumstance of classrooms argues against viewing them as virtual groups. One of the burdens of schools and teachers has been the idea of school as preparatory, that is, a place whose function is to serve experiences that happen later in life. Teachers and professional educators have suffered from this “school is a preliminary stage” identity. Conceived as material, however, classrooms assume a role analogous to roles and activities of people’s growth stages. School socialization is part of the life cycle, culturally handled. It is neither more nor less virtual than, say, the community called “corporate America.” Any collection of people and institutions assembled for study is a real, not a virtual, community. The study itself will yield results that tell how fully to assume such provisional communities. By thinking of classrooms, schools, school systems, and professional education as material (rhetorical or discourse) communities, we recognize them as neither preparatory nor final in the life cycle. We may then consider different aspects of classrooms as more important—socialization, for example—than ones considered now, such as test scores.

Miller came to the view of rhetorical communities as virtual through her initial intuitions about the significant value of generic thinking that, previously, had not played a compelling role in the scholarship of rhetoric; genre is social action, she proposed, and many of us are taking up this idea. In that early essay, however, a move similar to the one in the later essay had taken place. Miller identifies one of her precursors as Lloyd Bitzer (1980, 1995), who claimed that rhetoric is situational: one must always take into account the “environment,” as he put it, in understanding rhetorical behavior. We now use *social or interpersonal context* for what Bitzer referred to as environment. Bitzer, perhaps following Kenneth Burke, seems to characterize the rhetorical situation as material. Miller (1984: 28) contradicts this materialist reading, however: “What is particularly important about rhetorical situations for a theory of genres is that they recur, as Bitzer originally noted, but in order to understand recurrence, it is necessary to reject the materialist tendencies in situational theory.” To support this claim, Miller presents an argument that I think is not well taken. She first says that our perception of genres depends on the recurrence of individual entities. Following this, she argues that “recurrence is an intersubjective phenomenon, a social occurrence, and cannot be understood in materialist terms” (29). Why not, I wonder? As soon as a recurrent pattern is identified by a consensus giving it a name, it has materialized.

It remains true, as she explains, that in our language we have categories, names of groups that have been created by intersubjective construction—consensus. We as speakers have definitely made the categories with our language, which is where *in part* these categories exist. Miller assumes that because these categories reside in language, they must not be material themselves and must not have an operative rootedness in the recurrence of phenomena. But *we speakers* retain this rootedness in phenomena once we are committed to them through our language, once we name them. It is something like naming a child: It is born and then named. After that it is “our child, Leslie.” Subsequent reference to “Leslie” is rigidly connected to the living person (Kripke 1972). Leslie has materialized in the sense that this particular name cannot be separated from our *relationship* with that living person. In this sense, the language of our categories, as well as the material phenomena that led us, collectively, to this language is a unified material entity. It seems unambiguous from Miller’s discussion that she understands the category of language as itself not material. While it is true that the name *table* is not a thing-table, both the name and the thing are material. The names of the recurrent phenomena are as material as the phenomena. There is a sense, if one accepts Saul Kripke’s (1972) view of names as “rigid designators,” that words become *part* of the material reality in which they appear. It is even clearer, perhaps, that language is always part of the intersubjective situation in which it appears. These “rhetorical situations” are material, as Bitzer suggested; they are bound up with the language that describes them; they are not “virtual” in the sense of imaginary or illusory. Miller may be using the term *virtual* as it is used in cyberspeak. But even there, it does not mean *imaginary*. Virtual space is still material in its own right and in its connection with other material things, just as a picture of a building is connected to the building (perhaps) but is at least connected to the viewers of the picture, who are material. What Miller describes as *virtual* I would call the *provisional character* of rhetoric, language, and genre. Material things such as stones are also provisional, temporary, and have their own purview of existence, their own “half-life,” so to speak. But it is different to recognize the provisional status of language and genre than to think of them as virtual.<sup>9</sup> In rhetorical theory, then, the genre idea gets separated from the materiality of language. Similarly, while literary scholars have paid more attention to genre, they have not looked into how the materiality of language is related to literary genre studies or into its capacities to enrich the discipline’s curricular and pedagogical practices.

## Genre and Materiality in Literary Studies

In literary theory, the concept of genre now is more often taken to refer to provisional groups of texts or works than to permanent groups that vary little throughout history. As Ralph Cohen (1982, 1984, 1986, 1989) has discussed in several essays, understanding genres as features of history leads away from the taxonomical handling of genres to the sense that the continuous changing of literary genres contributes to understanding historical change. In addition, as Cohen discusses, viewing literary genres as features of society as well as of history alerts us to the understanding that genres are necessarily mixed, that the palpability of genres is the same as the palpability of language—that is, language *must* appear in genres—and that the boundaries of genres, while always there in some sense, are necessarily loose or variable at any moment in history.

Cohen is one of several critics who have proposed such views, which appeared earlier and in different forms in the work of Bakhtin and Todorov. In Bakhtin's (1986: 87) essay on speech genres, for example, he suggests that "when we select words in the process of constructing an utterance . . . we usually take them from *other utterances*, and mainly from utterances that are kindred to ours in genre." Similarly, Todorov (1990: 15) writes, "Where do genres come from? Quite simply from other genres. A new genre is always the transformation of an earlier one, or of several: by inversion, by displacement, by combination." As with Bakhtin, the genres considered by Todorov are both oral and written; they are *language genres*, a term that includes literature. Todorov makes a point of describing how poetry and other languages exist in a continuum: "Poetry has certain things in common with the other arts: representation, expression, effect on the addressee. It has language use in common with everyday and scholarly language. Only the genres are its exclusive property." In fact, genres are the "exclusive property" of a wide variety of discourse zones or rhetorical communities. I mentioned earlier that Miller (1994: 69) observed how such formats as cross-examination, *amicus curiae* briefs, and the *voir dire* of witnesses are all instances of legal genres. The genres are definitive, but flexible: necessary and loose, as Cohen describes them. Miller, like Bazerman, overtook Todorov's proposal that genres occur in systems to form her concept of rhetorical communities. Thus, literature has a series of characteristic genres. If the boundaries are loose, no genre (to broaden Todorov's claim) is the exclusive property of a rhetorical community; genres are only characteristic of these communities. Within the "field" of literature, genres mix regularly, as when poems appear in plays and novels, when philosophy or prayer appear in literature, and so on. Literary

genres can appear in court, legal genres in literature, as in the popular genre of “courtroom drama.”

The increasing interest in genre by literary critics was occasioned in part by the movement to discover writings by hitherto unstudied constituencies, including women, nonwhite writers, and others who wrote but whose genres did not enter Western classrooms. Because generic thinking has been available, it has facilitated identifying the new genres with appropriate names (slave narrative, for example), but it has also enriched literary study because the new names have related the genres to history and society. Awareness of genre has played a significant role in transforming literary studies from the purely text-bound enterprise it was previously into a subject that includes, potentially, all aspects of history and society, all aspects of language.

Interestingly, insofar as the genre idea has affected literary disciplines, the results have been to admit a wider variety of scholars to the study of literature and to broaden the sense of what counts as literature. However, the reluctance of genre theorists to engage the connection of genre to language materiality is reflected in the reluctance, generally, of modern literary theorists to include a sense of what language is in the discussions of literature. Philosophical discussions of language usually do not apply to discussions of literature. On the other hand, Jacques Derrida’s language philosophy, which includes a tendency to subordinate the action of genres to the “free play” of language, seemed to open the gates to a view of language that revokes both language philosophy and genre, but it nevertheless sharpened considerably the critical attention to literary language. Derrida’s philosophy confused many and, unfortunately, became an academic cult in literary criticism, emphasizing the ludic principle of literary works “deconstructing themselves.” Rather than disciplined readings,<sup>10</sup> critics and teachers entered a kind of verbal free-for-all that had no relation to the seriousness of Derrida’s attempt to introduce a more playful, language-conscious spirit into serious scholarship. Terms like “the free play of language” had historical and social possibilities, but because this philosophy downplayed the genre idea just as genre theorists rejected materiality, the movement toward understanding the materiality of language, as Derrida introduced it, died. Critics do not “deconstruct” literature any longer, and most, in fact, don’t know why they would want to undertake such a project at all.

Yet a combination of Derridean materiality with the genre-consciousness I have been contemplating implies a literary pedagogy that recognizes how learning language and literature is based on an exchange-of-language context. Some readers have said that they are “friends” with the authors they have

studied. Rereading works over time, our relationship with the works grows and seems to be like a relationship with a living person. As we remember the story or the thought of many works, the genre and the language are unconscious foundations of the active memory. In reading and rereading, we assimilate more and more of the “author’s” language, including its conventional and generic accents, until, perhaps, we are repeating it in new situations without conscious reference to its source. In high school, when we were told to enter into the “Worth Remembering” section of our notebooks the “Our revels now are ended” speech from *The Tempest*, we all groaned. Now, however, after our guests leave, I routinely remark to others at home that “our revels now are ended,” and I observe that they have “vanished into thin air” and that our dinner party was an “insubstantial pageant faded” that left many dishes behind. An ordinary domestic experience takes on a somewhat different identity in our minds—a dimension attaches itself to the experience through the act of taking “someone else’s” language, activating it, using it, and repeating it in new contexts.

Did I borrow from this “friend,” Shakespeare, or did I cite his work? Maybe, but it may be truer to say that I took his language, *made it my own*, and used it in a living scene, just as I have overtaken the language of people near me and made it my own. Also, I *changed* it, either by accident or deliberately, and of course it matters because the language has gotten and given new life. Isn’t every literature teacher trying to get every student to do this? Isn’t this the moment of success in literature classes, when the students have made the language their own and it stays with them over years? If literature is sacralized, placed in a special privileged, even transcendental, category, my remark would seem to be the work of a smart-aleck reader, an act of irreverence. If literature and all other writing were not sacralized, if it were treated with the same flexibility as speech, it, too, would continue to live and be cited and recited.

Heather Dubrow (1982: 117) has suggested that we think of genres as we think of personalities:

A genre closely resembles a human personality in the way it may incorporate elements from many other personality types while still conforming to one basic type itself. . . . Genres resemble human personalities, too, in their complex relationships with those around them. They are, as we have often observed, shaped both by learning from and by rebelling against their literary parents, those earlier forms from which they develop. . . . [A single trait] may also assume different forms within the same personality as it develops.

This analogy, like the figure of the author as friend, is evidence that social tropes of language interaction, internalized in childhood, lead us to recognize individual works and genres of works as aspects of living people. There is no mystery to this common description of one's relation to literature because of the way we have acquired language: we recognize real language as being rooted, necessarily, in living people. In reading, we may project or imagine living people articulating the works, but we also read in the context of real living people, in class, at home, at work, and so on. Our strong attachments to others presuppose the involvement of language: our involvement in language presupposes the presence of living people. Does one want to say that such recognition is a "social construction"? I would rather say that people internalize language as a social exchange or interaction. The current interpersonal situation, in which the response is rearticulated, activates the language. This is the mechanism of the construction. Dubrow's description of genres as personalities resembles Cohen's more abstract description of genres as changing, flexible, yet necessarily identified through history and society, just as people are.

David Fishelov's (1993) study of genre extends the scope of Dubrow's figure by considering four analogies for literary genres: biological species, families, social institutions, and speech acts. Fishelov offers that no one of these is more authoritative than the others. Genres could be a fifth class in this analogical series. These categories are either living beings themselves, or language associated with living people. In thinking of genres in this living mode, however, Fishelov, like other genre theorists in rhetoric and literature, does not consider the categories as material (or not). Rather, the probing of the genre idea uses the sources for a materialist sense of language but applies them only to the task of elucidating the uses and functions of genres. Yet the use of these analogies to describe genres is similar to Wittgenstein's use of language games, forms of life, and family resemblance to characterize language ceremonies and different kinds of speech acts.

A 1974 study by Gerald Bruns may shed light on why genre theorists have used most of the sources for the materiality of language but confined their use to genre theory. Bruns observes that after Plato, the language of poetry was assumed to be either a zone of pure expressiveness or a zone of absolute rootedness in world. On the one hand, language was a palpable thing to be crafted by the poet, thus removing him or her from the world and into poetry, a special zone. On the other hand, the making of poems places the poet securely in the palpable real world, not at all removed. Bruns suggests that this pair of polar attitudes toward the language of poetry is found throughout the history of the West, in different historical periods. Poetry was

considered material in both of these attitudes, but people made choices; materiality was, so to speak, factored out, as the issue became instead, What *social* position shall poets occupy? Language was not a problem: people did not view language as the part of life that affected how people lived. It might be said that how people understood the status of language *did not matter*, so that language was *immaterial* to the question of where in society poets belong. In contrast, in the modern period (perhaps the beginning of the twentieth century), an awareness of the complete involvement of the human species in the “objective” world began to grow. In the positivist world of subatomic physics, measurements could no longer be made without affecting the measured. Wittgenstein’s language philosophy first sought an account of “transparent” language needed by positivism. He then escaped from the objectivity of positivism toward a position that recognized the end of “transparent” language and the beginning of its study as a material feature of social life, an entity that is part of the ecology of material things.

The momentum of history and the values that history has recursively supported is my explanation for the extended inertia in responding to the materiality of language. Assuming the materiality of language would change many things that we take for granted in English studies. In particular, I want to consider how the materiality of language renders pedagogy part of the subject matter of language use.

### **The Subject of Language Use and the Pedagogy of Exchange**

The use of the contemporary, revised genre idea is a breath of fresh air, and it has opened important doors in language and literature pedagogy. Yet without its being united with the materiality of language, it still tends toward an academic use and has actually led toward classroom schemata of “direct instruction.” According to Aviva Freedman (1994: 191), one pedagogy (the Sydney school) derived from the application of genre theory is unchanged from the traditional “top-down” or “banking” pedagogy beyond which many of us are trying to move. Freedman emphasizes, rather, how genre, like language, is acquired through our immersion in these genres in our daily lives since childhood. Because of this unconscious acquisition of genre and its similarity to the unconscious acquisition of language, a different pedagogy is needed. Freedman emphasizes the fact (also brought out by theorists such as Cohen) that language necessarily appears to us in genres; no language appears “by itself.” Language brings with it this double perspective that makes its pedagogy distinctive.

The paradigm of the materiality of language and its genre elaborations



suggest that exchanges of language are also pedagogical situations: teaching and learning take place for speakers and listeners, writers and readers. In school, classroom populations give the subject of language use the emphasis, shape, and identity appropriate for those contexts. Each classroom has the potential for significant and extended conversation, idle talking, arguing, lecturing, teasing, joking, inquiring, insulting, note passing, and learning what others think. As discussed by Edward Pauly (1990) in *The Classroom Crucible*, the phenomenology of the classroom has been overlooked, in favor of whole-school performances, as a salient factor in achieving reform (Bleich 1998: 146–56). Peer- and professional-group socialization are part of most study and learning, but they are essential for learning the use of language. The degree of classroom socialization determines how good a basis has been created for exchanges of language. Good socialization lets class members (including teachers) *feel* the extent to which language matters in learning, knowing, and living. In class, we need to teach ourselves to feel the materiality of language by stipulating that how people interact in class becomes part of the curriculum.

Materiality is not a technique or a method; it is a universal feature of language urging us to become conscious of it during the moments of study. It identifies the uses of language and literature outside the classroom in the same way that it applies to classroom language uses. It is a guide to study our language and literature as we use it in different contexts, and it is the basis for teaching language and literature as *one subject*. It is a way of recognizing common interests in the use of language in school and of developing critiques of schools, classrooms, teachers, and administrators without moral and ideological gestures. The study of literary language teaches how to overtake literary articulations and make them our own and how to adapt older genres to contemporary society. Writing pedagogy may use either literary or nonliterary language, each emphasizing the sources in other people's and other societies' uses of language for the "new" language we are about to use.

Most writing-program curricula treat writing classes as if students' sharable thoughts were waiting for them to "find the words to express" these thoughts. As with literary texts and authors, individual students' writing is sacralized, and the practice of "doing one's own work" is promoted to unreasonable degrees. Rebecca Howard (2000) has advocated the abandonment of the term *plagiarism* because of this obsession and false pursuit of originality in writing. She urges recognition of different degrees of the overtaking of others' language by each writer/speaker and the recognition of how individual work is also plural and collective.



The exchange of language among students is not usually eligible for treatment in most writing courses; exchange is constrained by institutional evaluation processes and academic ranking, both also expectations given by the hierarchical arrangement of society. The need to give individual grades forces curriculum planners and teachers to highlight only the collection of individual work. As a result, students are rewarded by teachers, sometimes consciously, sometimes not consciously, for using the teacher's language, usually without citation, on examinations and essays. This is understood as "learning." Yet the identical phenomenon of learning takes place when students overtake from one another, but more often than not this process is called *cheating*. The "sacredness" of each person's "texts" creates a taboo for students regarding the possibility of using other people's writings; yet spoken language, which has social functions very similar to those of writing, can be overtaken and reused in the new, present context without any notice. A pedagogy of exchange—bringing the materiality of language consciously into our classrooms—would resist creating these categories of sacred texts in favor of collective exchange.

Teaching materiality and genre in our attention to the language "we already know" (the native language) tries to affect that aspect of the momentum of history that has insisted on the transparency of language—its inertness, its role as a conduit, its presumed immunity from social and political interest,<sup>11</sup> an inactive carrier of a detachable and transcendent meaning. Teaching the subject of language use by activating its own pedagogical energy implies that students, teachers, and classrooms will influence how business is done in universities today. Such teaching will affect many of the traditional practices of the vast majority of those who participate in one-directional, "top-down" teaching. Here are a few consequences of teaching language use and pursuing a pedagogy of exchange.

*What if the project were to study other students' essays, take the ideas, and then write one's own essay on what one learned from the other students? What if students had the chance to take their colleagues' language and make it their own, just as I overtook Shakespeare's language?* Each student enters a class with a style and history of language use. Some of this information is audible when students speak. But other information is available if students' work were shared, as it is beginning to be, through the use of e-mail class lists, chat rooms, and other informal communication lines now being opened in universities. Students now have access to one another's work, and if there were no fears regarding "doing one's own work," they could learn the processes of sharing and comparing the uses of language. Students can inquire into one

another's decisions; as relationships develop, the inquiries become increasingly substantial. Collaboration and group work, now used mostly in superficial exercises, will develop, if continued in unchanging groups, into resources of different language uses. Such extended social relations also need yearlong courses to reduce the provisional status of the exchanges of essays and conversation. The teachers' roles become more responsible in that they need to guide judgments away from offensive moves. Over time and habituation, the processes of judgment become common and expected: readers and writers give judgments and opinions, but none is recorded formally or deemed institutionally superior to another. In language exchanges, judgments are common. Why shouldn't they be common in classrooms? Why should the teachers' judgments end the processes of judgment? Teachers can include their own histories and uses of language in such inquiries. In groups in which familiarity has developed, as much attention can be given to why one made language choices as to why one should make choices in new projects. Extended socialization discloses the growth processes that change people's uses of language, and the changes are visible in terms of changed social relations. The habits of observing the language of one's colleagues help to stabilize classroom social relations; stable and active social relations teach language use.

*What if the search for language and thought in books were a deliberate attempt to learn the language of these texts and make it our own? What if learning and critiquing the language of biology textbooks were part of learning biology? What if historiography were understood to be a part of history rather than a separate subject?* Because books are sacralized, plagiarism has been a "capital" crime in academic communities (Howard 2000); one is not just stealing from a book—one is stealing authority. Yet if these books were understood as instances and mixtures of genres, variable with history and society, their language and substance—their textuality—would announce one subject matter, one statement of disciplinary knowledge, but without transcendental authority. In courses, writings in formal disciplines are language uses—genres—like lectures and discussion in classrooms. The processes of students' and teachers' overtaking (learning) the uses and genres of textbooks and sourcebooks become the objects of study. To study the languages and genres of textbooks is also to raise questions about the certainty of the scientific and scholarly claims. Textbooks' language is material and not transparent, generic and not "just language." Formal language uses communicate the status of knowledge as well as "raw" information, depending on what one is looking for in the text. Students can address all aspects of language use in textbooks, without

either discrediting the knowledge or believing it uncritically. The scholarly processes of citation and reuse then seem, perhaps, less like the affirmation of known facts and more like the affiliation of living scholars and teachers with established traditions.

Citation and re-citation are gestures in a growth process, part of the life cycle, provisional, temporary, and pointed to the needs of society. The teaching of language use exposes and compares the processes of scholarly exchange, but it also gives students access to these processes, authorizes them to judge and review the language they receive, and establishes their interests and ability to participate in the exchanges. Questions of imitation and emulation then appear. Material language shows its instrumental role in the perpetuation of values and mores and teaches the necessity of choosing the language at every stage of relationships and of writing. What is now being taught by direct instruction is this: Choose your words carefully for your audience. This dictum suggests manipulation rather than kinship, as *audience* is always an abstraction. Unless we are made to feel the consequences of the language choices themselves through our direct address to the “audience”—those with whom we are in contact—we do not, finally, understand the processes of language-use choice. By rewriting and rereading books to others in class, *audience* is not abstract or imaginary, and the uses of language are not hypothetical.

*What if it were common to teach and learn without argument and opposition?* For a number of years, “argument” has been the single basis of writing pedagogy. Stephen North et al. (1997: 257) have identified how this mode becomes the genre of the “argumentative academic prose essay.” This curriculum means that students learn one genre, with which writing and language use are then identified. Invariably, it is taught through direct instruction. Yet imagine getting the impression that there is only one genre: this actually means there are *no genres*. The impression is given that there is *only language* and that, as the recent textbook implies, “everything is an argument.” The processes of arguing anything are far from the styles of language acquisition learned in childhood. As Deborah Tannen (1998) has recently noted, the meaning of *argument* in contemporary society is oppositional. The term itself is taken to refer to there being only two sides to questions. When the academic argument-curriculum obtains, the emphasis is on building up one’s own authority rather than on disseminating information. The purpose of exchanging arguments is to *win*.

Exchanging language, facts, and formulations with other researchers—students in the same class—moves beyond the need to win. Teaching by comparing two or more verbal formulations of the “same” idea is not com-

mon in postsecondary classrooms. Teachers are fearful of being inconclusive if they end their presentations with several mutually exclusive statements. A pedagogy of exchange, on the other hand, means consciously pursuing such approaches and focusing on the language presented by each contributor. For example, the term *instinct* is taken for granted by many, yet few know that there is no formal, scientific agreement on its reference, beyond its common usage. Arguments acquire their energy from the assumptions of certainty. If it is known that no agreement about instinct exists, understanding it depends on how it is articulated: *instinctive behavior is learned; instinctive behavior is genetically regulated; instincts are learned on the basis of genetic preparation, but are not genetically regulated*. It matters how one says what instinctive behavior is. The exchange of language discloses various choices of how to “say” *instinct* without presupposing a need to win a competition of choices. It may be the better part of pedagogy to list possibilities and to observe how language changes the possibilities than to list laws, certainties, and facts as fixed formulations. It may be a better part of pedagogy to understand the language-use aspects of *truth* than to display the latter as an ideal on the seal of the university.

*What if part of every project were to understand some dimension of one's own involvement in it by examining how one articulates this involvement?* Most writing and learning projects do not expect or request students to take or give account of their involvement. In everyday speech genres, there are levels of involvement from “sincere” to “deceptive,” depending on the social relation of the speakers. To many students, the idea of caring about what they say is unconscious, emerging only in highly motivated contexts like love relationships, parental exchanges, and getting a job. There are different languages, genres, discourses of involvement. Students already have had experiences that led them to articulate their involvements. If done collaboratively, the search for one's own signs of involvement can take place through mutual recursive comparisons of each person's ways of articulating commitment. Many undergraduates have not learned to take the measure of their own commitments and involvements—not to subject matters, not to vocations, not to other people, not to amusements like music or sports. Nor are they thinking that their motivation affects how they name vocations that are “out there.” For most, the task of identifying their social and vocational affiliations has not been a part of a conscious effort in school; affiliations take place pragmatically and spontaneously. Yet because of the unfinished status of these involvements, their different levels of articulation are likely projects for the study of language. It is a role of language use to disclose how many students articulate commitment in

terms of “my career” or “my family” or “my avocation.” It is part of the curriculum of language use to notice common means of describing (or avoiding describing) commitments, vocation, and society. Many writing courses deal with common, publicly repeated issues like the death penalty and abortion rights; attention to language use aims to push the ordinary uses aside and to ask students to *find* language, through exchange with others engaged in the same search, that tells how they are implicated in such issues.

*What if each student’s work were not compared with the other students’, but instead students were considered coreaders and cothinkers of one another’s work? What if students’ writings were arranged not in a hierarchical list from best to worst, but in clumps of related interest? What if meritocratic values were considered to produce fearful experts instead of imaginative teachers? What if we didn’t segregate the gifted and the challenged? How can we use a language that identifies difference without creating unfair structures of status?* Even though parents have custody of infants, it would seem strange for anyone to judge that parents are “better spoken” than children. It would also seem strange, even in the fourth grade, for example, to describe a teacher’s uses of language as *superior* to her students’ uses. Yet as literacy education begins in the early grades, institutional demands make it necessary for teachers to compare one student to another in language and literacy ability, and then to rank all of the students either individually or in “reading groups.” Most parents, however, go to great lengths to conceive of their two or more children as equivalent to one another, in spite of obvious differences in their behaviors and family roles. The practice of ranking students, begun at the onset of formal literacy education, is also the beginning of a series of school practices—such as regular testing—that derogate the development of language in students. Except in cases where students have acute problems in school, there is no reason to segregate formally according to language ability. But because segregation is traditional and common, supported by mandatory testing, few think that alternatives can work.

It has been shown repeatedly and dramatically, in works such as William Labov’s (1972) *Language in the Inner City* and Shirley Heath’s (1983) *Ways with Words*, that children develop rich language capabilities regardless of cultural style. But schools, not alert to cultural differences, judge certain language behaviors as signs of greater or lesser capability or intelligence; they then segregate on the basis of this judgment. Since Labov’s and Heath’s studies came out, about a generation ago, very little has changed in literacy education. The Whole Language movement, which is responsive to the results of these studies, is still a minority segment of literacy education (Goodman

1986). Just as individuals become ranked and segregated, so have our curricula. A pedagogy of exchange seeks mixed genres of students and subject matters. In particular, it tries to integrate literary, rhetorical, and linguistic study in the same way that it promotes integration and collaboration as part of active classroom socialization.

The value of *exchange* implies one thing more about how materiality revises pedagogy. Language-exchange pedagogy assumes the relativity of language use to culture but also an analogous relativity of individual language use to family, community, and individual history.<sup>12</sup> In a sense, each person's version of English is an incrementally different language. Under these circumstances, single-classroom scales of evaluation are not applicable. The grounds of comparison among students' uses, capabilities, and styles of language use should be part of the curriculum and not part of teachers' judgments of students' competence. Language differences between individuals and between groups are part of the subject of language use; often enough, diverse student populations, already various in their styles, have enough background and experience in language use in society to participate in a curriculum that will teach language, language use, and language difference.

It is only a small step from cultural differences to differences in competence, which, in spite of appearances, are not great, especially in regard to the ability to speak; what are perceived as differences in competence are usually differences in motivation and attitude toward school—commitment. If it were not for mandatory ranked grading, the exchanges of language between those who speak fluently and those who don't could be included in the curriculum. The grading system creates a prejudice in each classroom that, in the course of a single semester, cannot be overcome. It does not occur to the certified gifted to listen, hear, and learn from the certified less-gifted or challenged; it does not occur to the challenged to teach the certified gifted something new. Yet the stabilization of classroom relationships through the exchange of language can lead to such on-the-record pedagogical conversations. It is neither difficult nor rude to demand of all students that they listen to other students and that they consciously try to use what they acquire from others. The obsession with measurable achievement narrows the focus of the gifted and intimidates the challenged, thus inhibiting socialization, promoting competition, and discouraging exchange. It is true that for a pedagogy of language exchange to work, the compulsory schemes of formal recorded evaluation based on a presumed competition of students against one another must be suspended.

## Exchanging the Subject

Recognizing materiality and genre is a change of traditional beliefs about language that urges on us a new subject, *language use*, whose substance and pedagogy are part of one another. Based on the need to study all forms of language exchange, the subject desacralizes the texts of “canonical” literature, makes the speech and text genres of knowledge available for language critique, and teaches how language use is an essential ingredient in social relations. Because historically in the West literacy has been regarded as an activity of a privileged class, we now need to overcome the false distinction between oral and written language. This distinction, which only a few find strange or unwarranted, is one of the main sources of the long vexation in writing pedagogy and of the split in English studies between literature and composition, of which many have written in the last forty years. The subject of *language use*, based on extended attention to oral and written language (including literary) exchanges, is poised to let all students feel the experience of teaching and to extend the exchanges of teaching to new places.

## Notes

1. In *Subjective Criticism* (1978), I review how Helen Keller came into language in a distinctly pedagogical situation: her teacher had to combine the authority of parents with the special knowledge of the language Helen could understand. In more ordinary situations, family members have both the authority and the appropriate knowledge.
2. A recent essay in *College English* by Anis Bawarshi (2000) titled “The Genre Function” presents a useful review that will help to orient readers of this essay toward the contemporary interest in genre. While it matters whether the term *function* or *idea* follows the word *genre*, my essay does not need the distinctions spelled out.
3. One other source belongs in this series, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which I cite later in my essay in connection with pedagogy. While this source is germane to a formal explanation of materiality, the present exposition does not need the explanation. Another essay of mine, “Converting Rhetoric to Language Use” (Bleich forthcoming), gives more notice to Whorf.
4. Carolyn Miller (1994) and Charles Bazerman (1994), in separate articles in *Genre and the New Rhetoric*, consider the work of Wittgenstein and Austin but do not work into their formulations their sense of what genre is and does as a social entity. In the present discussion, I will consider mainly Miller’s formulations to make my point. I think analogous arguments can be made about Bazerman’s approach to genre. Both have taken great strides to bring the value and scope of genre theory to our attention. My present commentary aims to make better use of their work.
5. In *Know and Tell* (Bleich 1998: 73–79), I elaborate on the sense of materiality in several non-Western cultures (given in Boyarin 1992) and in some zones of our culture described by all of the essays in that volume.



6. Extended discussion of this principle and the degree of its application in Western literary theory can be found in Iwanicki 1994. She and I found this path into materiality in Handelman 1982.
7. Noam Chomsky's idea of language competence is similar in style to, but more complex than, Wittgenstein's first conception of language. He made this idea more plausible by stipulating a genetic basis for the logical structure of language, whereas Wittgenstein decided that a logical structure will not be found and need not be sought.
8. From the bottom, the hierarchy reads: experience, language, locution, speech act, episode or strategy, genre, form of life, culture, human nature (Miller 1994).
9. Miller (1984: 29) also says, "Because human action is based on and guided by meaning, not by material causes, at the centre of action is a process of interpretation." I wonder about human action being guided by "meaning." However false or misdirected human actions may turn out to be, all of these actions are guided by desires, fears, needs, and circumstances, each of which is material and none of which can be separated from the language and genres in which they appear to us.
10. Barbara Johnson's (1980) essay, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*," offers one dramatic example of what a materialist approach to literature would yield. Unlike most deconstructionist essays, this one highlights the language so thoroughly that it establishes a model of what might be done pedagogically, but without the fanfare associated with the critical performances given by deconstructionist critics.
11. Noam Chomsky's work on language contains this presumption. Yet he claims another career for himself that spends equal energy on political contribution. The remarkable fact is that he holds the two careers to be completely distinct from one another.
12. As I mentioned earlier, one of the sources for the materiality of language not fully discussed in previous sections is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of the later 1930s and early 1940s. The hypothesis states that the meaning of language is relative to its total culture. Benjamin Whorf (1997) pursued this idea in his study of the language of the Hopi nation. He showed how the Hopi language reflected a different sense of fundamental concepts, such as time, taken for granted by Westerners. Similarly, because individual habits of use vary, sometimes considerably, from person to person, a certain degree of individualized usage is to be anticipated by teachers.

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