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Stanton Wortham
University of Pennsylvania, stantonw@gse.upenn.edu

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Moments of Enduring Struggle

A review of Ben Rampton (2006), *Language in late modernity: Interaction in an urban school*. NY: Cambridge University Press.

Stanton Wortham
University of Pennsylvania

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Ben Rampton has a gift for identifying subtle discursive patterns that hook into and illuminate broadly relevant social processes. His earlier work on "language crossing" focused on moments when multiethnic British youth inserted forms from other languages into ongoing talk in English (Rampton, 2005). His new book describes three similar patterns: the appearance of popular cultural forms (especially music) in school, students' out-of-class use of forms from a foreign language learned in school and students' stylized use of social-class-stereotypical forms ("posh" and "Cockney") dropped into everyday discourse. By tracing these distinctive types of language use through a remarkable data set of recorded youth speech, Rampton is able to develop a precise, compelling empirical account. He then uses the data to explore questions of broad concern—about the continued relevance of social class, the influence of media on youth engagement in schools, the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction and other important issues. Many write about these topics, but few ground their accounts in such precise and convincing empirical analyses.

In addition to offering comprehensive sociolinguistic accounts, both statistical overviews of usage by different types of speakers and detailed discourse analyses of many instances of use, Rampton provides extensive discussions of several other dimensions that illuminate his central object—that object being the discourse of multiethnic, working class youth in one inner city school and the ways in which their discourse is shaped by and contributes to more enduring social struggles. The first dimension, beyond his extensive microanalyses, involves theory and history. Rampton engages with many relevant social theories, articulating distinctive features of the "late modern" condition these youth find themselves in and discussing British, American and continental accounts of subjectivity and emotion, language and society, globalization and

postmodernism, capitalism and domination. He also describes historical transformations that have brought us into the current period and the distinctive features that have changed in larger social systems across time. The second dimension involves ethnography. Rampton provides extensive ethnographic background on the focal youth and the classroom, giving the reader a vivid sense of these students' lives and relations in school. The third dimension involves method. Rampton provides a whole chapter, plus many other commentaries throughout, on how he did his research, on the relations between theory and method and on the warrants for his empirical claims. The extensive discussions of microanalysis, theory, ethnography and method together provide an illuminating and compelling account.

Building from these complementary analyses, Rampton provides several lasting insights. He demonstrates the continuing relevance of social class, undermining the common academic lament that class does not matter any more. Through nuanced analyses of many speech events, he shows how youth themselves presuppose social class as part of their tacit accounts of the world. Through statistical sociolinguistic analyses, he finds social class in everyday behavior. Rampton also demonstrates how youth construct artful social commentaries, playing with language and its social connotations but also constructing commentaries that have bite. He demonstrates how popular media circulate into schools, where they do not displace academic tasks but instead contribute to a hybrid genre that allows both teachers and students to reach some of their goals. And he demonstrates how students confront rigid, teacher-centered lessons by constructing tacit commentaries on teachers and their pedagogical strategies.

The central conceptual issue running through Rampton's account involves the relation between interaction and social structure. His title, he says at the beginning of the book, intimates "both the rather grandiose and the fairly local" (p.4). The book contains very abstract social theory, describing processes that take place over decades and involve very large groups of people spread out over the entire globe, but it also presents many analyses of seconds-long snatches of talk. Rampton recognizes that he must articulate the relations between these two scales. At various points in the book, especially in early chapters, Rampton seems to follow a traditional argument about "structure" and "agency." He cites Giddens (1984) and the classic account of "structuration" (p.25).

According to this account large scale social and historical processes provide "essential background" against which particular interactions must be construed (p.11), because no event makes sense without presupposing some larger regularities of language use and social organization. Rampton "is always mindful of the positions that the participants occupy in larger/longer/slower social processes, seeking to reveal how these more established identities can be reproduced, contested and maybe changed by human agents interacting" (p.24). Thus he also describes how "collective socio-historical schemas are continuously reconstituted within the flows and contingencies of situated activity" (p.344). Larger scale processes constrain, but particular events can sometimes flout or redirect more entrenched regularities. Rampton argues that it is patronizing to ignore individuals' agency, and he provides many nice illustrations of reflexive, unexpected and ironic usage.

As Rampton acknowledges, however, a simple "dialectic" between "structure and agency" fails to explain how the two levels relate in practice (Agha, 2007; Bourdieu, 1972; Holland & Lave, 2001). He moves beyond this simple account in four different ways, at different points in his account. First, Rampton studies "meso-level" (p.95) and "mid-level" (p.89) processes that mediate between structure and agency. The two most important are "genre" and "ritual." A genre "involves practical perceptions of how the social environment should come together with the details of meaningful activity in different types of situation, and as such, it integrates phenomena and processes that, from an analytic point of view, are often seen as operating at different levels" (p.128). By describing how speakers' generic expectations operate downward, as it were, to inform people's interpretations and reactions in interaction, and upward, as those expectations are shaped by larger scale processes, Rampton begins to sketch in the spaces between structure and agency. "Ritual" serves a similar function, when he describes how students react to and sometimes parody teacher-centered pedagogy, and also how that pedagogy fits with the organization of society. Second, Rampton says that he would like to study the historical development of classroom genres (p.129) and the ontogenetic development of individuals' sometimes divergent sociolinguistic habits (p.365), but that his current data did not allow this. Including a diachronic dimension also allows an analyst to complicate the opposition between structure and agency, because it traces the emergence

and transformation of "structure" over widely varying timescales (Agha, 2007; Wortham, 2006).

Third, Rampton takes a more empirical stance and uses data from actual events to interrogate structural "claims with widespread contemporary currency" (p.12). Theorists, policymakers and ordinary people speculate about the organization of the social world, claiming that social class has become less relevant, for instance, and that the penetration of popular culture into classrooms is undermining education. Rampton "look[s] at the proceedings more closely" (p.88), and he provides evidence that social class is in fact relevant in many events and that popular culture weaves into academic activities in more complex ways than common wisdom would suggest. Fourth, Rampton points out that participants themselves make claims about the social world, and that the claims of social theory resemble these "secondary representations" (p.223). He examines young people's tacit claims about social structure and explores how their ideas about social structure influence behavior.

Those trying to move beyond the theoretical limitations of "structure" and "agency" have pursued each of these four responses, often in isolation. Instead of presenting social structure as a simple fact that both constrains and is shaped by individual actions and events, people have offered more complex accounts by describing the many mediating processes that intervene between the "macro" and the "micro," they have traced the spread and solidification of "structures" across different timescales, they have interrogated claims about structural "facts" by examining data, and they have focused on participants' own social theories as the relevant level of analysis. Rampton does not attend to the emergence of structure, historically or ontogenetically, but he does pursue the three other approaches, drawing them together into a more complex account at the end of the ninth chapter. He argues that social structure really exists, he provides evidence for it and he describes the "tacit but continuous reiteration" and occasional transformation that occurs in events (p.363). At the same time, he describes meso-level processes that mediate the influence of structure on agency. And he explores the interrelations between "primary realities" (p.222) and people's own "secondary representations," as they come together to influence the outcome of interactions. Finally,

he does all this with an eye toward debunking common claims about society and schooling, using data to show what is really going on.

Rampton opens his book by describing how, in many disciplines, "research on classrooms is often seen as rather dull" (p.3). His excellent and provocative analyses show that, to the contrary, many issues of central concern to various disciplines can be found and clarified through research on language and education—issues ranging from the forms and consequences of globalization to the influence of media to the development and legitimation of stratified social identities. As Rampton himself and others have argued (Levinson, 1999; Rampton, 2007; Wortham, in press), educational settings are important sites for the production of social relations that deserve attention from various disciplinary perspectives. This book illustrates the point admirably.

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