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The Official Language of Academic Debate

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Abstract: Academic debate continues to face the long term issue of how to reconcile competing philosophies of argument pedagogy and competitive practice, especially between adherents technical and civic debate theories. Using the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, this essay offers an analysis of this division, focusing on the role of dominant language formation and the role fluency plays in constituting power dynamic in the activity. The conception of a translation approach to judging is offered as a remedy for the exclusionary effects of technical language use in debate.

The current alphabet soup of debate formats, and the wide divergences of style and substance within those formats, bring to the fore a number of issues regarding debate pedagogy and competitive practice. While debate retains a strong case as a worthwhile pursuit for students and academic institutions, it is harder and harder to define exactly what debate is or explain it to a layperson. The National Forensics Association’s Lincoln-Douglas Debate (NFA-LD), the National Parliamentary Debate Association (NPDA), and post-merger policy debate offered by the National Debate Tournament (NDT) and the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA), along with any number of smaller organizations, share the common challenge of integrating the recent profusion of debate philosophies within their own competitive frameworks. These issues have attracted significant scholarly attention in the recent past (Zompetti 2004; Parcher 2004; Galloway 2007). Indeed, these differences between pedagogical visions of debate have been with us since the beginning of the activity (Keith 2002). But never before has there been so much disagreement, so much fragmentation, in intercollegiate competitive debate.

Reconciliation, or even hostile co-habitation, seems elusive, threatening both the congruence of the debate round and the long term viability of the activity. In this essay, I offer an alternative reading of the stakes for this

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1 I treat the two interchangeably as “policy debate,” a la McGee and McGee (2000).
friction in debate. My analysis is rooted in the philosophy and sociology of education articulated by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s work focuses in particular on the ways both education and accolades are distributed in societal institutions, a ready fit for competitive college debating. Bourdieu also lays bare the often hidden ways that power entrenches certain educational practices, a point I believe is key to understanding contemporary academic debate. I argue that the nominal objectivity of non-interventionist judging paradigms conceals a deeper bias in favor of those fluent in specialized debate vocabularies, and that this bias shuts out equitable access to education and competitive success for those not schooled in the dominant idioms of debate.

To make this case, this essay will first unpack the theories of Bourdieu, especially as they relate to the formation of official languages within educational institutions. Next, I engage in a Bourdieuan critique of intercollegiate competitive debate in order to diagnose the role that reputational distribution plays in choking off pedagogical agency. I finally offer a set of potential remedies, including a revised approach to judging debates that reflexively recognizes the privileges of fluency and hopefully paves the way for a more equitable practice of debate pedagogy.

**Bourdieu on the Structures of Education**

Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu has made a foundational contribution to the sociology of education along with any number of other fields. Perhaps his most important thoughts center on the ways societal institutions construct and distribute goods or “capital.” (Bourdieu 1984a; Bourdieu 1986). Educational systems are primary sources for both cultural and symbolic forms of capital. Cultural capital includes the skills and knowledge that accrue from participating in educational activities. Symbolic capital in educational contexts includes the benefits of reputation, title, and societal position that are the result of having attained education. The use of the capital metaphor by Bourdieu recognizes that both of these goods eventually translate into economic capital, as skills and prestige become entry tickets to certain vocations and a higher class status.

While those within a particular capital structure may view the distribution of cultural and symbolic capital as a process of determining merit, Bourdieu theorizes that fields of capital distribution in any status quo are in fact arbitrary and in the interests of the dominant class. This is true across society, but especially so in educational

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2 A similar dynamic of community norms stifling individual speaker agency has been noted in Individual Events as well. See (Gaer 2002) and (Ribarsky 2005). It is possible that the line of reasoning in this essay would be fruitful for those forensic activities as well.
systems (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). The distribution of capital is arbitrary because the standards by which we determine what knowledge and skills are important to possess, as well as the reputational benefits that flow to those who possess them, cannot be defended except from within the given field. While the prevalence of one type of capital over another is fundamentally arbitrary, from within the field the status quo often seems a natural product of an inevitable social order. Bourdieu argues, on the other hand, that this supposition is the product of “misrecognition,” a failure to reflexively understand the arbitrary nature of capital distribution. Those who possess capital falsely believe that they defend the objectively proper order of society when they reserve positions of power for others who possess this arbitrary, misrecognized capital. This is not merely a top-down process of hoarding power and privilege. Instead, the subjugated classes themselves misrecognize the status quo as being structured in a necessary and unrevisable way. They take it for granted that those who have been to certain schools, who have been educated to think or act in certain ways, are entitled to wealth and power while they themselves are destined for lower positions. Somebody has to dig the ditches, and most everyone believes that the societal rules for who those people will be are inevitable and proper.

The theoretical vocabulary of capital allows Bourdieu to paint a picture of society where scarce resources (education, prestige, careers, political and social power) are distributed according to a system that seems inexorable both to those in power and those who are denied power through their lack of capital. Anyone who has been denied a job because they do not possess a degree or has been socially shunned because of the status of their family, and further believed that this was “just the way the world works” has participated in this misrecognized system of capital distribution. One of the most important ways that this system operates is through the regulation of language.

**Determining an Official Language**

Bourdieu spent much of his early career studying the entrenchment of official French over a number of regional dialects, including his own now dead idiom Gascon (Grenfell 2009). The experience led him to place language in a central role for understanding the construction of society. Differences in dialect and diction are a product of regional, ethnic and class distinctions in a broader community. However, the lack of a common standard for multiple dialects makes social hierarchicization difficult. Homogenizing language use by establishing an official
or legitimate way of speaking allows society to demarcate those who have been through a formal education program, and therefore possess symbolic and cultural capital, and those who have not. Encouraging as many as possible to speak a common language is more than a process of ensuring communication between different groups. It is also a means of establishing a normative set of distinctions between linguistic communities. Bourdieu argues that language becomes a test to regulate behavior. “Produced by authors who have the authority to write, fixed and codified by grammarians and teachers who are also charged with the task of inculcating its mastery, the language is a code, in the sense of a cipher enabling equivalencies to be established between sounds and meanings, but also in the sense of norms regulating linguistic practices” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 145). Language that runs afoul of the respected idiom is therefore considered devolved, vulgar, and “common.” So too those who speak it.

Institutionalized education is crucial to the ascendency of an official language. Grammarians, linguists, instructors of proper speaking and writing ensure that pupils internalize these distinctions. Earning high marks, attaining degrees and subsequent acceptance into selective higher education are all contingent on the student mastering the common language, which for many contrasts with the ways of speaking in their own homes and communities. As a result, those who fail to adopt the official language are denied access to the symbolic capital of degrees and reputation, the cultural capital of knowledge and skills that only are available from institutionalized education, and the economic capital of vocations that require fluency in the official language.

To be sure, enabling communication across sub cultures in society is extremely valuable both economically and politically. Linguistic homogenization, though, comes with a cost. The alternative idioms are delegitimized, most often ruthlessly. In a telling location, Bourdieu calls this process “symbolic violence” (1991, p. 51), a means of domination of one class over another by policing the use of language. This violence is not accomplished through physical force but by rationing symbolic and cultural capital, a process to which the subjugated parties are complicit. The choice to adopt the official language by the minority speaker is seen in self interested terms. To acquire capital, one will surrender the home dialect.

The result is less a top-down prohibition of ways of communicating and instead a restructuring of the field of possible expressions by all participants. From within, this homogenization does not appear as symbolic violence since the warrants for restricting expression emanate from the censored. “Censorship is never quite as perfect or as invisible as when each agent has nothing to say apart from what he is objectively authorized to say: in this case he
does not even have to be his own censor because he is, in a way, censored once and for all, through the forms of perception and expression that he has internalized and which impose their form on all his expressions” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 138). Bourdieu’s famous notion of the *habitus* demonstrates how the most basic patterns of human behavior, how we dress, how we eat, how we walk as well as how we talk, are a product of this internalized censorship, even if the subjects do not recognize their own repression (Bourdieu 1992).

Once official languages are institutionalized, Bourdieu argues they have an even deeper censorial effect, altering not only the form but the content of thought. Content is “inseparable from its appropriate expressions and therefore literally unthinkable outside of the known forms and recognized norms” (Bourdieu 1991, p.139). As alternative dialects are delegitimized by the official language, so too are ways of critiquing the official language. If a critique emerges from the now “vulgar” dialects, it lacks both the linguistic resources to combat the official language as well as the credibility to be taken seriously.

This process is not relegated to national or ethnic language systems. Official academic languages emerge as well as a way to denote elevated and sophisticated approaches to ideas. Bourdieu observes that “to produce a philosophical discourse of a duly formal nature, that is, bearing the set of agreed signs (a certain use of syntax, vocabulary, references, etc.) by which philosophical discourse is recognized and through which it secures recognition as philosophical, is to produce a product which demands to be received with due formality, that is, with due respect for the forms it has adopted” (1991, p.139). This respect takes on a number of forms; degrees, appointments, publications through peer review, and citations by other initiates. The form itself is instrumental in meeting out these forms of capital. In the Academy, ideas that do not feature this official linguistic frame are treated just as folk dialects are, gross and common.

Therefore, there is special disdain reserved for attempts to simplify or reduce complicated academic discourse to a more accessible manner of presentation. There is a “prohibition against any kind of ‘reductionism,’ that is, against any destruction of form aimed at *restoring discourse to its simplest expression* and, in so doing, to the social conditions of its production” (Bourdieu 1991, p.151). Simplifying academic discourse is abhorrent both because the elevated form is seen as essential to the context and because it subverts the arbitrary hierarchy that prevents the uncredentialed from participating in the conversation.
Fluency in academic discourse is therefore less a means of communicating complex ideas and more a form of authorization of those who may speak at all.

The “elevated” style is not merely a contingent property of philosophical discourse. It is the means by which a discourse declares itself to be “authorized,” invested, by virtue of its very conformity, with the authority of a body of people especially mandated to exercise a kind of conceptual magistrature. It also ensures that certain things which have no place in the appropriate discourse, or which cannot find spokespersons capable of putting them in the correct form, are not said, whereas others are said and understood which would otherwise be unsayable and unacceptable (Bourdieu 1991, p. 152).

As I hope to show in the remainder of this essay, this process of authorization and magistrature can also be found in academic debate. Coming to grips with this mechanism for capital distribution allows us to diagnose the source of friction and suggest potential remedies.

A Bourdieuian Critique of Competitive Debate

The primary justification for the existence of competitive debate programs, given their place within institutions of higher learning, are their potential for, in Bourdieu’s terms, distributing cultural capital (Strait and Wallace 2008; Freeley and Steinberg 2009). While this is not a universally held edict (Burnett, Butler and Meister 2003) almost all defenses of debate primarily tout is pedagogical potential.

Of course, competition is the major aspect that separates contest debating from other forms of argumentation pedagogy. The symbolic capital of victories, trophies, championships and the overall prestige of participating in debate are seen both as motivators for participation and as educational in their own right (Hinck 2003). This combination of cultural and symbolic capital makes academic debate particularly complex, as at times the interests of the two are at odds. Allowing for equity in the distribution of symbolic capital may trade off with the desires of participants over which forms of cultural capital should be available. Much of the gestalt of debate is driven by agency, both allowing debaters the freedom to craft their own competitive strategies in the pursuit of a victory and to determine the nature of the skills they seek to acquire. The common refrain on judging philosophies that “debate belongs to the debaters” embodies the more or less generally recognized culture of experimentation and intellectual freedom that marks academic debate.
This ostensibly open tent philosophy has developed into a polarization of views on what sort of cultural capital should constitute debate instruction around two broad camps. In one, let us call them the technical camp, we find the hegemony of specialized argument forms that only experts in the activity can comprehend (Panetta 1990; Schiappa and Keenher 1990). As with all specialized language systems, the technical camp presumes a knowledge base in the audience that allows for novel argument forms that often omit the underlying logic of the argument on the assumption that the audience is both familiar with and favorably disposed to the approach. The “permutation” as an idea to test the viability of a counter proposal against an underlying proposal can be communicated to a lay audience through a long narrative. But the “perm” in traditional policy debate tropologically encapsulates that narrative before a technical audience that does not require the whole story in order to understand the point. Participation in technical style debate, as a result, requires either prior knowledge or detailed study of a long history of argumentative techniques, jargon and presumptions in order to participate.

Also within the technical camp are adherents of the kritik or performance debate, whose dense philosophical jargon or challenging content also render only initiates access to the arguments (Bennett 1996). Much as contemporary art often appears silly or lacking in artistic skill to the casual observer and yet speaks deeply to the connoisseur, so too must the observer of this kind of technical debate understand the background assumptions about logic and political praxis that make meaning for the expert in debate. In both traditional policy debate and philosophically oriented kritikal debate, the focus in on the expert judge who does not need all of the argument explained to her. The type of cultural capital this style produces is the development of high level reasoning and research skills, as the technical language games become increasingly complex and challenging.

The second camp views the cultural capital of debate as training in directly applicable argumentation skills for the public sphere. Let us call this the civic camp, meaning skills of civic engagement are the dominant telos of the activity (Weiss 1995; Trapp 1996; Trapp 1997; Kuster 2003). These participants seek skills that mirror deliberative or forensic argumentative practices in society. This perspective is more likely to resonate with the image of debate found in stakeholders beyond the activity itself. Administrators, novice students, and the broader public are unlikely to envision the complicated machinations of the technical camp when contemplating the activity. Lincoln-Douglas debate no doubt brings to mind Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, speaking before an audience on pressing issues of the day. Adherents to the civic camp, to varying degrees, hope to retain these types
of applied cultural capital, even if they themselves are versant in technical debate. This is not to say that the technical camp does not see itself as civically engaged. However, the civic camp uses public sphere discourse as the primary model for cultural capital. The technical camp takes a detour through expertise, later relying on students applying their skills of analysis and research back to the public sphere.

The distinction is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s remarks on the “poles” of thought in the Academy. He notes in *Homo Academicus* (1984) the poles that constitute power relations within the university structure. There is a difference between the faculties that emphasize scientific research for its own sake, the pursuit of knowledge such as research science, and those that are entrusted with reproducing the cultural order and preparing students to work within it, such as law and medicine. There is a similar distinction between the technocratic and civic camps of debate, with the former highly protective of its more insular laboratory approach and the latter intent on arming students with the real world skills necessary to wield power within the broader political discourse. The tension arises from the relative emphasis placed on reproducing a common cultural vision of what political discourse ought to look like. Between the two poles, Bourdieu calls this a difference between “scientific competence” versus “social competence.”

Bourdieu notes an ideological difference between the isolated scientific faculties who are free to pursue pure knowledge and those social faculties that are entrusted with replicating social order. The former can afford to be more radical, more experimental, while the latter are constrained by the conventions of society. In this sense, it is understandable how the technical camp, both in its traditional policy debate guise and its *kritikal/performative* guise, have come to embrace argumentative forms and content that seems so divorced from public sphere norms. Likewise, the civic camp, turning toward a deliberative ideal that constitutes the self perception of American governance, limits its argumentative invention to those techniques that have a chance to resonate with a heterogeneous audience. There is a clash here of visions of cultural capital, between an ethic of critique and one of working within the system, or carving out a space for experimentation and of incubating future leaders ready to persuade fellow citizens immediately.

**The Role of Language in Mediating The Two Camps**

Unsurprisingly, given the insights of Bourdieu, the most important way these differences between the two camps manifest themselves is through language. Civic debate, as much as possible, tries to mimic the kinds of
discourse found in the public sphere, where an engaged lay audience would comprehend the debate. Technical debate, though, has developed its own idiom to meet the needs of its technocratic audience. It has its own jargon (*i.e.* severance perm; conditional counter plan) as well as specialized meanings of common words; a “turn” means something in technical debate that it does not in regular English. Technical debate language has its own grammar and syntax as well. For example, not only must one understand the jargon associated with a Topicality argument, but one must know the order in which those ideas are employed and must phrase sentences in a particular way. The kinesics of technical debate is also unique, especially among traditional speed policy debaters, a practice now common across all of the major debate formats. Speaking cadence, patterns of breathing and motions of the body are all learned behaviors necessary to engage in rapid fire debate. The technical debater must also develop a new way of listening by focusing on keywords and anticipating which concepts are likely to follow in a particular argument.

There are also massive distinctions in the written discourse of the technocratic idiom. Flow note taking requires its own set of abbreviations and must adhere to a pictorial representation not found in other written languages. The status of the written record is much more important here than in many other linguistic communities. Missing any details of the speech can have large implications for the distribution of symbolic capital. We might push the study even further along the route of the *habitus* and note styles of clothing, patterns of interpersonal interaction between students as well as between students and critics and other dynamics that create an overall linguistic and performative package of the successful technical debater that those initiated within the system can recognize. While kritikal and performative debate can sometimes eschew the verbal patterns of speed debate, the technocratic complexity of these approaches develop their own technical idioms, just as Bourdieu noted for academic philosophical discourse. Either way, the connections back to the public sphere get weaker as the student becomes more advanced.

As anyone who has attempted to train novice debaters can attest, the entry barriers to leaning the technocratic language are high. Even in novice or inexperienced divisions of college debate, the students must first learn the new language in order to engage in more than a superficial level with the activity. To progress further in the ranks, language fluency is an almost nonnegotiable skill. The requirement for language acquisition ensures that only those willing to adopt the new language system become experienced debaters. It also polices the types of cultural capital available in the technocratic linguistic field. Losing public sphere language makes accessing civic
cultural capital very difficult. Just as Bourdieu observed earlier, forcing all thoughts into the official language restricts what can be said (see also Dimock 2009). And if Bourdieu is correct that elevated academic discourse precludes alternative idioms from mounting critiques and demarcates classes between who possess fluency and the common folk who rely on less sophisticated means of expression, then the consequences in debate are to foreclose access to cultural capital for the non-fluent. One cannot participate in debate without first learning the official language, which precludes civic cultural capital.

While it is clear to anyone involved in the major debate formats that the technical camp dialects now largely constitute the official language of debate, we must also understand the competitive function of debate to see how cultural and symbolic capital manage each other.

**Distribution of Symbolic Capital**

The critic is given the primary role of distributing symbolic capital throughout debate. This process is strikingly overt, as wins and losses are publically available in most cases immediately after the round, and then later through public performances of out rounds and printed tabulation sheets. As critics communicate, either directly or through reputation, their own guidelines for how symbolic capital will be given out, this has a direct effect on the parameters for cultural capital access as well. A judge that informs the debaters “I don’t vote on Topicality” is framing the types of cultural capital available in that round through the reward system of symbolic capital. This overt exclusion of arguments does occur, but much more common is an implicit rejection of certain arguments because of their form. If in a post round critique a judge says “You had some interesting ideas, but you dropped the reverse voters on ASPEC [agent specification], so I am voting against you,” she is placing the fluency of the written and oral forms of technical discourse before evaluating the underlying content of the arguments. The judge herself may find the ASPEC argument unpersuasive, she may have welcomed deeper debate on the position or found the counter arguments offered interesting personally, but she does not reward those thoughts with symbolic capital but instead defaults to the syntactic procedures of covering the flow. The content of the argument itself is bracketed. In each of these examples, the judge has not announced her intention to constrain educational content, as in “today we will not be learning about Topicality” or “your ideas on agent selection will only be considered if put into the correct
language.” Yet, the impacts of her preferences do severely control the direction of the debate. To the extent that the debate comes down to semantic differences in the ways arguments are framed, it becomes a clash of competing language systems, between which the critic is forced to choose, knowing that this decision will almost certainly determine the outcome of the round. Debaters who seek symbolic capital, then, must predict where that decision will fall and adapt accordingly.

Impacting the pedagogy of the round so directly is, of course, not the intention of the critic. Indeed, it is often in the interests of objectivity or non-intervention that she nominally refuses to impose what she perceives as her own preferences, instead remaining neutral and impartial. She wants as small a role in the outcome of the round as possible, so she defers to the form of the arguments. The veneer of impartiality, though, fails to account for the literacy differences between those versed in theoretical debate jargon and those who are not. If both language systems are judged in a vacuum, technocratic debate will almost always win out since it has consciously developed an exclusionary lexicon that the civic debater cannot access. Access to symbolic capital is reserved for those who speak the language, and as a result the incentive to become fluent is enormous. Those who have preexisting expertise in the technocratic language, or those who do not seek civic cultural capital and are willing to abandon public discourse, are privileged if the fluent critic refuses to be reflexive about her own fluency. Rather than assigning symbolic capital to the best argument, the critic actually assigns it to the best ways of manipulating the language of theoretical debate. This aligns with the “game” mentality that many believe is at the core of contemporary debate (Solt 2004). In a sense, the critic has already intervened by inserting her won fluency into a contest between rival idioms.

Even if a truly objective determination between technical and civic languages is impossible given the structural power dynamics of fluency, the critic may have a weaker form of non-intervention in mind. Her years of experience may have convinced her that the technical language (again, either traditional policy debate or kritikal debate) are indeed superior to publically oriented civic debate. The technical arguments are in her mind more sophisticated, dense, unique or otherwise meet a standard for quality argumentation that civic discourse cannot. She is “objective” to the extent that it is possible in her mind to defeat a technical argument with a civic one, but when push comes to shove technical language forms tend to prevail because they are in the end better.
This mindset is a product of the misrecognition that typifies the selective distribution of cultural and symbolic capital. Only from with the resources of fluency at her disposal can the critic elevate technical language above any other. Neither can the critic point to the critical mass of fellow educators and competitors who share her lionization of technical debate. There are, after all, powerful incentives to adopt the dominant language, so the fact that many choose to do so does not in and of itself speak to the superiority of the dominant language. Nor can the critic hold out as examples those who have converted to technical debate as evidence for its legitimate dominance. The self censorship of minority language speakers is a given if they aspire to rise in the ranks of the power structure, so the fact that some would choose to do so is to be expected.

But perhaps the most powerful reason the critic chooses to impose her fluency on the round is to maintain her own position of privilege. The critic herself is competing for respect and reputation from the students. In formats that employ mutually preferred judging (MPJ) or straight strikes this feedback loop is overt. British Parliamentary and Worlds Style debate goes even further in tracking critic reputation. Judging panels are hand selected by a tournament administrator after soliciting feedback forms from competitors and fellow critics (all debates feature panels of judges). Critics perceived as rendering judgments in conformity with community norms are rewarded with leadership positions on panels and rounds higher in the bracket.

A critic is no different than any other stakeholder in a system of symbolic capital distribution. She uses her position of privilege to reify existing power relations between the classes of the fluent and the non-fluent, herself receiving the benefits both educationally and reputationally in the process. In a pedagogical context, the actions of those in control “correspond[s] to the objective interests (material, symbolic and, in the respect considered here, pedagogic) of the dominant groups or classes, both by its move of imposition and by its delimitation of what and on whom, it imposes.” (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 7). In the case of debate, the reward system is clear, and those who buck the system are relegated to lower rounds and suffer the public castigation of being a “bad critic.” It is always, therefore, in the objective interests of the critic to impose the will of the powerful on all participants in the activity. The systemic pressure to adopt a judging paradigm that favors technical debate ensures the neutrality between language skills and cultural capital agency that is the precondition for maintenance of the system.

The pressure on judges to respect the interests of the dominant classes has been noted before. Bartanen (1994) offered a tripartite typology of the function of the judge in debate. There are educational functions, where
the critic helps students better apply the standards of forensics practice, referee functions where the critic renders a
decision as to who among competing students did the better job and a trustee function, where the critic is
responsible for the standards of the activity. Diers and Birkholt (2004) conducted an empirical study of the NPDA
community using this typology, finding a clear preference on the part of both competitors and fellow judges for
“policy type judges,” especially in regards to the referee function. To put it in Bourdieuan terms, the preference is
for critics both fluent in official debate language and willing to distribute symbolic capital based on competitors’
fluency in that language. In a real sense, therefore, two distinct classes emerge; those who buy into and replicate
the dominance of official language, and those on the outside who cannot or refuse to participate.

Framing this in terms of class and access may seem an exaggeration. However, debate scholars have argued
for some time that there are concrete materialist implications to the elevation of technical debate into a position of
dominance. Bruschke notes the competitive advantages students from high resource high schools have in debate
(2004). Indeed, economic class distinctions have a significant impact on who has access to technical debate idioms
(Warner and Bruschke 2001). The cultural homogeneity of academic debate has been bemoaned for decades. In
large part, this is the result of a symbolic capital system that only favors the fortunately fluent.

It is not as if these classes co-exist peacefully either. The strong reaction against reducing complex
linguistic forms in academic discourse that Bourdieu observed above are also present against non-fluent, or non-
compliant, debate practitioners. Too many of us have an experience of rage, or quite naked hostility, from a student
or coach in debate who feels that a critic is not sufficiently obeying the system that rewards technical fluency.
Nothing is worse than to be denied symbolic capital be a critic who appears insufficiently technical to recognize the
justice of the current system. And that contemporary debate culture at times normalizes these aggressive reactions
to the decisions of critics is not surprising given Bourdieu’s observations of how fiercely those invested in the
dominant language will defend their interests against the supposedly inferior, non-fluent vulgar aspirants to cultural
and symbolic capital.

Everything in this linguistic field returns inward. The same dynamic was seen by Bourdieu in his own
field.

The imposition of form which keeps the lay person at a respectful distance protects the text from
“trivialization” (as Heidegger calls it), by reserving it for an internal reading, in both senses; that of a
reading confined within the limits of the text itself, and concomitantly, that of a reading reserved for the closed group of professional readers who accept as self-evident an “internalist” definition of reading (Bourdieu 1991, p.153).

The less people who understand, the less trivial is the argument. This seems a self-evident truth in the Academy and in academic debate. The more tightly the rewards of wins and education can be controlled by the judges and debaters who, through work, inclination or historical accident, hold fluency over others, the more the status quo can be replicated. Debate indeed becomes fiercely internalist, and it more and more reacts negatively to outside scrutiny, ideas or participants that disrupt the power structure.

Remedies

The tension between linguistic fields has been a persistent one in debate. The most common remedy has been secession. CEDA, NFA L-D, and the NPDA all have origin stories that highlight the desire of the early pioneers to break away from the technocratic aspects of the dominant format. None has worked, if the goal was to resist the re-inscription of technical debate as the official language. A major strategy of these new formats was to create rules of debate that prohibited certain technical arguments. However, reputational dynamics are transplanted into the new format, no matter how strongly the founder’s vision was to exclude those idioms. NFA L-D is an excellent example. Minch (2002) concluded that

the excessive regulation of Lincoln-Douglas has backfired . . . . Students now actively seek ways to argue around theoretical obstacles to reach the argumentative goals they seek to achieve in any particular debate. The fact that the rules mandate topicality is a voting issue, for example, have not stopped competitors from spinning elaborate theoretical rationales for discounting the issue. Similarly, despite there being no framework within the current rules to evaluate a “critique” or "kritik," these arguments are still advanced even if they are cloaked as other arguments, such as disadvantages (p. 51).

Rules are only as good as their enforcement, and if the on-the-ground symbolic capital system rewards circumventing those rules, then they will be circumvented. If history is any guide, spun off formats invariably reincorporate technical practices once the power structure reasserts itself.
Others have called for the development of more civically engaged debate outlets to parallel traditional technical debate formats. Mitchell’s (1998) critique of “purely preparatory pedagogy” argues that traditional debate programs should supplement technical instruction with more applied activities such as public debates. This is certainly a noble goal, but it does imply both an abundance of resources and that the pedagogical benefits of public debates equal those in a robust competitive environment. One cannot help but wonder if we must abandon pluralism within the competitive tournament format of debate. If technocracy is inevitable, then Mitchell has the prescription. But if there is an alternative and civic competitive debate can be retained, it should be considered.

I make the assumption here that leveling the playing field in competitive debate is a laudable goal. One reason for this is that the viability of debate and forensics programs may hinge on their ability to expand participation rates and secure support from decision makers on campus (Holm and Miller 2004). Further, opening access to cultural and symbolic capital will help debate live up to its agency driven self image. True choice requires rethinking the activity. Of course, so long as symbolic capital is available in this or any linguistic field, dominant and minority language communities will be present. Still, in the interests of opening the activity to more diverse participants, the following steps may help introduce more equity into debate.

1. Diversify the fluency levels of critics at the tournament—Most systems, whether a Mutually Preferred Judging system or some version of straight strikes, work as mechanisms of misrecognition by conflating debater preference for fluency in dominant debate practices with finding a superior critic. A truly random selection process would at least increase the chances that at any given tournament students will see critics who force them to translate their arguments. The numerous calls over the years for more inclusion of non-expert judges in both debate and individual events are certainly a way to implement this (Bartanen 1994; Hada 1999). Absent a dynamic increase in the number of non-fluent critics participating in tournaments, though, the prospects of a structural remedy such as this are short. We have already seen that secession and rules are ineffectual. The real solution then becomes attitudinal.

2. Make translation a judging criteria—If we recognize the ascendancy of technical language as arbitrary and self interested, then the reflexive critic could see the round not from within her own linguistic competency, but as an observer of how competing language models interact with one another. She may check her fluency at the door and require technical concepts be reformulated so as to be understood by the non-fluent debater. Even though the critic
understands the more specialized vocabulary, she must avoid rewarding untranslated arguments to ensure all parties in the room have equal access to their own version of cultural capital.

In many ways, this is an extension of the judging style that asks for warrants or articulated links in debate arguments. Judges who profess to “not vote on blips” and urge debaters to develop arguments suggest a critic reluctant to vote for technical arguments that fail to meet even a minimum level of narrative description. This logic could be continued into a strong requirement for explaining the arguments, even beyond the point where the critic understands it. Even further, the whole room may be full of fluent technical debaters but the critic could still require this deep translation. Focusing on translation would raise the threshold to vote for an argument beyond comprehension and would instead require enough mastery to make the logic behind the argument plain to a non-fluent speaker who is either physically in the room or, more likely, implied by the judging paradigm. The translation judge stands in for the non-fluent audience member if only technocrats are present. Such a requirement would equip debaters with the skills necessary to wield debate before public audiences later on, which is after all the long term desire of almost all debate teachers. This translation approach would also reset the standards for symbolic capital distribution, so that in future rounds knowing the technical language would not be enough to earn rewards. This opens the playing field for the non-fluent speaker who, after hearing the argument articulated in an intelligible manner, then has a better chance of formulating responses and accessing the cultural and symbolic capital that accompanies that process of argument generation.

It is important to note that this translation approach is not merely the imposition of public discourse norms onto the debate round. That would be an equally arbitrary and violent exclusion of cultural agency. The content of technical arguments is retained, at least as much as it can be after it has been translated. Neither would debaters be able to dismiss unique technical approaches to argumentation on the grounds that “that is not how it is done in the real world.” Public sector debate must reckon with technical ideas, but in a translated form that makes them understandable. A kritik, for example, should not be rejected a priori. Even if the content of this argument runs afoul of dominant civic discourse, the translation oriented critic can weigh these experimental arguments against the quality of the civic debater’s response. This way, all parties understand the argument, and yet neither technical nor civic approaches to content exclude the other. In a sense, the translation critic says to the debaters “argue whatever you wish, but just do it in a way that both technical and civic audiences can understand it.”
English et. al. (2007) wonder why competitive debaters have not come under attack from critics of the Academy for espousing views in technical debate rounds that ideological critics might consider anti-American. They point out debate “has become remarkably isolated and esoteric. Competitive pressures have molded the activity into a highly technical art form, where students argue in jargon at breakneck speeds that regularly top 300 words per minute . . . . the isolation of this form of debate protects it from criticism and prevents it from having a broader social effect” (p. 223). A translation approach breaks down this isolation, and shortens the road that students need to travel in order to take their technical skills and transform them for public consumption.

(3) Rethink fairness in standards debates--Procedural arguments in technical debate often come down to debates about the standards of measurement the critic should use to choose between competing claims. There are numerous standards, but one of the most important is fairness, that the critic should choose the interpretation that is most equitable to both sides (it fairly delineates ground, for example). What is less common, and the analysis in this essay would imply is missing, is a conception of equity as it applies to cultural capital agency. Equity in this sense is framed less as access to the ballot and more as access to the skills that participation in debate provides. Competitive fairness cannot trump educational opportunity. If it does, then equity is omitted in both senses, as the minority speaker gets neither the benefits of debate skills nor the prospect of the victory. Since we should reflexively recognize the arbitrariness of what “fairness” means in the current linguistic field, the critic is then freed up to preserve educational agency. Correcting for power imbalances and opening up prospects for education can come to the foreground of the critic’s reasons for preferring one argument over another without fear of breaking an inviolable covenant to always places symbolic capital ahead of cultural capital. Taking power into account is advocated by Bourdieu for those who seek to understand symbolic power relations between speaker and audience, as well as between rival speakers. “The structure of the linguistic production relation depends on the symbolic power relation between the two speakers, i.e., on the size of their respective capitals of authority. (Bourdieu, 1977, 648). These capitals of authority can be recognized by the critic and compensated for. In a sense, the critic is free to adjust the distribution of capital to correct the inherent power imbalances in the system. Doing so may sacrifice her own position of privilege as she faces the wrath of the dominant linguistic class; it is no small order. But such a shift in attitude would go far to open the activity and expand the viability of debate.

Conclusion

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Perhaps these attitudinal shifts that I advocate, the idea that the critic should sacrifice her own symbolic capital in the interests of furthering the educational agency of the student, are impracticable. If the preceding analysis is correct, there are a number of reasons for those invested in the status quo to maintain that order. However, failure to adopt changes is likely to trap intercollegiate debate in a perpetual cycle of secession and colonization, as those with minority language skills or civic views of cultural capital seeks enclaves to pursue debate on their own terms. The alphabet soup continues to simmer.

By applying the theories of Pierre Bourdieu to intercollegiate debate, hopefully we have been able to diagnose the issue and at least be more reflexive about our practices. As debates about debate continue, this essay makes the case that defending one version of cultural capital over another as being inherently superior is a naïve approach. Such judgments are deeply affected by the power relations between classes of speakers. Even the demystification of this arbitrariness may embolden those who urge debate to me more inclusive, more willing to embrace alternative idioms. Finding ways to articulate those ideas within the structures of official debate language is the paramount challenge for those truly interested in the critique of debate.

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