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Writing is a Struggle: Discourse Acquisition

In her essay, *From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,* Min-Zhan Lu discusses the idea of discourse acquisition. She mentions the complexity of learning new discourses when she introduces the idea of “complicating the classroom scene” (447) to challenge the discourses that are dominantly taught in classrooms and educational settings. Later on in this same passage, Lu says, “We could also encourage them to see themselves as responsible for forming or transforming as well as preserving the discourse they are learning," (447). The word responsible is doing a lot of work here, and it reminds me of the other texts we have read in this course, specifically Jane Gallop’s *The Ethics of Close Reading,* that talk about every individual's responsibility during a discussion, whether that be to be a learner, an educator, or both. Through an examination of Lu’s discussion on discourse acquisition, this essay aims to explore how said acquisition can be simple or complex due to different social environments.

Based on the reading, in my opinion, acquisition of a discourse means more than just learning language skills, dialects, and other means of linguistics. I believe it involves being able to engage with new and/or different ways of thinking, communicating, understanding, and being. This ability to learn new discourses may spring up some conflicts, especially when discourses seem to be opposing one another. Lu, in her experience, found this to be a complex thing, as her parents and teachers seemed to have made a “scene free of conflict” for her to practice different languages, (445). She goes onto say,

Home and school each contrived a purified space where only one discourse was spoken and heard. In their choice of textbooks, in the way they spoke, and in the way they required me to speak, each jealously silenced any voice that threatened to break the unison of the scene. The homogeneity of home and of school implied that only one discourse could and should be relevant in each place. It led me to believe I should leave behind, turn a deaf ear to, or forget the discourse of the other when I crossed the boundary dividing them, (445).

This quote demonstrates Lu’s experience with the complexity of different discourses within two seemingly opposing social environments: her home and her school. This carries onto Lu’s next point, in which she talks about intentionally complicating one of these social environments in order to challenge the conflicts that her parents and teachers attempted to shield her from.

Lu talks about the discourse in the classroom scene in a way that showcases just how conflicting this scene is from the home environment, in her experience and in the experience of her daughter. She writes, “For when I listen to my daughter, to students, and to some composition teachers talking about the teaching and learning of writing, I am often alarmed by the degree to which the metaphor of a survival tool dominates their understanding of language as it once dominated my own,” (447). In earlier passages, as Lu had mentioned before, language was seen as a tool. The way that language was acquired by Lu determined how it would be used in heated arguments (445). She revisits this metaphor later on, seeing how isolating language discourse still is in the classroom scene of her daughter as it had been for her. The word dominated is strong here, and it holds a lot of weight in how this metaphorical tool was used in Lu’s experience growing up.

Lu goes on to mention a solution to the scene isolation problem, by intentionally complicating the classroom scene. She writes, “To help these students become actors in such a scene, perhaps we need to call their attention to voices that may seem irrelevant to the discourse we teach rather than encourage them to shut them out,” (447). Here, the word encourage holds weight in Lu’s experience, because she goes on to write later in the next passage on the same page, “As I think about what we might do to complicate the external and internal scenes of our students' writing, I hear my parents and teachers saying: ‘Not now. Keep them from the wrangle of the marketplace until they have acquired the discourse and are skilled at using it.’” (447). In the way she writes, it is as if the voices of her earlier experiences are echoing, reaching her present experience. It could also be used to show how complicated it is to actually “complicate” the classroom scene, as it opposes old ideologies and conflicting beliefs.

In my personal experience, I have struggled with conflicting scenes when it came to code-switching and AAVE. As a Black young woman in America, I have had my fair share of moments where I felt it necessary to switch between using AAVE in the home scene and a proper version of English in the social scene. Much like Lu, when I began to incorporate AAVE in my creative writing pieces in the classroom environment, it was almost impossible for me to not listen to the conflicting voices that I could hear from earlier experiences. Learning AAVE also complicated my work-scene in similar ways. I worked as an editor for a literary magazine during high school, and the incorporation of AAVE seemed so foreign, and almost wrong in a sense at first, as it felt like that specific discourse did not fit that social scene. But when I continued to push that discourse in those social scenes, it felt more comfortable and less complicated, at least while I was there.

In conclusion, Min-Zhan Lu’s account highlights the complexity that arises when acquiring a discourse, specifically in scenes where conflicting discourses are present. She presents the solution of intentionally complicating the classroom scene, which involves being able to incorporate a discourse and being open-minded about calling attention to it instead of shutting it out completely. By complicating the process of acquiring a discourse, I believe it helps to better understand the incorporation of other discourses that encourages us to better communicate and interact with the world.

Works Cited

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