# Discourse & Society

**Book review: Astrid Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming***
Seán Roberts

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What is This?

Chapters 16 and 17 extend the work by detailing case studies where language profiling is used in deliberate acts of discrimination, and Chapter 18 sums up the main thesis; namely, that standard language ideology in the USA ensures the dominance of SAE through acts of language subordination that must be viewed as intersectional with social class and race.

*English with an Accent* provides an intelligent and well-researched critical analysis of how standard language ideology reinforces power differentials in US society. As such, it is an important reference for students and researchers in the fields of Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Sociology and Communication Studies, and its informative and engaging style make it equally accessible to a lay audience.

## Reference

Rubin DL and Smith KA (1990) Effects of accent, ethnicity, and lecture topic on undergraduates' perceptions of nonnative English-speaking teaching assistants. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 14(3): 337–353.

Astrid Ensslin, *The Language of Gaming*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; ix + 208 pp., £49.50 (hbk), £16.99 (pbk).

**Reviewed by:** Seán Roberts, *Language and Cognition Group, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Netherlands*

Where can you find interlocutors being gripped by 'sheer terror and panic', but where laughter is common? Where 42% are female, but there are three times more 'he's than 'she's? Where 'halo' is the 12th most common noun? Where usual social norms are abandoned and being evil is not taboo? The answer is in *The Language of Gaming*, a comprehensive overview of how discourse analysis can be applied to the world of videogames. While the stereotype of a gamer is a teenage boy wasting time playing alone in the dark, the demography of gamers has broadened recently and there is much more interaction between players, developers, advertisers and the media. Readers may be surprised to learn that the average gamer is 34 years old, that there are more female adult gamers than male adolescents and that the US videogame market generates around $10.5b annually. Given this explosion in the range and number of people playing games, a systematic exploration of the opportunities and challenges of applying a wide range of linguistic approaches to gaming discourse is timely.

The book focuses on three sources of language – gamers, industry professionals and the media – and three types of discourse – discourse within games (instructions, narrative), discourse while playing games (between gamers) and discourse about games (advertising, reviews or web forums). Three dominant gamer discourses are highlighted: those of 'cool', fun and appreciation. A wide range of areas are discussed including phonology, lexis, syntax, metaphor (achievement is up), pragmatics, Conversation Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, turn-taking, deixis, politeness and discourse. A large corpus of gaming discourse is collated and analysed to illustrate these features.

Ensslin argues that gamers represent a community of practice with its own social norms. The ludic (playful) nature of games and the immersive 'magic circle' of fictional

spaces in which gamers situate themselves license more passionate and subversive interaction than some other domains – for instance, laughter, swearing or relaxing of politeness (even a greater range of emoticons than other computer-mediated discourse). The timing of turn-taking is less constrained, too, and an interesting prediction is made: immediate turn-taking indicates strong emotional involvement.

Ensslin observes a continuum in game discourse from the more accessible descriptions in the media to 'ludolects' used within games to jargon used by game developers. Indeed, discourse between gamers while playing – what Ensslin calls a 'buddylect' – is highly encoded and is designed to consolidate friendships and exclude outsiders. However, there are clear explanations and glosses for readers who are 'n00bs' (newcomers) to either computer gaming or discourse studies.

A wide range of academic sources from linguistics and videogame studies demonstrates the challenges of fitting the two together. Compared to some typical textual domains of discourse studies such as novels or newspapers, computer games are multimodal, immersive, interactive and doubly-embodied (the player is situated in both the real and virtual worlds).

Short case studies flesh out the potential for discourse approaches to gaming, like the inter- and epi-textuality of *Final Fantasy XI*.

The construction of gender is explored through a case study of *World of Warcraft*. Female characters often lack a fleshed-out backstory or conform to a limited range of stereotypes. This is reflected by female pronouns being less frequent, and collocating with a narrower range of verbs than male pronouns. In this way, games perpetuate how gender is orientated to and constructed in other domains.

Dominant discourses of racism and linguicism are also perpetuated in games such as *Black and White 2*. Physical suggestions of whiteness and blackness, standard versus non-standard dialects and formal versus informal registers cue the player into 'good' and 'evil' aspects of the game.

*Grand Theft Auto 4* is infamous for causing moral panic. While immersion may make gamers more ideologically susceptible, those demonising these games have often only experienced cut scenes or recordings of the worst aspects, while supporters have a fuller interactive experience. Developers, of course, do as much as possible to increase publicity and promote the 'carnivalesque' nature of the games. However, 'literary videogames' (e.g. *The Path*) often subvert the rules of gaming, aiming to promote 'deep attention' and the critical thinking typical of novels, instead of 'hyper attention' and passive acceptance of values in 'shoot 'em ups'.

The breadth inevitably means that not every aspect is covered in depth. One caveat is the focus on English discourse. Some of the sections are good summaries of previous work rather than developments of the theory. The quantitative results could have better controls, for instance the corpus of game discourse is compared to the British National Corpus (BNC) rather than other computer-mediated discourse. There are some inappropriate sources, such as the satirical user-generated encyclopedia *h2g2* or the help menu of a statistics software package. Some claims may be stretching linguistic theories, such as the claimed 'syntactic contiguity between programming code and ludic speech' (p. 92), where a causal link is unlikely or predicate fronting is due to multi-tasking demands (p.110), when it is a common feature of the likely dialect of the participants (Welsh

English; Williams, 2000). Section 8.5 also seems to confuse the appearance of intention and intelligence.

One neglected area is open-ended sandbox games like *Minecraft* which are used by players as settings for constructing their own narratives. Groups like the *YOGScast* (https://yogscast.com, which has 2.6 million subscribers on YouTube), who upload videos of themselves interacting while playing games, not only present an interesting use of *triple*-embodiedness (real-world, game-world, narrative-world), but also a vast corpus of dialogue to be explored (over 500 hours from the *YOGScast* alone).

However, overall, this is an insightful and useful overview that takes some early steps into introducing discourse studies to new arenas of interaction. It should encourage academics to treat gaming as a legitimate area of study and an exciting resource. The general public, too, is becoming increasingly interested in the discourse of gaming, as demonstrated by *Feminist Frequency*'s recent crowd-funded project on gender stereotypes in videogames (http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/566429325/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games). As Ensslin puts it, this field can only 'level up and play on!'

## Reference

Williams M (2000) The pragmatics of predicate fronting in Welsh English. In: Tristram HLC (ed.) *The Celtic Englishes II*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, pp. 210–230.

Jean-Jacques Weber and Kristine Horner, *Introducing Multilingualism: A Social Approach*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012; x + 214 pp., US$120.00 (hbk), US$33.95 (pbk).

**Reviewed by:** Hanna Torsh, *Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Australia*

The successful understanding of language at both a macro and a micro level – both climate and weather, to paraphrase Michael Halliday – remains a challenge for linguists, applied linguists and indeed anyone working in contexts where language is a salient issue. It is therefore extremely valuable to have an overview of an issue as complex as multilingualism which addresses not only the phenomenon itself, but also the foundational concepts, that is, what language is, what counts as language and why it matters. As academics who work in Luxembourg and the UK, the authors of *Introducing Multilingualism* are interested in contexts where multilingualism intersects with issues of citizenship, education, migration, employment and identity, and where questions of what language is, who has it and who does not are central to social inclusion and justice.

The book is divided into six parts. Part 1 is an introduction, and proposes a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of language. The authors take a social approach to multilingualism with the aim of reversing the usual assumptions about multilingualism in the Western academic cannon as the marked case. Through their deconstruction of the notion of language as a bounded system, they argue instead for the recognition of language repertoires which make every language user a multilingual to some extent. The authors do not deal with cognitive approaches to language use, but rather they aim to move beyond structural definitions of linguistic behaviour. In using the common linguistic terminology around languages and language users, they stress that they are using them to reflect socially constructed rather than linguistically defined