

Postgraduate Conference 2001: Empowerment through appropriation of the language system.

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Section I: Work in Guyana.

This paper is based on work carried out in the North Rupununi Savannah in the interior of Guyana in South America where I am looking at language use in negotiating situations between local Amerindian communities, international NGOs and the English-speaking Government.

Amerindians comprise only seven percent of the Guyanese population. Some are monolingual in one of six indigenous languages and some are monolingual in English, while the majority are bilingual or multilingual. Of those that do speak English, a good number are relatively fluent, but many have only a few years of primary learning and what they may have picked up from everyday interactions with non-Amerindians.

My own fieldwork looks at the dealings of the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB), an institution set up between the local Makushi Amerindian communities and the Iwokrama International Rainforest Conservation Programme, a multinational NGO which looks at sustainable development of the Amazon rainforest within Guyana.

Within Iwokrama a group of social scientists decided that, although only one Amerindian group lives within their particular area of research, as many groups use the rainforest in various ways, its sustainable development ideal should be expanded to include sustainable social development of the surrounding communities. The NRDDB was set up at the request of Amerindian leaders as part of this process. Members of the Board include Makushi leaders, often with plenty of dealings with authority; touchaus (village leaders), who have plenty of experience of Amerindian sociopolitics at the purely local and internal level; and Community Environment Workers (CEWs), a group, often youngsters with little negotiating experience, set up to explain Iwokrama's work at community level and to bring back to Iwokrama, through the Board, the desires, complaints, problems and satisfactions of the local communities. These last are seen as the outreach side of Iwokrama through the NRDDB and are, theoretically, under the control of the latter, though funded by Iwokrama. The level of English of the CEWs varies wildly.

During my time so far in the Rupununi I have witnessed the NRDDB grow in stature and autonomy and become less of a conduit for official Iwokrama policy. Of particular interest has been the setting up of the Bina Hill Institute, an impressive Amerindian-built structure where the bimonthly NRDDB meetings are now held (as opposed to being on Iwokrama's "home ground"). The Institute will also

accommodate the numerous anthropologists (and odd linguist) who come to study local customs. It also houses the newly established Radio Paiwomak, the only local radio station in Guyana, which is run by the local communities.

These developments, it must be said, have been what many in Iwokrama wanted to see. However, the growing show of autonomy is not without its problems. Not all those within Iwokrama are as interested in local development, for example, and there is a feeling among many Makushi that even those who are working with them are giving them development top-down and “Western-style”. And the Government of Guyana certainly views things with suspicion, not least because of the hundreds of lands rights issues still to be sorted between the two sides. The Radio station is also a problem as the Government, many miles distant, fears that the Makushi of Guyana will form closer bonds with the Makushi of Brazil and disown their Guyanese heritage (and most, despite history, do view being Guyanese as part of their heritage). For this reason the broadcasting of current affairs in Makushi has caused great problems.

Other problems the NRDDDB will have to deal with include a new road to pass from Brazil through their territories to the Guyanese capital Georgetown. While this road will bring many opportunities, including greater access to national markets for local produce and the expansion of the fledgling ecotourism industry, it will also further open the area to *garimpeiros* (small-time Brazilian goldminers) and other outside traders as well as increased government involvement/interference. To those wishing to develop within their own cultural context, then, such changes are a double-edged sword.

And on a purely linguistic level, negotiations within the NRDDDB concerning these great changes are largely limited to the same speakers as many lack the necessary competence in English (though attempts are being made by the leaders to enhance the role of Makushi), but also because of the discomfort felt by very many participants in such an institutional setting.

My work, then, looks at the use of English in such situations by Makushi, be they monolingual in either language or bilingual, with the aim of feeding back into a method of English teaching that aims at empowering such communities, as opposed to the old-fashioned grammar-based approach still practised in Guyanese schools - but also as against some modern “function-based” approaches that often fail to provide a real understanding of the workings of grammar and its possibilities and which do not look to the specific locations in which they are operating. Although my work arises from my particular situation in Guyana, therefore, the aim is to provide an overarching theory that can be transported and adapted to local circumstances elsewhere.

Section II: The cliché of empowerment.

I talked above of “empowering people”, yet this word *empowerment* has been used by many groups from right-wing business to cultural gurus to mean many things. I should therefore clarify how I am using it here and perhaps even modify my terminology.

Firstly, I am not referring to the concept of enabling an individual or various individuals to become members of the dominant class or elite, as in the ditty (to the tune of The Red Flag):

*The working class can kiss my arse,
I've got the foreman's job at last.*

The type of empowerment I am referring to is the ability of a subgroup to alter the thinking of an elite minority so as to improve the lot of the underclass, most especially so that that group or subgroup may live by its own mores. In other words I am talking of the empowerment of whole groups under an order by which they have been dominated or oppressed, as is the case with the Amerindians of Guyana. This amounts to a *cultural transformation* of that society.

However, given that I have emphasised transportability and adaptability and the need to consider particular local circumstances, the theory should also allow for group empowerment in terms of acculturation and assimilation into the dominant culture if that is the way a particular community sees their development as lying (and it is very naïve to assume that this is not indeed the desire of many).

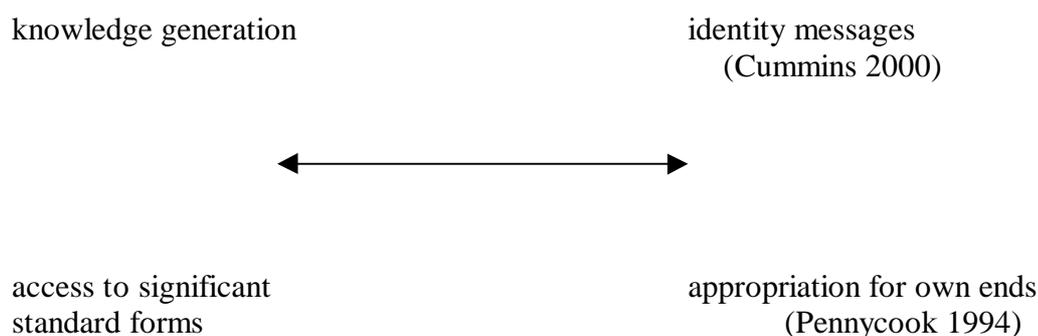
In this distinction between empowerment and transformation, the notion of *symbolic power* is important: that many manifestations of power are arbitrary and defined by the dominant bloc with the express aim of excluding other groups. In these terms, power can be seen as the ability to define what counts as important. Hence, transformational empowerment can be defined as comprising both the ability to choose what is important and the ability to act in accordance with this.

This is summed up in the following table (after Cameron* *et al.*) comparing different definitions of empowerment:

	community choice of action?	community action?
ethical concern	X	X
advocacy	✓	X
cooptation	X	✓
transformational empowerment	✓	✓

In the sociopolitical context of Guyana, where the vast majority of the population speaks English and this is the working language of the NGOs, it is generally accepted by Makushi leaders that there is a need to speak English well if a community's voice is to be heard – though of course the situation may be very different elsewhere. On the other hand, the community feeling amongst the Makushi and within the NRDDB is that their language and customs also fall within the remit of social development. The goal, then, is an English-teaching methodology that can achieve both these criteria. This would have to go beyond both Phillipson's (1990) socioeconomic critique of the TEFL industry and Pennycook's (1994) syllabus-based-approach to empowerment to look at how the dominant language might be taught so as to become part of the minority group's own cultural repertoire. This aim, or group of aims, is represented in the following figure, using the complementary terms of Pennycook (1994) and Cummins (2000):

Balance of TEFL aims:



Section III: Appropriating the Lexicogrammar.

The problem with the above synthesis is that language is a social semiotic, the means by which a particular socioculture is transmitted. Therefore there can be no such thing as neutral language teaching: by teaching language we are by definition teaching the culture that evolved alongside that culture.

However, it might be possible to lessen the impact of this problem if we turn to Habermas's concepts of colonisation and appropriation. In these terms a local minority culture within a dominant setting may either be colonised by the majority group, being totally subsumed within the dominant culture (C2); or it may appropriate aspects of this majority dominant C2 and adapt these for their own development on their own terms. This relates to TEFL inasmuch as the teaching of the dominant C2 along with the dominant language (L2) is colonisation, whereas a transformational and empowering goal would be a means by which L2 can be appropriated for use by the learner group within and according to their own culture (C1). This culture would

of course change in the process, but for the Makushi such change is seen as necessary for the protection and development of their own culture and, paradoxically, the maintenance of their own language (L1).

To my mind this calls for a reexamination of what is meant by Communicative Competence in the teaching of foreign languages. For example, many workings of communicative competence have been criticised as being based on “functions” treated as isolates, “communicative strategies” being taught almost as stock responses to set communicative situations rather than as *manipulable resources*. Secondly, the approach has been criticised in that the forms taught derive from inner-circle English and therefore constitute a form of ideological imposition, a form of colonisation, according to the argument given above that language is a social semiotic. Such representations of competence also portray it as no more than the ability to produce *appropriate* utterances, that is as the ability to cooperate in keeping a conversation going. It thus assumes equality of power and a spirit of cooperation within these interactions, an assumption that favours the dominant group.

This notion of communicative competence is not, I believe, faithful to Hymes’s original notion, of which appropriateness was only a part. However, Hymes’s notion was open to hijack as he, along with Chomsky, dichotomised linguistic knowledge and spoken performance. For Chomsky this was merely a way of explaining grammatical error by developed adults, incongruent to his theories; opposing this asocial notion of language it was, for Hymes, the difference between technical mastery of the grammar of the language and the ability to say the right thing in the right circumstances, something that did not seem to worry Chomsky. However, Hymes’s adaptation still means that a speaker’s utterances need not match their linguistic knowledge as long as they are *appropriate*. When this approach was adopted within English-language teaching, it meant that appropriateness and cooperation were all, with “pure grammar” left far behind. This is where the criticism of communicative functions as linguistic isolates arises, and from here the criticism that these isolates were purely inner-circle norms. After all, if you have no grammar, only utterances, how would it be possible to adapt your responses to your own norms and needs?

Standing in contrast to the dichotomy of knowledge and use is the Firthian notion of competence as the ability to produce structure in context, grammar as production. In this way no utterance can be an isolate as grammar and utterance are the same thing: grammar is utterance-making within a social context.

This definition can be expanded to the idea that competence is the ability to create a *subject position* within the *meaning potential* of a situation, that is the ability to create for yourself a social position within the ongoing potential created by the dialogue in context. And the position you take up need not be appropriate, cooperative nor even logical – that is up to you as speaker. The position taken up, however perverse or contrary, is nonetheless a response to your interlocutor, the subject matter under discussion and the text as it unfolds. These represent Halliday’s three metafunctions

of language, the interpersonal, the ideational and the textual respectively. Competence in these terms could be defined as the ability to produce for yourself a subject position in relation to these three areas of speech simultaneously, and this requires a pragmaticosemantic knowledge of the three metafunctions and how they are realised in speech.

Context and realisation of language as behaviour :

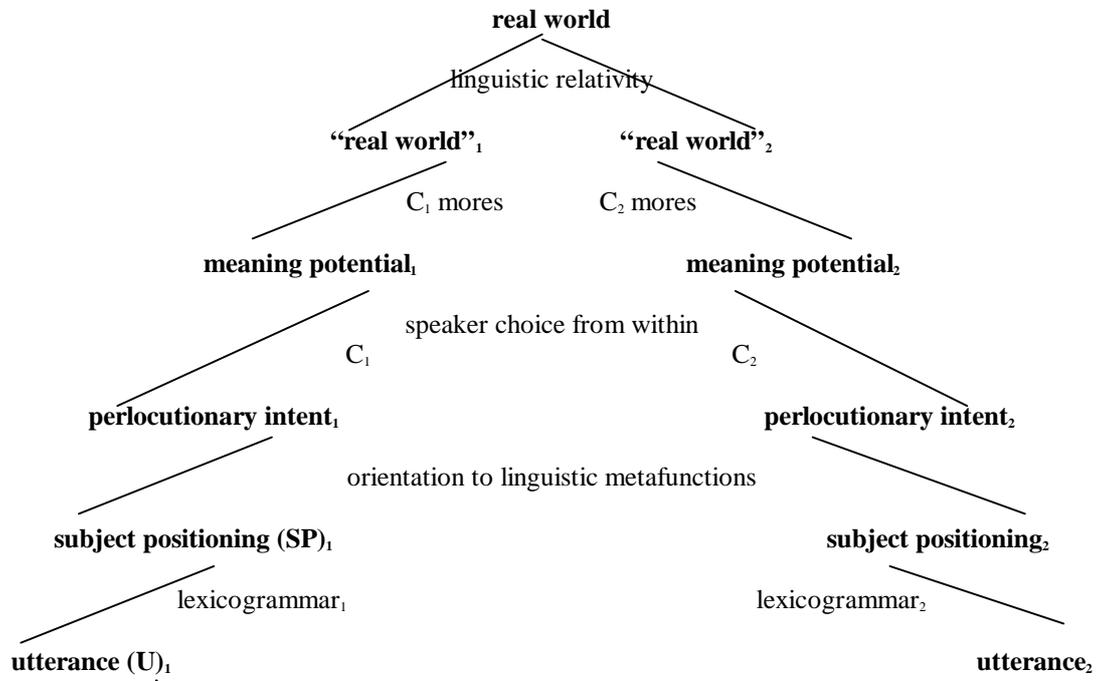
	<i>context of culture</i> →
	<i>context of institution</i> →
<u>(Thick) Context</u>	<i>context of situation (including ongoing personal relationship)</i> →
	<i>context of text</i> →
	<i>immediately prior speech act</i> →
<u>Meaning potential</u>	<i>perlocutionary effect of context</i> →
	<i>perlocutionary intent of speaker</i> →
<u>Realisation</u>	<i>subject positioning</i> →
	<i>lexicogrammatical realisation – choices from systems</i>

→ = “informs”

Following the above figure, an interactive communicative competence can be seen as the ability to turn the perlocutionary effect of context to your own perlocutionary intent. This requires not culturally-bound isolates but control by the learner of the three metafunctions within the linguistic system of L2.

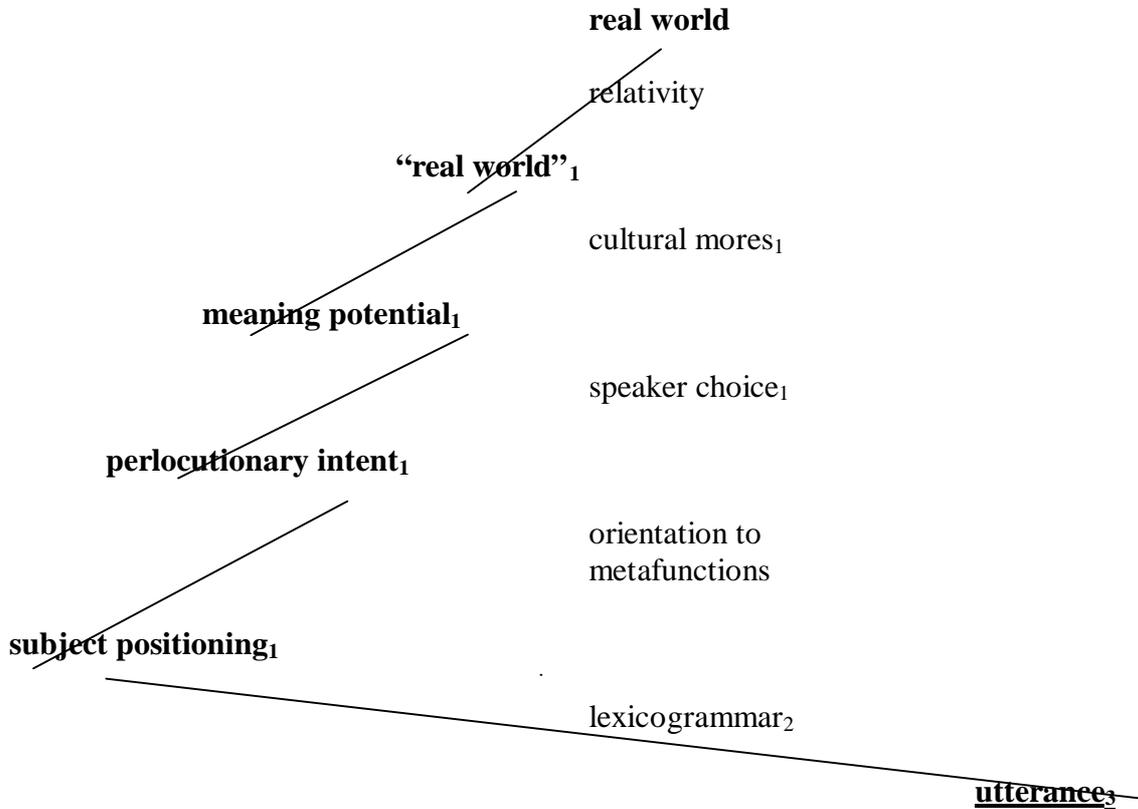
In an earlier paper (Bartlett 2001), I explored how a subject position could be created by learners in grammatically correct and fully understandable English utterances that reflected the values of the speaker’s own cultures – in other words, how the system of English could be appropriated by other cultures as an empowering and even transformative tool. To do this it was first necessary to examine how intercultural differences were reflected interlinguistically and the following figure was an attempt to represent this:

Christmas tree effect of intercultural distance and the lexicogrammar:



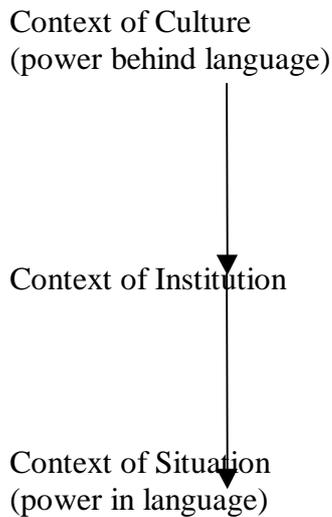
This Christmas-tree figure implies that linguistic colonisation would require that the learner follow the C2/L2 side of the tree as early as possible, whereas an appropriation model would encourage staying on the C1/L1 side as long as possible before transferring to L2. The path described below, therefore, would allow for the learner speaker to remain in L1/C1 for as long as possible, translating the three metafunctions of their subject position into sentences that are fully understandable in English, without being what the demands of Anglo-Saxon culture would necessarily deem cooperative or even appropriate.

Proposed model for intercultural communication:



This approach to foreign-language teaching would mean a deconstruction/reconstruction of the meaningful components of utterances (that is the three metafunctions) in both languages; relating these components to the discourse systems of each culture; and from there exploring how communication without colonisation is possible, what I have termed Multicultural Language Arts. However, given the directionality of power and hegemony as represented in the figure below, it becomes necessary to question whether appropriation of the lexicogrammatical system for utterances alone is enough and to move from control of utterance in the context of situation further up the power scale to control of genre within the context of institution. This also seems highly appropriate in the study of an institution such as the NRDDB.

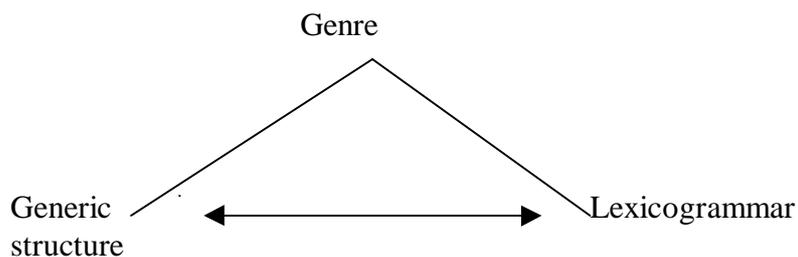
Context and Power:



Section IV: Teaching genre for transformative empowerment.

Recently the subject of teaching genre to people from other cultures has been a source of great debate (see Luke [1996], Rose [1999] and Martin [1999]), though this has chiefly been over literary genres and genres in literacy teaching. As the figure below demonstrates, genre comprises lexicogrammar and generic structure in a dynamic relation: the lexicogrammar builds up the generic structure and the generic structure defines the lexicogrammar. Thus the debate over genre also includes within it the debate about standardised lexicogrammatical forms.

Realisation of genre:



The ideological debate over genre has centred round the idea of whether genre-teaching to the disempowered is teaching ideology or simply respecting the desires of the learners and their families and their real-life difficulties and desires for advancement. While Rose and Martin claim that genres taught through deconstruction will automatically be appropriated once the lexicogrammar underlying them is internalised, and that this will at the same time open up avenues for

underrepresented groups, Luke counterclaims that deconstruction without sociological critique leads to reproduction of the ideology implicit within the genres, thus maintaining the political status quo, and criticises the increasingly fine-grained analysis of the lexicogrammatical structure of genres on the grounds that such learning based on status-group forms merely reinforces the process.

Looking at my particular fieldwork, we can take as an example of a genre “a contribution from the floor”. Now, whereas utterances have to be structured within the bounds of L2 lexicogrammar in order to be understood at all, contributions from the floor need not follow a C2 generic form in order to be understood (though this brings into question what we mean by “understanding”).

What needs to be learned for a transformation of power (in terms of the dominance of discourse systems), then, is how to manipulate L2 lexicogrammatical forms in order to structure a C1 generic form.

One tentative solution would be through the following steps:

- Consider first C1/L1 “contributions from the floor” with respect to their overall plan and purpose within the discourse: how they relate to the meaning potential of the situation in terms of subject matter, intended perlocutionary effect and their structure as discourse (their Field, Tenor and Mode respectively, the three metafunctions as manifest in genre). This should be related to the overall discourse system of the culture.
- Break these contributions down into each meaningful step (rhetorical unit or RU, often more than one sentence) and examine how these RUs gradually achieve the speaker’s subject position (i.e. how they lead from the perlocutionary effect of the prior context to the speaker’s perlocutionary intent).
- Repeat the process for C₂/L₂ contributions.
- Examine the role of the three metafunctions of the lexicogrammar in the construction of the L₂/C₂ RUs as they build up the contribution.
- The relationship between L2 lexicogrammar and RUs demonstrated for the C₂ generic structure can then be transferred to structure contributions (in L2) within the C₁ discourse system.

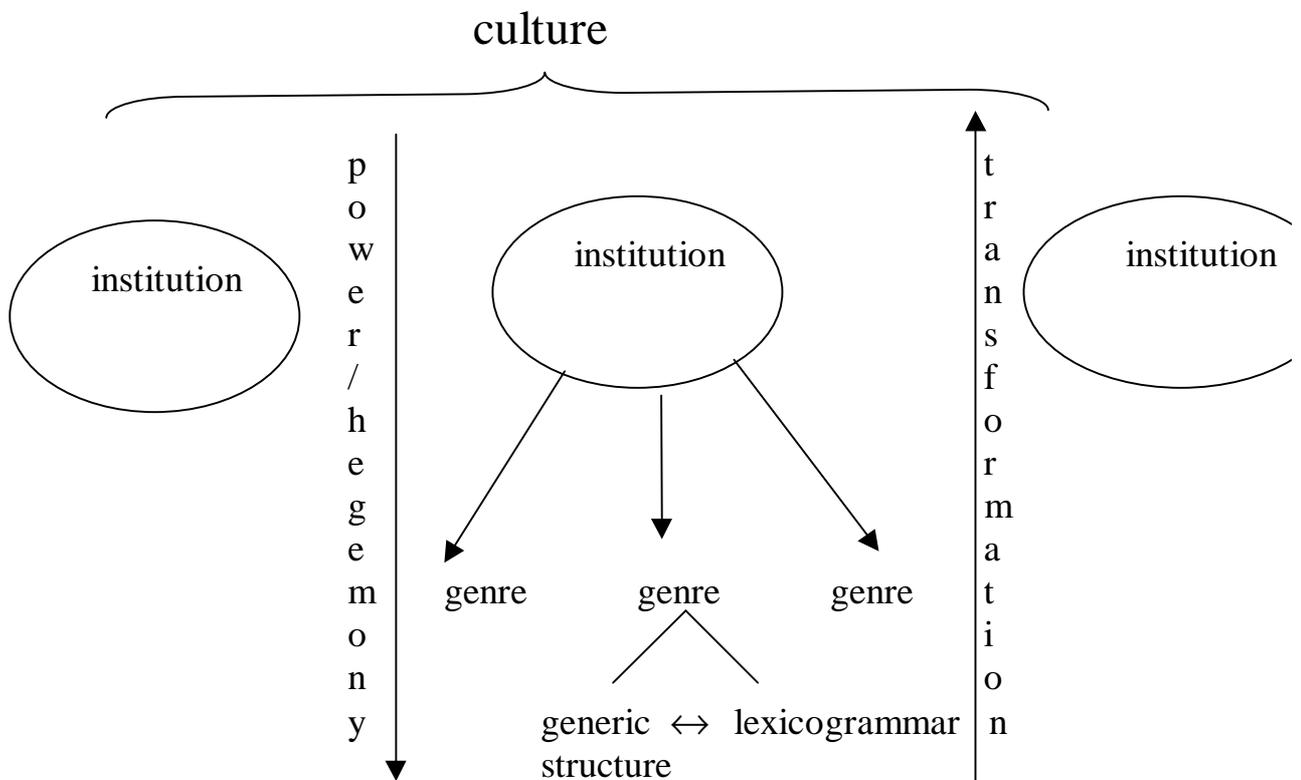
Such an example of Multicultural Language Arts includes both sides of Pennycook and Cummins’s continuum and the Martin, Rose and Luke debate: it teaches the important L₂ generic structures while opening these structures up for appropriation. And as with the case for appropriation of the grammar, it is up to the community whether they structure their genres according to C₁ or C₂. However, as genres, unlike utterances, must be jointly constructed, a “third-space” hybrid culture should be

aimed for, a dynamic form of traditionalism that meets C₂ on its own territory. In ideal circumstances the two cultural groups will work together to forge this third space.

V. By Way of Conclusion.

As regards going further up the system of power, the figure below represents the idea that the context of culture can be seen as no more than the tense balance of power of the array of institutions that it comprises.

Direction of power and direction of transformative empowerment.



The real battlegrounds, the commanding heights of the economy as it were, are the institutions. Synchronically the context of culture may prescribe norms that percolate down the system, but norms are only oriented to and the system is filled with tension. Diachronically, tension allows for change, and this change comes from below, from the morpheme up.

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