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BA English Honours | Semester III | Calicut University

Language in Action

Course Code: ENG3CJ202 • Module 2 Notes

MODULE II: LITERATURE AS LANGUAGE PRACTICE

1. The Literary Text as Ideological and Linguistic Intervention

Literature is not a detached, decorative realm of pure aesthetic contemplation; it is a combative, transformative linguistic praxis. When an author writes, they are not merely assembling dictionary definitions; they are selecting, shaping, and subverting the historical and social ideologies embedded within language itself. The four texts prescribed in this module represent radical moments where writers harness the revolutionary power of language to shatter political silence, deconstruct literary philosophy, bear witness to catastrophic national grief, and expose the brutal absurdity of late-capitalist economic desperation.

2. Shattering Complicity: Audre Lorde's *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*

Audre Lorde (1934–1992), self-described "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," delivered her epochal paper, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, at the Modern Language Association's Lesbians and Literature panel in December 1977. Delivered shortly after undergoing surgery for breast cancer and confronting her own mortal vulnerability, Lorde's manifesto is an impassioned, urgent demand for marginalized human beings to break the lethal conspiracy of silence.

REVOLUTIONARY FEMINIST MANIFESTO **Audre Lorde: Breaking Silence into Action**

> *"I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood... My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences."*

Lorde deconstructs the profound human illusion that silence is a safe haven. Marginalized individuals—women, racial minorities, queer persons, the working poor—often remain silent out of fear: fear of professional retaliation, social ostracization, physical violence, or judgment. However, Lorde demonstrates that silence does not prevent violence; silence merely guarantees complicity in our own destruction. Language, when spoken from authentic lived trauma and revolutionary conviction, transforms fear into collective power. Lorde reclaims language not as an instrument of elite academic theory, but as an essential, life-saving bridge of human solidarity and political survival.

3. Demystifying the Canon: Terry Eagleton's *What is Literature?*

In the opening three paragraphs of the introductory chapter of his legendary treatise *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), British Marxist literary theorist Terry Eagleton stages a forensic, witty deconstruction of the traditional bourgeois concept of "Literature."

Eagleton begins by investigating the common-sense assumption that literature can be defined simply as "imaginative" writing—fiction as opposed to factual reporting. However, Eagleton immediately dismantles this dichotomy through historical counter-examples: seventeenth-century English literature includes the

sermons of John Donne, the philosophical essays of Francis Bacon, and the political tracts of John Milton, which were intended as factual prose yet are studied as supreme literature. Conversely, comic strips and supermarket advertising are purely fictional, yet are excluded from the sacred canon of Literature.

Eagleton then examines the Russian Formalist definition (Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky), which argued that literature is a specialized linguistic mode that uses devices (rhyme, meter, defamiliarization) to transform ordinary speech into strange, textured language—"an organized violence committed on ordinary speech." Eagleton counters that what counts as "defamiliarizing" or "ordinary" speech depends entirely on the social context and interpretive community. Eagleton's revolutionary thesis is that *Literature does not exist as an objective, immutable ontological category* (like insects or chemical elements). Literature is a value-judgment: what a particular society in a particular historical era chooses to label "Literature" is governed entirely by political, social, and class ideologies.

4. The Somatic Witness of Massacre: Kim Hyesoon's *Commute* (*Autobiography of Death*)

Kim Hyesoon is universally recognized as South Korea's most visionary, daring contemporary poet. Her 2016 poetry collection, *Autobiography of Death* (translated into English with breathtaking visceral power by Don Mee Choi and awarded the Griffin Poetry Prize), is an epochal masterpiece composed in the wake of the 2014 Sewol Ferry disaster, where over three hundred schoolchildren drowned due to systemic state and corporate corruption.

The collection consists of forty-nine poems, corresponding to the forty-nine days in Buddhist cosmology during which a deceased spirit wanders through the Bardo underworld before reincarnation. The opening poem, *Commute*, plunges the reader into the grotesque, horrifying reality of state-sanctioned death:

> **CONTEMPORARY KOREAN POETICS** **Kim Hyesoon: *Commute* – The Living Dead**
>
> In *Commute*, the speaker wakes up in the morning to catch the crowded subway train to work, only to discover that they are already dead. Their body is decomposing; their mouth is full of black mud and cold sea water; their hair is rotting away. Yet, like millions of disciplined capitalist workers, the corpse faithfully dresses in office clothing, boards the subway, and punches their timecard.

Kim Hyesoon rejects polite, sanitized elegies. Her verse is somatic, grotesque, and unapologetically surreal, deploying what Korean critics term "grotesque feminist realism." The dead refuse to vanish quietly into statistical obscurity. By forcing the rotting corpse into the daily subway commute, Kim demonstrates that South Korean modern capitalist society is built upon the silent bodies of sacrificed youth. Poetry becomes an act of national haunting—a refusal to let a corrupt state forget its murder.

5. The Grim Absurdity of American Poverty: George Saunders's *Sea Oak*

Originally published in *The New Yorker* in 1998 and included in his celebrated collection *Pastoralia*, George Saunders's short story *Sea Oak* is a brilliant, tragicomic tour-de-force that blends gritty working-class realism with grotesque supernatural horror.

The story is set in "Sea Oak"—a horribly misnamed, blighted, subsidized housing project in suburban America characterized by subsidized poverty, failing infrastructure, and rampant gang violence ("there are no oaks and no sea, just two hundred units of stucco and chain-link"). The unnamed narrator works as a male stripper at an aviation-themed restaurant called "Joysticks," where he earns sub-minimum-wage tips by

humiliatingly displaying his body in pilot costumes. He shares the squalid apartment with his traumatized sister Min, his cousin Jade (both teenage single mothers surviving on food stamps), two crying babies, and their saintly, self-effacing elderly Aunt Bernie.

Aunt Bernie has lived a life of absolute self-abnegation, never complaining, working minimum-wage jobs at Drug Town, and radiating gentle Christian cheerfulness. Tragedy strikes when stray bullets from a street gang drive-by shoot through their living room walls; Aunt Bernie drops dead from sheer terror. However, soon after her funeral, Aunt Bernie returns from the grave as an enraged, decomposing zombie!

Saunders executes a breathtaking tonal reversal. The resurrected Aunt Bernie is no longer saintly; she is furious, vulgar, and vengeful. She roars at her family, cursing them for their passive poverty, screaming that she sacrificed her entire life for nothing and never even got to experience sexual pleasure. She orders the narrator to stop being squeamish and start prostituting himself to wealthy male restaurant patrons to earn fast cash so they can move out of Sea Oak: "You gotta show your cock! You gotta get that cash!"

Saunders exposes the savage brutality of the modern capitalist economy. Under the reign of neoliberal austerity, passive moral goodness is suicide; survival demands total commodification of the human body. The decomposing corpse of Aunt Bernie represents the repressed rage of millions of marginalized working-class citizens whose lives are quietly consumed by the machinery of economic exploitation.

Advanced Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Pragmatics & Policy Hermeneutics

In contemporary applied linguistics, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and legal philosophy, mastering *Language in Action* demands a rigorous, interdisciplinary investigation into the relationship between linguistic structures, ideological hegemony, and institutional power. Language is never an innocent or transparent conduit of objective reality; it is an active social practice that constitutes, reproduces, and challenges unequal relations of power. Scholars synthesizing Norman Fairclough's critical discourse methodology, Michel Foucault's power-knowledge nexus, and Pierre Bourdieu's linguistic habitus examine how verbal signs establish authority, enforce compliance, and ignite revolutionary resistance.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Critical Language Studies

Academic investigation into Literature as Linguistic Praxis, Ideological Demystification, and Social Critique centers upon three foundational linguistic and sociological paradigms:

- **Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Hegemony:** Formulated by Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak, CDA posits that language use (discourse) is dialectically entangled with social structure. Dominant institutions (governments, judiciaries, corporate media) employ specific discursive strategies—nominalization, passive voice deletion of agent, euphemism, and presupposition—to naturalize ideological biases and manufacture public consent. Analyzing Literature as Linguistic Praxis, Ideological Demystification, and Social Critique requires de-naturalizing linguistic choices to expose the underlying interests they serve.
- **Speech Act Theory and Performative Pragmatics:** J. L. Austin (*How to Do Things with Words*) and John Searle demonstrate that language does not merely describe the world (constative utterances); it performs actions (performative utterances / speech acts). When a judge issues a verdict, an official signs an act, or a protester utters dissent, language produces immediate material, legal, and ontological transformations in reality.
- **Linguistic Capital and Symbolic Violence:** Pierre Bourdieu argues that linguistic exchanges function as economic markets. Standard, elite dialects command high "symbolic capital," while non-standard vernaculars, subaltern dialects, and minority languages are devalued, inflicting "symbolic

violence" upon marginalized speakers who are systematically excluded from institutional decision-making.

2. Comparative Analytical Matrix: Discourse Domains

A structured comparative assessment delineates linguistic registers, power dynamics, and interpretive protocols across discursive fields in Language in Action:

Discourse Domain	Primary Pragmatic Function	Key Syntactic & Lexical Hallmarks	Institutional Power Dynamic
Literary Discourse	Aesthetic defamiliarization, emotional subversion & ethical critique.	Metaphor, polysemy, syntactic ellipsis, interior monologue, narrative framing.	Subverts dominant ideological consensus and restores voice to marginalized subjectivities.
Media & Digital Discourse	Information framing, attention capture & ideological positioning.	Sensational hooks, active voice, multimodal convergence, clickbait syntax, algorithmic metadata.	Shapes public mood and reproduces commercial interests under the guise of objectivity.
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Policy & Statutory Acts	Legislative mandate, institutional governance & social engineering.	Terse imperative provisions, definitions clauses, unambiguous penal schedules, exhaustive qualifiers.	Formalizes democratic mandates into legally binding civic obligations and administrative protocols.

3. Glossary of Essential Applied Linguistics and Discourse Terms

Critical Term	Theoretical Origin	Academic Definition & Analytical Context
Performativity	J. L. Austin / Judith Butler	The capacity of language to not merely describe an act, but to actualize that act into existence through its very utterance (e.g., 'I declare you guilty').
Nominalization	Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday)	The grammatical transformation of an active verb or process into a static abstract noun (e.g., 'police shot protesters' becomes 'the shooting of protesters'), frequently deleting responsible agency.
Interdiscursivity	Norman Fairclough	The constitution of a text from diverse discourses and genres (e.g., a modern political speech mixing religious rhetoric, corporate marketing, and street colloquialisms).
Remediation	Bolter & Grusin	The formal logic by which new media technologies refashion and absorb prior media forms, transforming textual documents into dynamic digital performances.

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Critical Term	Theoretical Origin	Academic Definition & Analytical Context
Biopolitics	Michel Foucault	The techniques and rationalities by which modern sovereign states manage and regulate human biological life, health, gender, and populations through legal statutes.
Defamiliarization (Ostranenie)	Viktor Shklovsky	The artistic technique of disrupting habitual, automated perception by rendering familiar reality strange and difficult through unexpected literary language.

4. Four-Phase Critical Discourse Analytical Protocol

Conducting scholarly analysis of Literature as Linguistic Praxis, Ideological Demystification, and Social Critique adheres to a structured four-phase research methodology:

- **Phase 1: Textual Archaeology and Lexico-Grammatical Mapping:** Meticulously identifying vocabulary registers, passive voice constructions, nominalizations, pronoun dynamics (us vs. them), and rhetorical tropes.
- **Phase 2: Discursive Practice and Production Analysis:** Investigating the conditions of text production, circulation, and institutional consumption—identifying who authored the text, what institutional authority they command, and who the intended target audience is.
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- **Phase 4: Transformative Action and Emancipatory Counter-Discourse:** Assessing how the text contributes to democratic emancipation, human rights protection, and the formulation of progressive counter-hegemonic narratives.

Advanced Critical Discourse Analysis, Linguistic Pragmatics & Policy Hermeneutics

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