

# Linguistic exploitation

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“Not the gun but the word is the symbol of authority. The most frequent governmental activities are talking, writing, listening, and reading” (Lindblom 1977: 52). If Lindblom is right about what governments do, then the word is not merely a *symbol* but also a *tool* of authority. If words are tools of authority, then language, which allows people to produce words, must be a tool for making tools of authority. And, if language is a machine tool in the authority industry, then we should also expect people to compete for control over language.

As expected, we find struggles over language taking place every day. Political activists devote much of their energy to such struggles. And the nature of politics may be influenced by the fact that linguistic competition is one of the determinants of political success. According to one interpretation, suggested by Edelman (1977), those who have political power use it to get power over language, and those who have power over language use it to get political power, with the result that the ideal of democratic government is never achieved. Myers-Scotton (1989) has offered a variant of this argument, under the heading of “elite closure,” which she defines as

a tactic of boundary maintenance: it involves institutionalizing the linguistic patterns of the elite, either through official policy or informally-established usage norms. This limits access to socioeconomic mobility and political power to those societal members who possess the requisite linguistic patterns of the elite.

One tactic in struggles over language is to obtain control over the definition of *correctness*. Correctness in language, as in anything, is scarce. It is an attribute of only some languages and some linguistic forms. If all languages and forms had it, we would not even have a concept of correctness.

It would be naïve to suppose that the distinctions between what is linguistically correct and what is linguistically incorrect arise without