

Language



Definition

Language—constituted of words, sentences, paragraphs, and larger units of discourse—has been at the heart of rhetoric since the time of the ancient rhetoricians. In the time of rhetoricians like Plato, language used to make meaning was principally oral, but communities around the world, from the Sumerians and Egyptians to the Chinese and the Mesoamericans, soon came to rely on a written language that was rooted in the oral. In the Western world, the printing press helped make reading material located largely in language available to many during the Renaissance, and to even more people in the nineteenth century when new printing presses were developed. During this same time, more people were learning to use written language: to establish accounting systems; to create diaries; to write political documents. A specific use of language—signing one’s name—became a vehicle for political agency, and the inability to write became an excuse to deny agency.

Language is understood to be a distinguishing feature of human beings, and many believe that it is through language that we

express our humanity, shape reality, and bring knowledge into being and to others.

Importance to the Field

Within the last several decades, our understanding of language has been especially important in two ways. First, we understand the connection between language and identity; writing teachers believe that students—like all humans—have the right to their own language use. Second, because of new versions of globalization, we understand the transnational character of all languages.

Resources

- Burke, Kenneth. *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1966. Print.
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- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued.” *College Composition and Communication* 57.4 (2006): 586–619. Print.
- Christensen, Francis. “A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence.” *College Composition and Communication* 14.3 (1963): 155–61. Print.
- Conference on College Composition and Communication. “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” Position Statement. *College Composition and Communication* 25 (1974). Print.
- Horner, Winifred Bryan. “The Roots of Modern Writing Instruction: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain (1990).” *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*. Ed. Susan Miller. New York: Norton, 2009. 33–52. Print.



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