NIGHT ELVES, JARGON, AND YOU: THE LANGUAGE OF POWER WITHIN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

By Christopher Hornyak

Over five million people from around the globe currently play *World of Warcraft*, making it a common target of study. Yet, while most articles have focused on its ludological features, few have bothered to take a closer look at the unique linguistics present within the community of the game. Within *World of Warcraft*, a new, dynamic "language of power" is being formed: alienating outsiders, while allowing those within the gameworld to more efficiently perform in the game. *World of Warcraft* forces players to interact with each other, making communication a vital part of the game. If players do not communicate, they cannot make their characters more powerful – the equivalent of "winning" *World of Warcraft*. This focus on communication in a hypercompetitive space has evolved a special, unique language within the gameworld: one that consists of a combination of novel deictic symbols, "standard" English, and jargon.

An Introduction to *World of Warcraft*

World of Warcraft is set within a fantasy world called "Azeroth." Within the game, players are tasked with creating a character, picking from a handful of races and classes. Each of these races and classes has their own unique attributes, every combination

bringing something unique to the gameworld. Likewise, each individual class has a certain set of abilities that only they can perform. Once a player creates a character, they are entered into a world in which they must gain levels, defeat powerful monsters, and collect numerous pieces of armor.

As *World of Warcraft* is an MMORPG, or massively multiplayer online role-playing game, the experience of creating and leveling a character is not an isolated one. It is almost impossible to navigate the landscape of *World of Warcraft* without running into other players. Indeed, *World of Warcraft* is a profoundly social experience – playing "solo," or by yourself, is discouraged within the game. Without making friends, much of the game's content is inaccessible. Dungeons, for example, are designed to be completed by five players communicating among themselves. In addition, a large amount of strategy is often needed for players to defeat certain monsters.

To facilitate in-game communication, *World of Warcraft* uses a basic chat system. Within the bottom left corner of every player's screen there is a small, rectangular box in which text appears. Using the chat system in *World of Warcraft* players can communicate with each other in public using "chat channels," or they can communicate in private – using "whispers," which are just private messages between two players. As the player moves about the gameworld, her chat channels will change. Every time the player travels to a new zone, she is automatically joined into that zone's "general" chat channel. In this channel, players usually discuss zone-specific information. For example, players might discuss where certain monsters are or how to complete certain quests. When players enter the boundaries of a major in-game city, they are automatically joined into the "trade" chat channel. Within the trade channel, players sell and buy goods, recruit for their guilds, and look for partners to complete certain tasks that they cannot do on their own.

A Primer on Language, Power, and Communities

Before talking about the dialect of power within *World of Warcraft*, it is important to establish what a "dialect of power" actually is. In brief, a dialect of power is a dialect that allows its user to gain specific advantages within their social sphere. This definition of power is built on Scott Kiesling's research on language and power within male fraternities. While power had been described in linguistic research prior to his work, Kiesling formulated the idea that power is relative to the community it exists within: "Through language, people place themselves in relatively enduring power roles, as defined by a community of practice … Every speaker cannot simply use any strategy or form to index any role. They are limited by ascribed traits, previous roles they have filled in the community, the roles available in the situation, and their competence in a certain strategy or form" (Kiesling, 1996, p. 41). Within Kiesling's framework, users of language take on power roles through the use of language. By taking advantage of certain dialects of community-focused jargon, users can gain power within their own community. Likewise, as users learn more strategies (and better understand the language of their "sphere"), they are able to take on more power roles, allowing them to gather power.

In Kiesling's research, "power" specifically meant social mobility with fraternities. As "social mobility" is arguably at the center of fraternity life, that is what "power" manifests as in that specific social sphere. In other social spheres – schools, business, academia – "power" can mean entirely different things. Likewise, as "power" is different, the dialect that determines power within that community is different.

It is also important to mention that dialectal power is not innate. For example, within American culture, "standard" English is often considered to be the "preferred" or "powerful" dialect. Yet, this is not because "standard" English is inherently correct, nor

is it because "standard" English has some sort of advantage over other dialects that gives it power. Instead, the power derived from "standard" English comes from the community that has created (and uses) it. When language is present alongside power imbalances, language becomes intertwined with power, as Ahearn explains: "Unequal power relations can result in – and be the result of – symbolic violence (symbolic power, symbolic domination), which Bourdieu maintains, occurs when individuals mistakenly consider a standard dialect or style of speaking to be truly superior to the way they themselves speak, rather than an arbitrary difference afforded social significance. Language and power are therefore commonly intertwined" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 111). As both dialect and power are intertwined, the gap widens between those that can command powerful dialects and those that cannot. After all, the communities that command the dialects are continuously rewarded with power for using them (allowing them to influence said dialect) while those that cannot command the same dialect cannot compete with the growing power imbalance.

Such a dynamic is visible within "standard" English. While "standard" English is simply a dialect, it is treated as if it is more than that – as if it is a language, or rather, *the* language. Peter Trudgill explains: "Historically, we can say that Standard English was selected (though of course, unlike many other languages, not by any overt or conscious decision) as the variety to become the standard variety precisely because it was the variety associated with the social group with the highest degree of power, wealth and prestige" (Trudgill, 1999, p. 9). Using Kiesling's framework, we see that the most powerful group in the social sphere picked their dialect (the one they were most comfortable with – the one that gave them the most power within their social group) and imposed it (using their power) on those who wished to gain access to their sphere. Woolard expands on this: "Language varieties that are regularly associated with (and thus index)

particular speakers are often revalorized – or misrecognized – not just as symbols of group identity, but as emblems of political allegiance or of social, intellectual, or moral worth" (Woolard, 1994, p. 61) Once again, using Kiesling's framework we can then define "power" within this social sphere as social, intellectual, or moral worth – by using "standard" English, you are seen as having higher valor, as being more "worthy." This gives users of the dialect of specific power – one that those who cannot use the dialect cannot access.

Within *World of Warcraft*, however, there is a different understanding of power. Within this specific virtual world, "power" is determined by the strength of your character. That is, characters with better gear (armor), higher player-versus-player rankings, and more in-game currency are seen as "more powerful." Therefore, within *World of Warcraft*, in order for a language to be truly powerful, it would have to assist in making an individual's character more powerful. Likewise, much as in the case in the "real world" examples of the fraternity – or "American culture" at large – the language (dialect) chosen to be "powerful" is one that is "chosen" by the most powerful users. Therefore, as theoretically everyone wants to increase the power of their character, the dialect of power is seeded to the rest of the community.

Yet, just as it is important to recognize that it is possible to live and communicate in American society without access to "standard" English – that particular sphere's "language" of power – it is completely possible to exist in *World of Warcraft* without speaking the game's language of power. Saying that a "language of power" exists does not mean that it is the only language (or in the case of "standard" English – dialect) communication can happen in, it simply means that certain dialects are privileged over others. In truth, in order for a "language of power" to exist, other forms of communication must exist alongside it. After all,

"power" implies a dynamic – those who have it and those who do not.

The language of power in WoW has three distinct features: a heavy reliance on lingo, unique deictics, and an external reliance on "standard" English. All of these features come together to form a digital "language" of power that is used within the sphere of *World of Warcraft*. All of these facets of language within WoW are equally important. They might occur all at once, or they might separately occur in isolated spaces. In a way, each of the facets of the language are like words in a vocabulary: they are interchangeably used throughout *World of Warcraft*, although not every single facet is used at once. The focus here is that a player who has mastered WoW's "language of power" can utilize any facet of the language at any time if it is necessary within the context of the game.

The First Facet of *World of Warcraft*'s Language of Power: Lingo

Lingo, the first feature of *World of Warcraft*'s language of power, has much in common with jargon or slang. Lingo is any acronym, created word, technical phrase, or symbol used within a system that has a concrete definition of meaning. On first glance it might appear that I am trying to describe jargon – however, this is not the case. While jargon and lingo are certainly related, jargon specifically implies a disconnect between the word and the social group that uses it. This is explained by Bethany Dumas: "A technical term that is used solely to designate – regardless of its etymology or the social status of those who use the term – is jargon, not slang. Slang characterizes a referent; jargon and standard English only indicate it" (Dumas, 1978, p. 13). While technically the lingo used in WoW is only used to "designate," it is not socially neutral. This would seem to make WoW lingo "slang," according to Dumas – yet according to her, slang is only spoken by those of lower "conventional status." As this is the

exact opposite within *World of Warcraft*, we have to find a different term: hence, lingo.

This is not the first time the term "lingo" is being applied to gaming communities. Mia Consalvo first used the word in her discussion on communicative noise in video game communities: "Game lingo may be noise to the new, casual, or returning MMOG player. It can serve as a shortcut or a marker of status or signal community membership. It goes beyond basic gameplay terms to encompass game-specific terminology, slang, and emerging forms of expression" (Consalvo, 2008, p. 308). Consalvo's definition of lingo is precisely what exists with *World of Warcraft*'s community: it is a series of terms coined by the community that both assist communication and show that the player using the lingo is part of the community.

Lingo in *World of Warcraft* is used frequently: within the general and trade chat channels, it is almost a guarantee that every line will contain at least one piece of lingo. In fact, lingo itself likely became popularized by these channels. As there can be over 10,000 players on one server, text often appears in the player's chat box at a rapid rate. Players must compete against each other in order to be seen – as players that "spam" their message by posting it more than three times are quickly reported by players (an offense that can lead to getting banned), the only effective way to have your message seen is to get your message across in a concise manner.
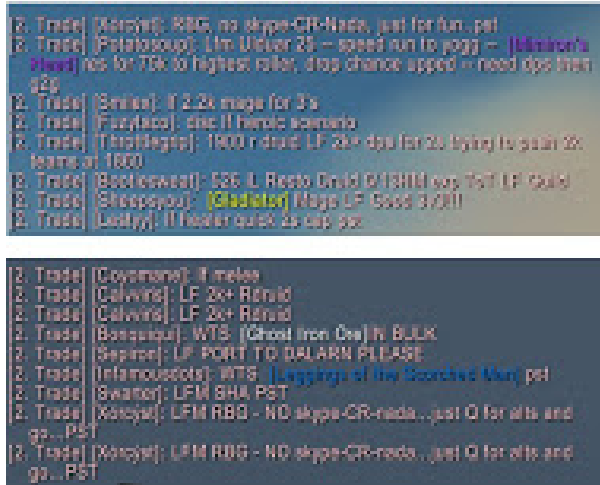
Figure 1: Two chat samples of in-game text. (Source: World of Warcraft, 2013)

Figure 1 contains two screenshots of a user's chat box. Both screenshots were taken around primetime, and while there are no timestamps shown, the text was scrolling rapidly on the screen – at a rate of about two lines a second. In the top image, you can see the player "Xorcyst" typing out a line of text. In this context, "RBG" stands for "Rated Battle Ground" – a player using this acronym is looking to join a team of ten players who fight another team of ten players. While someone might assume "no skype" simply refers to the VoIP program, Skype, it actually means that no external VoIP programs will be used at all. "CR-Nada" means that this player does not care about "combat rating" or CR, a method of rating the game uses to rank players. Finally, "PST" simply means "please send tell." When these terms are used in context with one another, they form a coherent sentence that lets other players quickly know what "Xorcyst" is looking for. If this line was written without lingo, it would look like this: "I'm looking for people to join my rated battleground group. We aren't using any VoIP programs and I don't care about your personal rating. This is just for fun. Please message me." While his original line might look like nonsense to a player not familiar

with WoW lingo, it is clear that to those that understand it, his method of communicating is much more efficient.

Mia Consalvo notes that "too much lingo can create unacceptable levels of noise for the newbie, or the infrequent player, but player facility in learning lingo is crucial to becoming a part of a particular MMOG community" (Consalvo, 2008, p. 308). Indeed, even though Consalvo is primarily talking about another MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XI*, her words still have truth in *World of Warcraft*. The sheer amount of lingo within *World of Warcraft* is overwhelming – entire dictionaries exist online just to facilitate the learning of the various terms and acronyms. Yet, players who wish to grow in power must learn the lingo. Consalvo theorizes that some tasks are almost impossible in MMOGs without the use of lingo. She opens up the example of a character trying to do a dungeon in *Final Fantasy XI*, running into problems when they are told to do things by their group yet cannot understand them. This problem is easily paralleled in WoW. An individual who plays a mage in WoW trying to do a dungeon might be told to "sheep a mob" (to cast their crowd control spell on a monster), or they might be told to "nuke X" (literally – to use their big damage abilities on the monster marked with an 'X' over their head). Likewise, they might be told to "spam AoE until execute" (rapidly use attacks that hit multiple monsters until the monsters get below 30% health). All of these commands would happen rapidly – not to mention many of them would be time sensitive. A mage who has to think about what his group mates are telling him would likely cause the group to "wipe" (everyone dies). Likely, that mage will not be invited back to future groups.

The Second Facet of *World of Warcraft*'s Language of Power: Modified Deictics

The second prominent feature within *World of Warcraft*'s "language of power" is the community's usage (and modification)

of the deictics "ˆ" (carat) and "< – – -" (arrow). This shift was discussed in great detail by Lauren Collister, who wrote about the evolution of both deictic symbols: "The language used is written so that specific words or utterances can actually be pointed to on the screen in addition to being anaphorically referenced; this linguistic environment allows for creative uses of linguistic deixis. The availability of a lexical item for pointing may be what gives rise to the proliferation of arrow-shaped figures in the community's discourse" (Collister, 2012, p. 10). Collister notes that such a feature is interesting because in this medium symbols can be treated as words – in other words, they are vulnerable to semantic evolution.

While their original meaning was entrenched in the symbols they are supposed to represent (an arrow pointing to the left and an arrow pointing up), they evolved over the course of two years to become the equivalent of symbolic pronouns. This likely happened because of their original usage within *World of Warcraft*'s chat box system. Players would use the arrow to point to themselves, following it with a message. If a player had asked a group of individuals if they wanted to purchase an item, an interested player would respond by saying "< – – – me." As the arrow would point to their name in the chat box, it was something of a trendy – if not redundant – phrase.

This usage allowed individuals to signify player position within relation to the virtual world. In other words, they would use them to identify themselves in a place where they would normally use "body language." Over time, however, the "me" morphed into the arrow, allowing the arrow itself to serve as a sort of pronoun. As transactions taking place in the chat box happen quickly, players quickly adopted this new usage, which allowed them to respond without having to type out lengthy text responses. A similar evolution happened to the carat, which quickly took on a meaning of agreement. If an individual said something a player liked, they would respond with "ˆˆˆˆˆ" rather

than "I agree with that," or something similar. While these symbols gained additional meaning, they did not lose their original meaning. Collister explains: "Both retain the sense of their original iconic meaning, but require a familiarity with the community norms to fully understand all of the intended meanings. In this community, they both are polysemous, retaining their original (iconic, in this case) sense while carrying additional meanings" (Collister, 2012, p.16). The note of familiarity with community norms is important – much like lingo, true understanding of these phrases can only come with immersion in the community.

Due to the nature of their creation within the community, these symbols add to the "language of power" in the same way that lingo does. As both are created and fostered by the community, they also imply a connection with the community. If a player is seen using the arrow and carat throughout their speech within *World of Warcraft*, it is implied that they are part of the community – they are "speaking the language" – a quality that implies that they have additional competence, and that they "fit in."

The Third Facet of *World of Warcraft*'s Language of Power: The Power of "Standard" English ideology

The influence of "standard" English ideology on *World of Warcraft* might seem surprising, especially considering the extensive use of lingo within the community – yet it is important to recognize that *World of Warcraft*'s playerbase does not just "exist" in the gameworld itself. As *World of Warcraft* is a profoundly social game, many communities have been setup outside of the gameworld for players to interact in. While these communities are optional for the player to take part in, many of them are also intrinsically linked to player power. Perhaps the best example for this is of the guild community present within *World of Warcraft*.

Throughout this paper there has been a notion that *World of Warcraft* is a social game. This has been mostly due to the idea that common in-game tasks are made easier through communication with other players. Yet, players who wish to quickly become more powerful – or to reach the "highest" and most "prestigious" parts of *World of Warcraft* – must join a guild. A guild within *World of Warcraft* is a group of players who play together to achieve a common goal. In addition to the social benefits a guild provides, being in a guild also provides tangible advantages to a player. For example, players in a guild receive certain bonuses simply for being in a "good" guild: they will receive more experience for killing monsters, so they will level up faster. They will move faster in the gameworld, allowing them to complete quests faster. They will even get more gold from quests and monsters, allowing them to have more purchasing power in the gameworld.

Guilds, much like players, can be organized into many tiers of "power." This is because guilds are nothing more than groups of players – so the power of individuals is spread to everyone else within the guild. Likewise, as individuals have their own goals, so do guilds. It is also fair to say that there are many types of guilds within *World of Warcraft* – while some focus on PvP ("player versus player," or killing other players), others will focus on "casual" content – that is, simply leveling and talking with friends. This essay, however, focuses on the most competitive type of guild, known as raiding guilds. Raiding guilds in *World of Warcraft* are groups of players that specifically gather to raid, or to enter end game dungeons ("raids" – that is, dungeons you enter at the max level within the game) that are released periodically by the game's developers. These dungeons present a series of challenging, intense encounters that are designed explicitly to push guilds to their very limit. Essentially, when new raids are released, it is a rush to see who can beat them the

fastest. The guilds that enjoy this sort of competition are ranked worldwide.

In order to get into a raiding guild, a player must fill out an application. Typically, these applications ask many questions about the player's individual game history: what raids have they seen in the past? Can they get others to vouch for them? What current armor are they wearing? This is where "standard" English comes in – all of these questions must be answered like miniature essay questions. While the content of the answers might seem like the most important thing, the guild members that judge applicants strongly consider grammar, spelling, and form. The following is a selection of quotations taken directly from the sites of three of the top guilds in the world:

"If it looks like you spent about 20 seconds doing your application, do not be surprised if we spend less time than that declining. Please make an effort with your presentation and try to write coherently" (Midwinter, 2013).

"Applications that don't use proper grammar and spelling are typically regarded as trash. We have no idea who you are, and neither do our raiders who are reviewing your application. If you respond to questions with barely-legible sentences and can't be bothered to hit the shift button, we are going to think you're an idiot because you are writing like one" (Reckoning, 2013).

"If you can't be bothered with proper spelling and grammar then your first impression will be that of a dribbling general forums lolwut idiot. Be mindful of this" (BigCrits, 2013).

The practice of judging players harshly based on their mastery of "standard" English is not limited to the absolute best guilds, however. On the popular WoW community site Maintankadin, a player named Nikachelle comments on what they think a "proper" application looks like: "If your grammar and spelling indicate that you're not fluent in English (which is important EU

side for my guild) or, that you chose to write in the manner of a 5 year old, then I will discard your applicant without further ado" (Maintankadin, 2013). The player even goes as far as to refer to their application process as "an English exam." Another player named Chunes notes that "professionalism, proper grammar, [and] good vocabulary" are the most important things he looks for in a guild application.

What is visible in these snippets of *World of Warcraft*'s community is a connection between mastery of "standard" English and mastery of *World of Warcraft*'s mechanics. This "competency link" seems to apply a handful of assumptions about language. The biggest assumption is that there is a "clean" and "proper" version of English that everyone can aspire to, and that failure to achieve this is a sign of laziness. Lippi-Green comments on the phenomenon heavily, noting the example of a Hawai'in meteorologist with 20 years of experience who was passed up for a promotion due to his accent: "This is a very good – if very disturbing – example of how people think about language: if we want to, if we try hard enough, we can acquire a perfect language, one which is clean, pure, free of variation and unpleasant social associations. Language which is not perfect is a handicap, and does not need to be accepted" (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 145). In Lippi-Green's example, the meteorologist seemingly has the perfect resume for the job – yet because he has an accent and his English is not "perfect" (because it does not conform to "standard" English ideology) he is not considered for the job. This is because the general belief is that those who cannot speak "proper" English are doing so because they lack the willpower to learn how to. When you consider that *World of Warcraft* is played around the world – and that many players do not speak English as their first language – this line of thought suddenly becomes problematic. If competency in "standard" English is linked to performance, players who might otherwise be excellent at *World of Warcraft* are excluded.

The inclusion of "standard" English into the language of power within *World of Warcraft* helps illuminate one of the core concepts presented in this paper's introduction. That is, while each element of the language of power has its place in *World of Warcraft*, not every element must be used at once. For example, a player within the gameworld might never need to utilize standard English while he is actually playing WoW. At the same time, that player might need to show a high knowledge of WoW lingo/deictic usages during her in-game activities. At another point in time, that same player might wish to apply to a raiding guild. At that point, she might not need to show proficiency in novel deictics, but he might have to combine standard English and WoW lingo. As is the case with "languages of power" in other spheres, complete mastery is not necessary for power to be extracted using the language. Certainly, different levels of mastery receive different advantages.

Gameplayl Notes on *World of Warcraft*'s Language of Power

Mia Consalvo closes her discussion on language in MMO's with the following note: "[Game language] is dynamically co-constructed by game developers and players, shifting and changing over time to meet the demands of gameplay as well as the idiosyncratic preferences of players... There will always be particular terms, abilities, and kinks in specific games to learn, and if such learning fails to occur, noise is the result" (Consalvo, 2008, p. 309). From both a sociological and a ludological perspective, the presence of a language of power in *World of Warcraft* is a problematic one. Via Kiesling, it is interesting to note that the same exact power dynamics present in the real world are present in the virtual one. Just as language is innately linked to power in real life, in *World of Warcraft* language and power are inseparable. For an ethnographer or linguist, a thorough study of the language of power might reveal interesting notes on how language is chosen and how it evolves.

In much the same way, a game-centric perspective on the language of power in *World of Warcraft* cannot be ignored. The language of power within *World of Warcraft* is, in many ways, a game mechanic – it is something that must be learned by the player in order for them to gain some sort of in-game advantage. Yet, unlike something like a specific fight mechanic, or a strategy that can be "taught" by the game, there is no in-game mechanism for learning the language of power. Instead, players must interact with the community, picking up on the forms and usages of the language as they go. While this is how it has always been within MMORPGs, it might not be the best way of doing things. After all, is something that gives power within a game yet cannot be taught by the game a good thing? Traditionally, such a gameplay mechanic would be considered undesirable.

On the other hand, the presence of the language of power within *World of Warcraft* does not seem to be controllable by the developers. The language is organic – it is something that grew from within the community. Considering what we know about how power and language intermingle via Kiesling, it seems unlikely that developers could actually control the evolution of language within the game. One popular "solution" among certain developers is to limit the social interaction of the players – yet this is not desirable, as it is something that would corrupt the game's spirit. Perhaps the most pragmatic solution is to simply offer up methodologies within the game for a player to learn the language. Still, even that option seems distasteful, as it seems to prop up a power system within the game based on language ideology. As it stands, the only thing that can be done is to study and understand the language of power within *World of Warcraft*, perhaps building up a database of language usage and player power. Further research needs to be done to see how both realms of power interact with each other – and, more than that, how we might begin to deconstruct both while preserving the "community" (while, at the same time, leveling the playing field).

References

Ahearn, L. M. (2001). Language and Agency. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *30*, 109-37.

Application Requirements, Reckoning — Mannoroth. (2013, August 8). Retrieved September 10, 2013, from http://www.reckoningwow.com/page/about

Big Crits — Guild Recruitment. (2010, September 6). Retrieved August 10, 2013, from http://www.bigcrits.com/forums/viewtopic.php?f=9&t=45

Blizzard Entertainment. (2013). World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria, 5.3.

Chunes., & Nikachelle. (2010, September 10). *A Discussion about Guild Applications*. Retrieved September 10, 2013,

Collister, L. B. (2012). Constructing a Powerful Identity in World of Warcraft: A Sociolinguistic Approach to MMORPGs. In *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-playing Game* (pp. 193-217). Continuum.

Collister, L. B. (2012). The Discourse Deictics ?< – – -? and ?^? in a World of Warcraft Community. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *1*(1), 9-19.

Consalvo, M. (2008). Lag, Language, and Lingo: Theorizing Noise in Online Game Spaces. In *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 295-312). Routledge.

Dumas, B. K., & Lighter, J. (1978). Is Slang a World for Linguists? *American Speech*, *53*(1), 5-17.

Kiesling, S. F. (1996). *Language, Gender, and Power in Fraternity Men's Discourse* (Doctoral Dissertation). Georgetown University.

Lippi-Green, R. (1997). *English with an accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States*. London: Routledge.

Midwinter — Sargeras. (2012, April 10). Retrieved September 10, 2013, from http://www.mwguild.net/apply/

Trudgill, P. (1999). Standard English: What It Isn't. In *Standard English: The Widening Debate*. Routledge.

Woolard, K. A. (1994). Language Ideology. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *23*, 55-82.