

University of Louisville

## ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

---

Faculty Scholarship

---

Spring 1991

### Redefining the legacy of Mina Shaughnessy : a critique of the politics of linguistic innocence.

Min-Zhan Lu  
*University of Louisville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

#### Original Publication Information

Lu, Min-Zhan. "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence." 1991. *Journal of Basic Writing* 10(1): 26-40.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

Min-zhan Lu

## REDEFINING THE LEGACY OF MINA SHAUGHNESSY: A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICS OF LINGUISTIC INNOCENCE

**ABSTRACT:** *This article examines Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations in light of current discourse theories which posit language as a site of struggle among competing discourses. It finds Shaughnessy's analyses and recommended pedagogies dominated by a view of language as a politically innocent vehicle of meaning. The author argues that this view of language leads Shaughnessy to overlook basic writers' need to confront the dissonance they experience between academic and other discourses, which might undercut her goal of helping students achieve the "freedom of deciding how and when and where to use which language." The author further argues that to pursue Shaughnessy's goal of countering unequal social conditions through education, we need to abandon the limitations of the essentialist view of language informing our pedagogy.*

The aim of this paper is to critique an essentialist assumption about language that is dominant in the teaching of basic writing. This assumption holds that the essence of meaning precedes and is independent of language, which serves merely as a vehicle to communicate that essence. According to this assumption, differences in discourse conventions have no effect on the essential meaning communicated. Using Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* as an example, I examine the ways in which such an

---

*Min-zhan Lu, assistant professor of English at Drake University, teaches writing and literary and cultural criticism. Her work has appeared in College English, The Journal of Education, and Prairie Schooner. She is currently writing a novel on three generations of Chinese women, and coauthoring a book with Bruce Horner on representations of nontraditional students.*

© *Journal of Basic Writing*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1991

assumption leads to pedagogies which promote what I call a politics of linguistic innocence: that is, a politics which preempts teachers' attention from the political dimensions of the linguistic choices students make in their writing.

My critique is motivated by my alignment with various Marxist and poststructuralist theories of language.<sup>1</sup> In one way or another, these theories have argued that language is best understood not as a neutral vehicle of communication but as a site of struggle among competing discourses. Each discourse puts specific constraints on the construction of one's stance—how one makes sense of oneself and gives meaning to the world. Through one's gender; family; work; religious, educational, or recreational life; each individual gains access to a range of competing discourses which offer competing views of oneself, the world, and one's relation with the world. Each time one writes, even and especially when one is attempting to use one of these discourses, one experiences the need to respond to the dissonance among the various discourses of one's daily life. Because different discourses do not enjoy equal political power in current-day America, decisions on how to respond to such dissonance are never politically innocent.

From the perspective of such a view of language, Shaughnessy's stated goal for her basic writers—the mastery of written English and the “ultimate freedom of deciding how and when and where” to use which language (11)—should involve at least three challenges for student writers. First, the students need to become familiar with the conventions or “the stock of words, routines, and rituals that make up” academic discourse (198). Second, they need to gain confidence as learners and writers. Third, they need to decide how to respond to the potential dissonance between academic discourse and their home discourses. These decisions involve changes in how they think and how they use language. Yet, most pedagogies informed by the kind of essentialist assumption I defined earlier, including the one Shaughnessy presents in *Errors and Expectations*, tend to focus attention on only the first two of these challenges.

I choose *Errors and Expectations* as an example of such pedagogies because, following Robert Lyons, I interpret the operative word in that book to be “tasks” rather than “achievements.” As Lyons cogently points out, Shaughnessy's work “resists closure; instead, it looks to the future, emphasizing what needs to be learned and done” (186). The legacy of Shaughnessy, I believe, is the set of tasks she maps out for composition teachers. To honor this legacy, we need to examine the pedagogical advice she gives in *Errors and Expectations* as tasks which point to the future—to what needs to be learned and done—rather than as providing closure to

our pedagogical inquiry. One of the first tasks Shaughnessy establishes for composition teachers is that of “remediating” ourselves (“Diving In” 238). She urges us to become “students” of our students and of new disciplines. Reading *Errors and Expectations* in light of current theories of language is one way of continuing that “remediation.” Shaughnessy also argues that a good composition teacher should inculcate interest in and respect for linguistic variety and help students attain discursive option, freedom, and choice. She thus maps out one more task for us: to carry out some democratic aspirations in the teaching of basic writing.<sup>2</sup> Another task she maps out for composition teachers is the need to “sound the depths” of the students’ difficulties as well as their intelligence (“Diving In” 236). If, as I will argue, some of her own pedagogical advice indicates that an essentialist view of language could impede rather than enhance one’s effort to fulfill these tasks, then the only way we can fully benefit from the legacy of Shaughnessy is to take the essentialist view of language itself to task.

In *Errors and Expectations*, Shaughnessy argues that language “is variously shaped by situations and bound by conventions, none of which is inferior to the others but none of which, also, can substitute for the others” (121). Using such a view of language, she makes several arguments key to her pedagogy. For example, she uses such a view to argue for the “systematic nature” of her students’ home discourses, the students’ “quasi-foreign relationship” with academic discourse and, thus, the logic of some of their errors. She also uses this view of language to call attention to basic writers’ existing mastery of at least one variety of English and thus, their “intelligence and linguistic aptitudes” (292). She is then able to increase the confidence of both teachers and students in the students’ ability to master a new variety of English—academic English.

Shaughnessy’s view of language indicates her willingness to “remediate” herself by studying and exploring the implications which contemporary linguistic theories have for the teaching of basic writing.<sup>3</sup> However, in looking to these fields for “fresh insights and new data,” Shaughnessy seems to have also adopted an essentialist assumption which dominates these theories of language: that linguistic codes can be taught in isolation from the production of meaning and from the dynamic power struggle within and among diverse discourses.<sup>4</sup>

We see this assumption operating in Shaughnessy’s description of a writer’s “consciousness (or conviction) of what [he] means”:

It seems to exist at some subterranean level of language—but yet to need words to coax it to the surface, where it is communicable, not only to others but, in a different sense, to the writer himself. (80)

The image of someone using words to coax meaning “to the surface” suggests that meaning exists separately from and “at some subterranean level of language.” Meaning is thus seen as a kind of essence which the writer carries *in* his or her mind prior to writing, although the writer might not always be fully conscious of it. Writing merely serves to make this essence communicable to oneself and others. As David Bartholomae puts it, Shaughnessy implies that “writing is in service of ‘personal thoughts and styles’” (83). Shaughnessy does recognize that writing is “a deliberate process whereby meaning is crafted, stage by stage” (81), even that “the act of articulation refines and changes [thought]” (82). But the pedagogy she advocates seldom attends to the changes which occur in that act. Instead, it presents writing primarily as getting “as close a fit as possible between what [the writer] means and what he says on paper,” or as “testing the words that come to mind against the thought one has in mind” (79, 204). That is, “meaning is crafted” only to match what is already in the writer’s mind (81–82).

Such a view of the relationship between words and meaning overlooks the possibility that different ways of using words—different discourses—might exercise different constraints on how one “crafts” the meaning “one has in mind.” This is probably why the pedagogical advice Shaughnessy offers in *Errors and Expectations* seldom considers the possibility that the meaning one “has in mind” might undergo substantial change as one tries to “coax” it and “communicate” it in different discourses. In the following section, I use Shaughnessy’s responses to three student writings to examine this tendency in her pedagogy. I argue that such a tendency might keep her pedagogy from achieving all the goals it envisions. That is, it might teach students to “write something in formal English” and “have something to say” but can help students obtain only a very limited “freedom of deciding *how* and when and where” to “use which language” (11, emphasis mine).

The following is a sentence written by one of Shaughnessy’s students:

In my opinion I believe that you there is no field that cannot be effected some sort of advancement that one maybe need a college degree to make it. (62)

Shaughnessy approaches the sentence “grammatically,” as an



example of her students' tendency to use "fillers" such as "I think that . . ." and "It is my opinion that. . ." (62). She argues that these "fillers" keep the writers from "making a strong start with a *real subject*" and make them lose their "*bearings*" (62, my emphasis). The distinction between a "real subject" and "fillers" suggests that in getting rid of the "fillers," the teacher is merely helping the writer to retrieve the real subject or bearings he has in mind. I believe Shaughnessy assumes this to be the case because she sees meaning as existing "at some subterranean level of language." Yet, in assuming that, her attention seems to have been occluded from the possibility that as the writer gets rid of the "fillers," he might also be qualifying the subject or bearing he originally has in mind.

For instance, Shaughnessy follows the student's original sentence with a consolidated sentence: "A person with a college degree has a better chance for advancement in any field" (63). Shaughnessy does not indicate whether this is the student's revised sentence or the model the teacher might pose for the student. In either case, the revised sentence articulates a much stronger confidence than the original in the belief that education entails advancement. For we might read some of the phrases in the original sentence, such as "in my opinion," "I believe that you," "some sort of," and "one maybe need," as indications not only of the writer's inability to produce a grammatically correct sentence but also of the writer's attempt to articulate his uncertainty or skepticism towards the belief that education entails advancement. In learning "consolidation," this student is also consolidating his attitude towards that belief. Furthermore, this consolidation could involve important changes in the writer's political alignment. For one can well imagine that people of different economic, racial, ethnic, or gender groups would have different feelings about the degree to which education entails one's advancement.

In a footnote to this passage, Shaughnessy acknowledges that "some would argue" that what she calls "fillers" are "indices of involvement" which convey a stance or point of view (62 n. 4). But her analysis in the main text suggests that the sentence is to be tackled "grammatically," without consideration to stance or point of view. I think the teacher should do both. The teacher should deliberately call the student's attention to the relationship between "grammar" and "stance" when teaching "consolidation." For example, the teacher might ask the student to consider if a change in meaning has occurred between the original sentence and the grammatically correct one. The advantage of such an approach is that the student would realize that decisions on what are "fillers" and what is one's "real subject" are not merely "grammatical" but

also political: they could involve a change in one's social alignment. The writer would also perceive deliberation over one's stance or point of view as a normal aspect of learning to master grammatical conventions. Moreover, the writer would be given the opportunity to reach a self-conscious decision. Without practice in this type of decision making, the kind of discursive options, freedom, or choice the student could obtain through education is likely to be very limited.

Attention to this type of deliberation seems just as necessary if the teacher is to help the student who wrote the following paper achieve the style of "weav[ing] personal experience into analytical discourse" which Shaughnessy admires in "mature and gifted writers" (198):

It can be said that my parents have led useful live but that usefulness seems to deteriorate when they fond themselves constantly being manipulated for the benefit of one and not for the benefit of the community. If they were able to realize that were being manipulate successful advancements could of been gained but being that they had no strong political awareness their energies were consumed by the politicians who saw personal advancements at the expenses of dedicated community workers. And now that my parents have taken a leave of absence from community involvement, comes my term to participate on worthwhile community activities which well bring about positive results and to maintain a level of consciousness in the community so that they will know what policies affect them, and if they don't quite like the results of the policies I'll make sure, if its possible, to abolish the ones which hinder progress to ones which well present the correct shift in establishing correct legislation or enactments. In order to establish myself and my life to revolve around the community I must maintain a level of awareness to make sure that I can bring about positive actions and to keep an open mind to the problems of the community and to the possible manipulation machinery which is always on the watch when progressive leaders or members of the community try to build effective activities for the people to participate. (197)

Shaughnessy suggests that the reason this writer has not yet "mastered the style" is because he has just "begun to advance into the complexity of the new language" and "is almost certain to sound and feel alien with the stock of words, routines, and rituals that make up that language" (198). The "delicate task" of the teacher

in such a situation, Shaughnessy points out, is to “encourag[e] the enterprise and confidence of the student” while “improving his judgment about both the forms and meanings of the words he chooses” (198).

I believe that there is another dimension to the teacher’s task. As Shaughnessy points out, this writer might be “struggling to develop a language that will enable him to talk analytically, with strangers, about the oppression of his parents and his own resolve to work against that oppression” (197). If what Shaughnessy says of most of her basic writers is true of this writer—that he too has “grown up in one of New York’s ethnic or racial enclaves” (3)—then the “strangers” for whom he writes and whose analytical discourse he is struggling to use are “strangers” both in the political and linguistic sense. To this writer, these “strangers” are people who already belong to what Shaughnessy calls the world of “public transactions—educational, civic, and professional” (125), a world which has traditionally excluded people like the writer and his parents. These “strangers” enjoy power relationships with the very “politicians” and “manipulation machinery” against whom this writer is resolved to fight. In trying to “talk analytically,” this writer is also learning the “strangers’” way of perceiving people like his parents, such as viewing the oppression of his parents and his resolution to work against that oppression with the “curiosity and sentimentality of strangers” (197–98). Thus, their “style” might put different constraints than the student’s home discourse on how this writer re-views “the experiences he has in mind” (197). If all of this is so, the teacher ought to acknowledge that possibility to the students.

Let me use the writings of another of Shaughnessy’s students to illustrate why attention to a potential change in point of view might benefit students. The following are two passages written by one of Shaughnessy’s students at the beginning and the end of a semester:

*Essay written at beginning of semester*

Harlem taught me that light skin Black people was better look, the best to succeed, the best off fanicially etc this whole that I trying to say, that I was brainwashed and people aliked. I couldn’t understand why people (Black and white) couldn’t get alone. So as time went along I began learned more about myself and the establishment.

*Essay written at end of semester*

In the midst of this decay there are children between the ages of five and ten playing with plenty of vitality. As they toss the football around, their bodies full of energy, their clothes look



like rainbows. The colors mix together and one is given the impression of being in a psychedelic dream, beautiful, active, and alive with unity. They yell to each other increasing their morale. They have the sound of an organized alto section. At the sidelines are the girls who are shy, with the shyness that belongs to the very young. They are embarrassed when their dresses are raised by the wind. As their feet rise above pavement, they cheer for their boy friends. In the midst of the decay, children will continue to play. (278)

In the first passage, the writer approaches the “people” through their racial and economic differences and the subject of childhood through racial rift and contention. In the second paper, he approaches the “children” through the differences in their age, sex, and the color of their clothes. And he approaches the subject of childhood through the “unity” among children. The second passage indicates a change in how this writer makes sense of the world around him: the writer has appeased his anger and rebellion against a world which “brainwashed” children with discriminatory perceptions of Blacks and Whites. Compared to the earlier and more labored struggle to puzzle out “why people (Black and white) couldn’t get alone [sic],” the almost lyrical celebration of the children’s ability to “continue to play” “in the midst of the decay” seems a much more “literary” and evasive form of confronting the world of “decay.”

Shaughnessy characterizes this writer as a student who “discovered early in the semester that writing gave him *access* to thoughts and feelings he had not *reached* any other way” (278, my emphasis). She uses these essays to illustrate “the measure of his improvement in one semester.” By that, I take Shaughnessy to have in mind the changes in length and style. By the end of the semester, the student is clearly not only finding more to say on the subject but also demonstrating better control over the formal English taught in the classroom. This change in length and style certainly illustrates the effectiveness of the kind of pedagogical advice Shaughnessy gives.

Yet, these two passages also indicate that the change in the length and style of the student’s writing can be accompanied by a change in thinking—in the way one perceives the world around one and relates to it. This latter change is often political as well as stylistic. I think that Shaughnessy’s responses to these student writings overlook this potential change in thinking because she believes that language will only help the writers “reach” but not change how they think and feel about a certain subject or

experience. Thus, attention to a potential change in one's point of view or political stance seems superfluous.

If mastery of academic discourse is often accompanied by a change in one's point of view, as my reading of these three student writings suggests, then it ought to be the teacher's task to acknowledge to the students this aspect of their learning. However, teachers may hesitate to do so because they are worried that doing so might confirm the students' fear that education will distance them from their home discourses or communities and, as a result, slow down their learning. As Shaughnessy cogently points out, her students are already feeling overwhelmed by their sense of the competition between home and college:

Neglected by the dominant society, [basic writers] have nonetheless had their own worlds to grow up in and they arrive on our campuses as young adults, with opinions and languages and plans already in their minds. College both beckons and threatens them, offering to teach them useful ways of thinking and talking about the world, promising even to improve the quality of their lives, but threatening at the same time to take from them their distinctive ways of interpreting the world, to assimilate them into the culture of academia without acknowledging their experience as outsiders. (292)

Again and again, Shaughnessy reminds us of her students' fear that college may distance them from "their own worlds" and take away from them the point of view they have developed through "their experience as outsiders." She argues that this fear causes her students to mistrust and psychologically resist learning to write (125). Accordingly, she suggests several methods which she believes will help students assuage that fear.

For example, when discussing her students' difficulty in developing an "academic vocabulary," Shaughnessy points out that they might resist a new meaning for a familiar word because accepting it would be like consenting to a "linguistic betrayal that threatens to wipe out not just a word but the reality that the word refers to" (212). She then goes on to suggest that "if we consider the formal (rather than the contextual) ways in which words can be made to shift meaning we are closer to the kind of practical information about words BW students need" (212). This seems to be her rationale: if a "formal" approach (in this case, teaching students to pay attention to prefixes and suffixes) can help students learn that words can be made to shift meaning, then why not avoid the "contextual" approach, especially since the "contextual" approach

will only activate their sense of being pressured to “wipe out not just a word but the reality that the word refers to”?

But taking this “formal” approach only circumvents the students’ attention to the potential change in their thinking and their relationship with home and school. It delays but cannot eliminate their need to deal with that possibility. As a result, students are likely to realize the change only after it has already become a fact. At the same time, because the classroom has suggested that learning academic discourse will not affect how they think, feel, or relate to home, students are also likely to perceive their “betrayal” of home in purely personal terms, the result of purely personal choices. The sense of guilt and confusion resulting from such a perception is best illustrated in Richard Rodriguez’s narrative of his own educational experience, *Hunger for Memory*. Rodriguez’s narrative also suggests that the best way for students to cope constructively with their sense of having consented to a “betrayal” is to perceive it in relation to the politics of education and language. The long, lonely, and painful deliberation it takes for Rodriguez to contextualize that “betrayal” suggests that teachers might better help students anticipate and cope with their sense of “betrayal” if they take the “contextual” as well as the “formal” approach when teaching the conventions of academic discourse. In fact, doing both might even help students to minimize that “betrayal.” When students are encouraged to pay attention to the ways in which diverse discourses constrain one’s alignments with different points of view and social groups, they have a better chance to deliberate over how they might resist various pressures academic discourse exercises on their existing points of view. As Shaughnessy points out, “English has been robustly inventing itself for centuries—stretching and reshaping and enriching itself with every language and dialect it has encountered” (13). If the teacher acknowledges that all practitioners of academic discourse, including those who are learning to master it as well as those who have already mastered it, can participate in this process of reshaping, then students might be less passive in coping with the constraints that academic discourse puts on their alignments with their home discourses.

In preempting Shaughnessy’s attention from the political decisions involved in her students’ formal or linguistic decisions, the essentialist view of language also seems to have kept her from noticing her own privileging of academic discourse. Shaughnessy calls formal written English “the language of public transactions—educational, civic, and professional”—and the students’ home discourse the language one uses with one’s family and friends (125).

Shaughnessy insists that no variety of English can “substitute for the others” (121). She reassures her students that their home discourses cannot be substituted by academic discourse, but neither can their home discourses substitute for academic discourse. Thus, she suggests that academic discourse is a “necessary” and “advantageous” language for *all* language users because it *is* the language of public transaction (125, 293). This insistence on the nonsubstitutive nature of language implies that academic discourse has been, is, and will inevitably be the language of public transaction. And it may very well lead students to see the function of formal English as a timeless linguistic law which they must respect, adapt to, and perpetuate rather than as a specific existing circumstance resulting from the historically unequal distribution of social power, and as a condition which they must recognize but can also call into question and change.

Further, she differentiates the function of academic discourse from that of the students’ home discourses through the way she characterizes the degree to which each discourse mobilizes one’s language learning faculty. She presents the students’ efforts to seek patterns and to discriminate or apply rules “*self-sustaining activities*” (127, emphasis mine). She argues that the search for causes, like the ability to compare, is “a constant and deep *urge* among people of *all* cultures and ages” and “part of an *unfolding intellectual power* that begins with infancy and continues, at least in the lives of some, until death” (263, emphasis mine). Academic discourse and the students’ home discourses, Shaughnessy suggests, unfold their “intellectual power” differently. The home discourses of basic writers are seen as allowing such power to remain “largely intuitive,” “simplistic,” and “unreasoned” (263), while the conventions of written English are seen as demanding that such power be “more thoroughly developed,” “more consciously organized” (261). Thus, academic discourse is endowed with the power to bring the “native intelligence” or the “constant and deep urge” in *all* language learners to a higher and more self-conscious level.

This type of depiction suggests that learning academic discourse is not a violation but a cultivation of what basic writers or “people of all cultures and ages” have in and of themselves. Shaughnessy thus suggests basic writers are being asked to learn academic discourse because of its distinctive ability to utilize a “human” resource. Hence, her pedagogy provides the need to learn academic discourse with a “human,” and hence with yet another seemingly politically innocent, justification. It teaches students to see discursive decisions made from the point of view of academic culture as “human” and therefore “innocent” decisions made



absolutely free from the pressures of specific social and historical circumstances. If it is the student's concern to align himself or herself with minority economic and ethnic groups in the very act of learning academic discourse, the politics of "linguistic" innocence can only pacify rather than activate such a concern.

Shaughnessy's desire to propose a pedagogy which inculcates respect for discursive diversity and freedom of discursive choice articulates her dissatisfaction with and reaction to the unequal social power and prestige of diverse discourses in current day America. It also demonstrates her belief that education can and should attempt to change these prevailing unequal conditions. However, the essentialist view of language which underlies her pedagogy seems also to have led her to believe that a vision of language which insists on the equality and nonsubstitutive nature of linguistic variety, and an ideal writing classroom which promotes such a view, can stand in pure opposition to society, adjusting existing social inequality and the human costs of such inequality from somewhere "outside" the socio-historical space which it is trying to transform. As a result, her pedagogy enacts a systematic denial of the political context of students' linguistic decisions.

The need to critique the essentialist view of language and the politics of linguistic innocence is urgent when viewed in the context of the popular success of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s proposals for educational "reforms." Hirsch argues for the "validity" of his "vocabulary" by claiming its political neutrality. Hirsch argues that "it is used to support *all* conflicting values that arise in public discourse" and "to communicate *any* point of view effectively" or "in *whatever* direction one wishes to be effective" (*Cultural Literacy* 23, 102, 103; my emphasis). Hirsch thus implies that the "vocabulary" one uses is separate from one's "values," "point of view," or "direction." Like Shaughnessy, he assumes an essence in the individual—a body of values, points of view, a sense of direction—which exists prior to the act of "communication" and outside of the "means of communication" (*Cultural Literacy* 23).

Like Shaughnessy, Hirsch also argues for the need for *everyone* to learn the "literate" language by presenting it as existing "beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region" (*Cultural Literacy* 21). Furthermore, he assumes that there can be only one cause of one's failure to gain "literacy": one's unfamiliarity with "the background information and the linguistic conventions that are needed to read, write, speak effectively" in America (*Cultural Literacy* 22, "Primal Scene" 31). Thus, Hirsch also denies the students' need to deal with cultural differences and to negotiate the competing claims of multiple ways of using language when writing.



He thereby both simplifies and depoliticizes the challenges facing the student writer.

Hirsch self-consciously invokes a continuity between Shaughnessy's pedagogy and his "educational reforms" ("Culture and Literacy" 27; *Cultural Literacy* 10). He legitimizes his New Right rhetoric by reminding us that Shaughnessy had approved of his work. For those of us concerned with examining writing in relation to the politics of gender, race, nationality, and class, the best way to forestall Hirsch's use of Shaughnessy is to point out that the continuity resides only in the essentialist view of language underlying both pedagogies and the politics of linguistic innocence it promotes. Critiquing the essentialist view of language and the politics of linguistic innocence in Shaughnessy's work contributes to existing criticism of Hirsch's New Right rhetoric (see Armstrong, Bizzell, Moglen, Scholes, and Sledd). It makes clear that if, as Hirsch self-consciously maintains, there is a continuity between Shaughnessy's work and Hirsch's ("Culture and Literacy" 27; *Cultural Literacy* 10); the continuity resides only in the most limiting aspect of Shaughnessy's pedagogy. Recognition of some of the limitations of Shaughnessy's pedagogy can also be politically constructive for the field of composition by helping us appreciate Shaughnessy's legacy. Most of the lessons she taught us in *Errors and Expectations*, such as students' "quasi-foreign relationship" with academic discourse, their lack of confidence as learners and writers, their desire to participate in academic work, and their intelligence and language-learning aptitudes, continue to be central to the teaching of basic writing. The tasks she delineates for us remain urgent for those of us concerned with the politics of the teaching of writing. Recognizing the negative effects that an essentialist view of language have on Shaughnessy's own efforts to execute these tasks can only help us identify issues that need to be addressed if we are to carry on her legacy: a fuller recognition of the social dimensions of students' linguistic decisions.<sup>5</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> My view of language has been informed by Louis Althusser's notion of ideology, Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony, Jacques Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power, and the distinction Raymond Williams makes between practical and official consciousness.

<sup>2</sup> For discussion of Shaughnessy's pedagogy in relation to her democratic

aspirations, see Robert Lyons and rebuttals to Rouse's "The Politics of Shaughnessy" by Michael Allen, Gerald Graff, and William Lawlor.

<sup>3</sup> In arguing for the need to show "interest in and respect for language variety," Shaughnessy cites William Labov's analysis of the inner logic, grammar, and ritual forms in *Black English Vernacular* (17, 237, 304). Shaughnessy also cites theories in contrastive analysis (156), first-language interference (93), and transformational grammar (77-78) to support her speculations on the logic of basic writers' error.

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of the way modern linguistics of language, code, and competence (such as Labov's study of *Black English Vernacular*) tend to treat discourses as discrete and autonomous entities, see Mary Louise Pratt's "Linguistic Utopias."

<sup>5</sup> Material from this essay is drawn from my dissertation, directed by David Bartholomae at the University of Pittsburgh. I would like to thank my teachers and colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh and Drake University, especially David Bartholomae and Joseph Harris, for their criticism and support. I want to acknowledge particularly Bruce Horner's contributions to the conception and revisions of this essay.

### Works Cited

- Allen, Michael. "Writing Away from Fear: Mina Shaughnessy and the Uses of Authority." *College English* 41 (1980): 857-67.
- Armstrong, Paul B. "Pluralistic Literacy." *Profession* 88: 29-32.
- Bartholomae, David. "Released into Language: Errors, Expectations, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." *The Territory of Language: Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition*. Ed. Donald A. McQuade. Carbondale, IL: U of Southern Illinois P, 1986. 65-88.
- Bizzell, Patricia. "Arguing about Literacy." *College English* 50 (1988): 141-53.
- Graff, Gerald. "The Politics of Composition: A Reply to John Rouse." *College English* 41 (1980): 851-56.
- Hirsch, E. D., Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Boston: Houghton, 1987.
- . "Culture and Literacy." *Journal of Basic Writing* 3.1 (Fall/Winter 1980): 27-35.
- . "The Primal Scene of Education." *New York Review of Books* 2 Mar. 1989: 29-35.
- Lawlor, William. "The Politics of Rouse." *College English* 42 (1980): 195-99.
- Lyons, Robert. "Mina Shaughnessy." *Traditions of Inquiry*. Ed. John Brereton. New York: Oxford UP, 1985. 171-89.
- Moglen, Helene. "Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch: Educational Reform as Tragedy and Farce." *Profession* 88: 59-64.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Linguistic Utopias." *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature*. Ed. Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant, and Colin MacCabe. New York: Methuen, 1987. 48-66.

- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger of Memory*. New York: Bantam, 1982.
- Rouse, John. "The Politics of Composition." *College English* 41 (1979): 1–12.
- Scholes, Robert. "Three Views of Education: Nostalgia, History, and Voodoo." *College English* 50 (1988): 323–32.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- — —. "Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 27 (1976): 234–39.
- Sledd, Andrew, and James Sledd. "Hirsch's Use of His Sources in Cultural Literacy: A Critique." *Profession* 88: 33–39.