

## Is Discussion an Exchange of Ideas? On Education, Money, and Speech

David I. Backer

Volume 24, Number 4, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070688ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070688ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Backer, D. (2017). Is Discussion an Exchange of Ideas? On Education, Money, and Speech. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 24(4), 295–309.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1070688ar>

Article abstract

How do we learn the link between speech and money? What is the process of formation that legitimates the logic whereby speech is equivalent to money? What are the experiences, events, and subjectivities that render the connection between currency and speaking/listening intuitive? As educators and researchers, what do we do and say to shore up this connection, and—as we may be inclined—are there things we can do or say to loosen it? Educational discourse theory, specifically examining classroom discussion, is one of the most prominent arenas of educational research where the equivalence between money and speech is active. While it may seem tautological to say that “discussion is an exchange of ideas,” it is not trivial to do so. Definitions of discussion in both reference and academic texts use the word “exchange” for discussion like Kant would use the word “unmarried” to define a bachelor. Yet the exchange case carries connotations and denotations that the bachelor case does not. There is more to say about it. Take this one small case—whether discussion is an exchange of ideas—as a part of the more general inquiry about education and money/speech. Discussions happen throughout classrooms and other educational contexts in society, and the phrase most likely passes person-to-person in such a way as to make it obvious that what is happening in the discussion is an exchange, perhaps making it equally obvious that money and speech are equivalent. In other words, the claim in this article is that continually referring to discussion as an exchange of ideas teaches that speech and money are equivalent, a proposition that has serious political consequences. It is not obviously the case that discussion is an exchange of ideas, as I will show, and demonstrating this with a careful philosophical comb can go some distance towards showing (and therefore teaching) that money is not equivalent to speech.

# *Is Discussion an Exchange of Ideas? On Education, Money, and Speech*

---

DAVID I. BACKER

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

*Abstract: How do we learn the link between speech and money? What is the process of formation that legitimates the logic whereby speech is equivalent to money? What are the experiences, events, and subjectivities that render the connection between currency and speaking/listening intuitive? As educators and researchers, what do we do and say to shore up this connection, and—as we may be inclined—are there things we can do or say to loosen it? Educational discourse theory, specifically examining classroom discussion, is one of the most prominent arenas of educational research where the equivalence between money and speech is active. While it may seem tautological to say that “discussion is an exchange of ideas,” it is not trivial to do so. Definitions of discussion in both reference and academic texts use the word “exchange” for discussion like Kant would use the word “unmarried” to define a bachelor. Yet the exchange case carries connotations and denotations that the bachelor case does not. There is more to say about it. Take this one small case—whether discussion is an exchange of ideas—as a part of the more general inquiry about education and money/speech. Discussions happen throughout classrooms and other educational contexts in society, and the phrase most likely passes person-to-person in such a way as to make it obvious that what is happening in the discussion is an exchange, perhaps making it equally obvious that money and speech are equivalent. In other words, the claim in this article is that continually referring to discussion as an exchange of ideas teaches that speech and money are equivalent, a proposition that has serious political consequences. It is not obviously the case that discussion is an exchange of ideas, as I will show, and demonstrating this with a careful philosophical comb can go some distance towards showing (and therefore teaching) that money is not equivalent to speech.*

Money talks, talk is cheap, and ideas are exchanged in marketplaces as part of the knowledge economy. While these are small turns of phrase, the idea behind them—that money is speech<sup>1</sup>—can be highly prized. The United States Supreme Court made the following decision in *Buckley v. Valeo* in 1976:

A restriction on the amount of money a person or group can spend on political communication during a campaign necessarily reduces the quantity of expression by restricting the number of issues discussed, the depth of their exploration, and the size of the audience reached.

---

<sup>1</sup> I write “speech” rather than “discourse” to signal an interest in talking, listening, and communicating rather than the wider arena of meanings, epistemologies, and symbols (a subset of discourse). For a good look at money and discourse, particularly in the poststructuralist tradition, see Suzuki (2001). On the wider arena of critical discourse analysis see Fairclough (2004).

In this case, while money is not identified with the act of exchange, currency is “necessarily” related to the “quantity of expression.” A quantity of money is a quantity of speech such that limiting the former is equivalent to limiting the latter. This 1976 decision was the main precedent for the recent 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which, under the aegis of free speech, permits institutions such as corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money in political campaigns in the USA. A more recent case threatened to change the landscape of workers’ rights even further, coming from the world of schooling: *Friedrichs vs. California Teachers Association* boiled down to a question of whether money is speech. In this case, the specific issue was whether being charged agency fees violates free speech if the payer does not agree with a union’s policies or negotiations; in other words, whether being compelled to pay money to an organization which does not represent one’s values is a violation of free speech. A split court prevented a decision one way or the other on this issue, permitting public sector unions access to crucial funding for their operations. But in a future court this access could very well be limited, all because—in some way—payment is speech.

There are important educational questions to ask about this link between speech and money. How do we learn the link between speech and money? What is the process of formation which legitimates the logic whereby speech is equivalent to money? What are the experiences, events, and subjectivities which render the connection between currency and speaking/listening intuitive? As educators and researchers, what do we do and say to shore up this connection, and—as we may be inclined—are there things we can do or say to loosen it?

Certainly, the court decisions above rely on a “fusion of money and speech,” or what the cultural theorist R. W. Greene (2007) calls “money/speech.” While a helpful term, money/speech hides some subtleties in the proposition that money is speech. There are at least two distinct ways to understand this proposition. First, one can say that money is identical to speech, which would mean that any given case of money is a case of speech and any given case of speech is money. If it is money, then it is speech and vice versa. This identity between money and speech is quite strong. Second, one can say that money is equivalent to speech, which is more flexible. Drawing an equivalency between money and speech means claiming that either money is speech or speech is money, but not both. In some cases, speech is money and in some cases money is speech, but not in all cases for either; or speech and money can have closely related meanings and usages in utterance, though they are not identical. I will proceed in the following article to critique the educational implications of the weaker, more flexible notion that money is equivalent to speech.

Educational discourse theory, specifically examining classroom discussion, is one of the most prominent arenas of educational research where the equivalence between money and speech is active. While it may seem tautological to say that “discussion is an exchange of ideas” it is not trivial to do so.<sup>2</sup> Definitions of discussion in both reference and academic texts use the word exchange for discussion like Kant would use the word unmarried to define a bachelor.<sup>3</sup> Yet the exchange case carries connotations and denotations that the bachelor case does not. There is more to say about it. Take this one small case—whether discussion is an exchange of ideas—as a part of the more general inquiry about education and money/speech. Discussions happen throughout classrooms and other educational

<sup>2</sup> Greene (2007) gives the name “Money/Speech” to the *political* “fusion of money and speech.” We will examine the political connotations in what follows.

<sup>3</sup> See Quine (1951). Given the scope of this essay, I should point out that “using” a word is another interesting case warranting ideologemic analysis.

contexts in society, and the phrase most likely passes person-to-person in such a way as to make it obvious that what is happening at the discussion is an exchange, perhaps making it equally obvious that money and speech are equivalent. In other words, the claim in this article is that continually referring to discussion as an exchange of ideas teaches that speech and money are equivalent, a proposition that has serious political consequences. It is not obviously the case that discussion is an exchange of ideas, as I will show, and demonstrating this with a careful philosophical comb can go some distance towards showing (and therefore teaching) that money is not equivalent to speech.

### The Absurdity of Discussion as Exchange

Consider Georg Simmel's (2004) argument in *The Philosophy of Money* that exchange requires sacrifice. Let us say Bob exchanges something with Pam. Both must yield something and gain something else if they are in an exchange. Bob and Pam sacrifice something to get whatever it is they get from one another. For Simmel, exchange requires such loss, subtraction, or depletion (in both private and public goods).<sup>4</sup> But in a discussion this is clearly not the case, at least with respect to the things one is meant to exchange during the alleged exchange of ideas. If Bob and Pam have a discussion, they speak and listen to one another in turns. They each make noises while the other listens. They think. They learn or come to a certain decision, or quarrel. But neither of them, in the discussion *qua* speaking and listening, has sacrificed anything. Certainly *qua* time, attention, leverage, and taking the floor they have made sacrifices: Bob and Pam "spent" an hour talking and listening, and (if traditional gender roles are active in the hypothetical) Pam spent more time listening to Bob, who "took" more turns. They sacrifice time, energy, and attention during the discussion, no doubt. Perhaps they even sacrifice leverage or access to information as they speak by omitting certain "pieces of information."<sup>5</sup> But the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas does not say discussion is an exchange of time, energy, leverage, and attention. It says that the discussion itself is an exchange of ideas.

In legal terms, discussion is considered pure speech, whereas these other things—time, energy, *etcetera*—are speech-related conducts and behaviors. Money/speech equivalency, and the particular phrase under consideration about discussion, compels us to say that Bob and Pam exchange the very stuff of speaking and listening in their pure speech: what is said and understood. This is clearly not true. In terms of speaking, listening, and understanding (if we admit that speaking, listening, and understanding are the kind of things that can be "had," which is also tautological but not trivial), Bob and Pam each come away with both what they had and what they may have "gained" from the discussion (insofar as one "gains" from speaking and listening). In terms of speaking, listening, and understanding, they have not sacrificed anything. Rather they have "given" each other "something" and "retained" it at the same time, increasing their holdings while depleting them in a way that renders the economic analogy nonsensical. The same holds for any "loss" of held beliefs. If one changes one's mind during discussion, has a transformative epiphany, we might express this experience as a loss—but

---

<sup>4</sup> There are notions of exchange which do not necessitate subtraction. These are "non-economic" notions which I deal with later.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank a reviewer for this point about leverage.

one has not lost anything. One still understands the old belief, but no longer endorses it. A feeling of loss during education, such as melancholia, is a different phenomenon altogether.<sup>6</sup>

In any case, the economic analogy to discussion is clearly absurd. It is impossible to exchange ideas during discussion. If it were possible, the following would also be possible: Bob buys a sandwich from Pam, but Bob gets to keep his money and the sandwich while Pam is fully compensated for the sandwich and gets to keep the bread, meat, and toppings and other sandwich resources, as well as the labor time it took her to make the sandwich. It does not make sense. Wright would call the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas a “blunderbuss formula”: nonsensical and lacking in basic subtlety (Wright, 1976, p. 1010).

## Discussion as Exchange in Educational Literatures

Yet the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas remains entirely sensible, particularly in the tradition of theoretical and analytic writing about educational discussion. Consider the following passages. The list is a cross-section taken from texts about educational discussion. They were selected from among books and articles widely cited in the literature on educational theory, discussion, and dialogue. I do not mean to say (yet) that the word “exchange” in each of the following has a particular meaning, only to note that the word is present and to provide a launchpad for analysis.

[D]ialogue is an “exchange of speech acts between two partners in a turn-taking sequence aimed at a collective goal. (Walton, 1992, p. 25)

[D]iscussion is scarcely a narrow term. It is confusingly used to denote any number and variety of exchanges. (Dillon, 1994, p. 6)

In addition, if students feel that their opinions or answers are being judged by a teacher, they can quickly become disengaged in a discussion. To prevent this, teachers must encourage a free exchange of ideas. (Hulan, 2010, p. 2010).

As one speaks with others in the community, one discovers the community’s patterns of response to what one says. ... Through these exchanges, conclusions are drawn and actions are determined. (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1998, p. 14)

A conversation is an exchange: of feelings, of thoughts, of information, of understandings. (Lipman, 2003, p. 87)

[D]ialogue can work as a written as well as spoken exchange. (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012, p. 14)

[B]etween two friends [talking] about their relations with their respective families ... I label this kind of exchange a conversation. (Burbules, 1993, p. 112)

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice, 1975/2000, p. 52)

---

<sup>6</sup> Again, I thank my reviewer for this example of the lost belief. For more on melancholia during discussion see Backer (2017).

Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks say, which the partners in dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 386)

Do these passages teach that money is equivalent to speech? Let us begin to consider what that would mean.

## Money and Speech

In “Money: A Speech Act Analysis,” philosopher Peter Hadreas argues that “monetary practices may be instructively conceived as cases of linguistic commitments” since they are “a subclass of acts of acquisition” that are “necessarily linguistic,” and “failing to consider money within the conversational context in which it occurs results in ontological and conceptual errors” (1989, p. 115). He goes on to argue that “monetary transactions are linguistic” (p. 117) in the following way. He points out a category mistake that treats money and speech as different from one another. The “Quantity Theory of Money” casts currency as a substance which occurs in certain sums. However, any occasion of exchange requires a set of relations between humans (Hadreas calls them “promissory”) such that the quantity theory of money is an abstraction that shifts attention “from the ontology of relations to the ontology of substance.” In other words, trying to clearly parse money from speech is problematic because relations and substance occur with a simultaneity in this case that might converge on there being a distinction without a difference. Money *is* relations just as much as it *is* substance.

It is altogether easy to forget that money as amounts of dollars, marks, or yen is nothing unless it allows for the requests and promises that these types of currency permit. The fortunes of Getty or the Hunt family are nothing unless they allow for the option to enter into a vast scope of promissory relations. Indeed, one goal of presenting money within a conversational context has been to indicate how money marks promissory relations and how when one loses sight of this context, one typically conceives of money as a substance. (p.122)

Money here is “nothing unless it allows for requests and promises” which the currency requires, and is “nothing unless” it allows “for the option to enter into a vast scope of promissory relations.” In a fascinating turn of phrase, Hadreas claims that “money marks” relations. Every occasion of exchange is also an occasion of promissory relations. Money is equivalent to speech in this case because if there is money, then there is speech too. If Hadreas is right, then it would appear that limiting any exchange of money amounts to limiting an exchange of promises—which would be a violation of free speech.<sup>7</sup>

One might then say that discussion is an exchange of ideas because any exchange of currency is an exchange of ideas. But here we have to refine the question under consideration: To say that discussion is an exchange of ideas is not to say that speech is equivalent to money such that any exchange of money is an exchange of speech, but rather that speech is equivalent to money such that speaking and listening is an exchange of ideas like the exchange of objects or currency. It is one thing to say that when one speaks, one exchanges; it is another to say that when one exchanges, one speaks. Hadreas’s argument is that money is speech because every money transaction requires, marks, and occasions

---

<sup>7</sup> A response to Hadreas, emerging from a claim by Adam Smith, is made at the end of the paper.

promises. Yet this differs from the claim that every speech action requires, marks, and occasions something like a money transaction. Saying that discussion is an exchange of ideas is not saying that an exchange of currency for goods and services always marks a discussion that must occur for the exchange to go forward. With Hadreas's argument, we cannot conclude that discussion is an exchange of ideas. Certainly it is instructive to think about the ways in which money is linguistic, but money being linguistic is different than language being economic. Propositions that teach that money is equivalent to speech (like saying or writing that discussion is an exchange of ideas) are instructive in a different way: they teach that speaking and listening have economic significance, specifically of currency.

There are yet more layers to peel away here. It is problematic to say that all exchanges are exchanges of money, or even economic. Claiming that learning and teaching through discussion is an exchange of ideas shores up the link between speech and money presumes that exchange is an economic activity limited to the circulation of currency. There are the other possible ways to understand exchange in this proposition. Given these other perspectives, does the proposition take on a different significance than the money-meaning already attributed to it? Do these other perspectives make it more sensical? Further, are these perspectives convincing enough to prohibit the attribution of money-meaning to the proposition? What are the different ways exchange can be understood in the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas? Perhaps we are not teaching and learning the connection between speech and money by uttering that proposition, but rather the connection between speech and sharing, reciprocity, or participation.

There may still be more reasons not to even ask the question: the political potency of an idiomatic phrase may itself be vacuous. Is a turn of phrase like "discussion is an exchange of ideas" political at all? For sake of argument let us assume there is some political unconscious to this proposition, using Frederic Jameson's (1981) term. Jameson's notion requires that the political unconscious of a text indicate a capitalist "proto-narrative," a fragment of capitalist ideology emerging from the author's or speaker's situation within a contradiction of capitalism. Reading the political unconscious means finding ideologemes, discrete instances of language or discourse which betray one's immersion in a particular politics. The term "ideologeme" is a more specific way to refer to such instances. It was introduced as a neologism by Valentin Volosinov (1973) and taken up by Julia Kristeva (1986) and Pavel Medvedev (1978), and was intended in a more general way to signify how language both determines and is determined by social life. Thinking about the proposition as an ideologeme with a political unconscious begins to make sense of the view that it does have a general political importance.

Language for Volosinov reflects and refracts society, registering the material conditions of existence as well as the discursive trends surrounding the speaker. For Volosinov, our social life is awash with language. He uses water metaphors to describe this relationship. The structures of social life both shape the flow and current of language and those structures themselves are shaped by language, like land and water. The land is a surface guiding the water while the water shapes the land. Volosinov, a Russian linguist writing in the years just after the 1917 revolution and identifying as a Marxist, is interested in examining language's relationship to economics. The text from which these ideas about language emerge does not insist, like many critical-theoretical texts today might, that capitalism is always the most prominent and active agent. Rather the social life of speakers itself is the agent/entity which imbues signs with meaning, which includes the material conditions of existence in an important way, but also includes other aspects like culture or anything in what is known as the "superstructure": law, science, religion, poetry. For example, when someone says they want to "plug into" an event or group,

“network” to get ahead in their professional career, or “interface” with one another in person, their language registers the influence of computer technology on social life. When a writer says they will “deploy” a concept, “take a shot in the dark,” or “launch” a critique, the language is registering the influence of military action. Raymond Williams’s (1977, 1985) approach to the politics of language is a contemporary example of Volosinov’s theory, and the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas would most likely elicit a political-economic analysis from this tradition of authors.

But others might not accept the political unconscious of the statement, and perhaps ideologemic analysis in general. If the word exchange is part of an imaginary, as Michelle LeDeouff (2000) argues, there is no political intention in its usage. Imaginaries slip into discourse without explicit argumentation, have a powerful affective resonance, and engage in a kind of straightforward dogmatization by instituting an emblem in the discourse, yet LeDeouff claims that such imaginaries cannot have political significance because it would entail an impossible intentionality. Language is too rife with complexity for any set of interests to guide such usages. If we think of the proposition as a move in a language-game that is part of our form of life, as late Wittgensteinians would claim, we might also say there is no politics in the phrase—it is just a move in a game played by some speakers to do certain things, some of which might be political, but maybe not. There is also the possibility that the discussion-exchange proposition is a metaphor we live by, as Lakoff and Johnson observe, and that the metaphor of exchange maps roughly to the kind of reciprocal sharing/giving of time, energy, space, and attention mentioned earlier, and also to the sensation (expressed by the metaphor but lacking in any political import) of coming away from a discussion with more than one had before. If the proposition is just a metaphor we live by, then claiming it has a political unconscious would be making the issue a “bigger deal” than necessary, so to speak.

There are responses to these responses, though. To the LeDeouffians, I would argue that the utterance of “exchange” in the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas is not quite an imaginary, since it is not uttered for the purposes of philosophical argumentation. Whereas Kant uses ocean and island imaginaries in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to communicate things about the individual, for instance, the ubiquity and by-definition status of exchange with respect to discussion is a different type of phenomenon. No single person is arguing anything in particular with the utterance, yet the utterance could be a social-collective registration of successful arguments over time. Also, the political significance of a proposition need not be entirely intentional. Social structures are reproduced, at least partly, through utterances supporting the continuity of social relations in ways that no one speaker or group of speakers intend specifically, though these utterances may serve the interests of a group of speakers. Capitalists benefit when speech and money are equivalent, because such an understanding manufactures consent to an economic arrangement that privileges their interests. There may not be any one or two capitalists plotting behind a curtain to maintain this power, but the perpetuation of capitalist social relations occurs structurally through a language that registers the vindication of a capitalist agenda over time. Thinking about discussion as an exchange might be both evidence and maintenance of this vindication. The response, though worded differently, is adequate for Lakoff and Johnson’s (2008) position as well. While exchange may be a metaphor, not referring exactly to exchange but rather something like exchange, the utterance can still have a political-economic significance—particularly since we live by it.

To the Wittgensteinians, I would respond by echoing Jean-Francois Lyotard’s (1984) argument in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* that ideological interests determine the rules of language



games. Lyotard claims in that book that there is a general agonistics in language games: a struggle over what rules will be put in place; a battle between those who accept a consensus and those who do not accept, or are not initiated into, that consensus. The burden of proof in this case is on the Wittgensteinians to show that the process by which the rules of language games emerge is not political.

All of which is to say that it is reasonable to consider the discussion–exchange proposition as an ideologeme with a political unconscious in Jameson’s terms. (At this point I will write the term “discussion–exchange ideologeme” to name the thing under consideration: the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas as a particular educational case of speech-money equivalency.) What is the political unconscious of this ideologeme? It could be economic or non-economic, and if it is economic then it could be capitalist or non-capitalist.

There are utterances of exchange which are not necessarily economic. When chemists and biologists speak of carbon exchange as a transfer of substances, does the word carry an economic connotation? Carbon trading and carbon markets are explicitly economic, but in talking about the back-and-forth interchange of substances there is nothing economic present in the connotations or denotations of the statement, just a to-and-fro movement of material in space and time. Yet if the discussion–exchange ideologeme means to say that material or substances go to-and-fro in space and time, we have already seen that nothing *qua* speaking, listening, and understanding goes to-and-fro or back-and-forth during discussion. Turns, time, and attention go back and forth, but when people speak and listen they are making noises that each of them hears, reacting to them as they listen, and continue to make noises. Simmel’s principle of sacrifice is also relevant to mention again. In the carbon exchange example, there would also be some depletion in the transfer of material. In the speaking and listening case, there is neither such transfer nor depletion. When Pam says something, she makes a noise and the soundwaves go towards Bob, but there is no material depletion in her doing so. She does not have a quantity of soundwaves available to her that, when she speaks, are depleted or sacrificed. In a chemical reaction, certain substances are used up and change over time.<sup>8</sup> This is not the case with speaking and listening *qua* speaking and listening. So it could be safe to say that the exchange in the discussion–exchange proposition is not non-economic, since it does not match the chemical/biological meaning.

If we make the jump to say that the ideologeme does have an economic meaning of exchange, we can still understand what economic means in different ways, such that the discussion–exchange ideologeme is not economic in one particular sense. Lionel Robbins (1935) understands economics as a human relationship between ends and scarce means, whereas Arthur Pigou (2013) claims economics is only what can be measured by money. The former is a more open definition of the economic whereas the latter is closed. There is also a sense in which discussion as an exchange of ideas has nothing to do with money but is still economic. Gabriel Tarde (1898/1969) speculated in the late nineteenth century that the language of giving and the language of talking/listening mixed when those in inferior social positions went to visit those in superior social positions to talk business, and it was customary to bring gifts as part of the official discussion. In this sense the notion that a discussion is an exchange of ideas is a linguistic remnant of gifting exchange, which means it is still economic but has nothing to do with market activity—although what counts a gift is debatable.<sup>9</sup> This Tardian point is a pre-capitalist

---

<sup>8</sup> Exploring ideas of information and matter in the field of physics would be of particular interest here, particularly whether matter can be created or destroyed, and whether information is matter.

<sup>9</sup> See Mauss (1954) and Derrida (1992).

ideologemic analysis, in which the discussion–exchange ideologeme is economic but related to neither currency nor the economic arrangement where exchange-value is a predominant form of value.

Given that there are available arguments to the contrary, namely gifting and reciprocity, what arguments are there that the political unconscious of the discussion–exchange ideologeme has to do with money? Karl Marx’s theory of money in *Capital* states that money is just the expression or manifestation of a general equivalent which permits any kind of exchange, no matter the mode of production. In other words, there is some standard of value according to which it makes sense to exchange X for Y, or even when giving a gift, though not Derrida’s sense. Money is just the expression of this general equivalent, such that the reciprocity and sharing mentioned in the pre-capitalist arguments above still relate to currency, but in a different, more protean way. In other words, even if the discussion–exchange ideologeme operates on a pre-capitalist notion of bartering, sharing, or giving, there is still an important presence of exchange-value inherent to the notion. It marks a general equivalent according to which a certain object is assigned a quantitative value that can be swapped or bartered with other objects. Money, for Marx anyway, is just an expression of this general equivalent—which is the same thing as exchange-value. Of course, it would be a mistake to claim that gifting requires money, but it could also be a mistake to say that there is no exchange-value in a gift. This notion approaches the money-centric meaning of exchange in the discussion–exchange ideologeme.

There are certainly precedents for the money-centric meaning of the ideologeme, going back further than the relatively contemporary examples mentioned already. In the *Areopagitica*, John Milton’s tract on free speech, Milton demands that knowledge—and by extension public discussion thereof—not be thought of in economic terms.

Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized and traded in by tickets and statutes and standards. We must not think to make a staple commodity of all the knowledge in the land, to mark and license it like our broadcloth and our woolpacks. (1644/1860, p. 110)

Trying to keep the sacred life of knowledge separate from the base and usurious world of trucking and trading, Milton draws a line between speech and money that he thinks should not be crossed. Present in this claim is the idea that one *can* think about truth and understanding as a commodity like broadcloth and woolpacks—it might even be easy and appealing—but, according to Milton, it is wrong to associate the two because there is something sacred about knowledge. Milton’s argument foreshadows my own later on. Contrast it to one staked out much later by Adam Smith. In a 1763 lecture, only a few years before he published *The Wealth of Nations*, he notes that offering a shilling is “in reality” the same thing as offering an argument.

If we should enquire into the principle of human mind on which this disposition of trucking is founded, it is clearly the natural inclination every one has to persuade. The offering of a shilling, which to us appears to have so plain and simple meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so. (Smith, 1766/1982, vi.57, p. 352)

This passage is particularly striking<sup>10</sup> because Smith notes that his (in)famous anthropological assumption about humans’ natural disposition to barter, truck, and exchange is “founded” on the “natural inclination every one has to persuade.” While the general scope of Smith’s argument is more

---

<sup>10</sup> Again, another ideologeme. Why do ideas “strike” us?

about self-interest in bartering, Smith gestures towards the idea that persuasion, a form of talking, is so deeply entrenched in human nature that when we pay for something with money, this payment is “in reality offering an argument.” The act of giving or exchanging money is founded in talking, such that the reality of one is the reality of the other, which is just an older version of Hadreas’s more systematic claim in his essay about money as a speech act. In this sense every exchange of goods is an exchange of ideas also, at least insofar as it is an exchange of arguments to persuade the other person to go ahead with the exchange. Smith and Hadreas might therefore find Milton’s claim unnatural.

The naturalness of identifying speech with money, the way Smith describes it, is precisely the question on the table. If Smith is right, then the U.S. Supreme Court cases above carry water philosophically as well as legally: Not permitting someone to spend money on a political campaign is the same thing as not permitting them to offer an argument to that effect, and not permitting them to offer an argument violates free speech. Looking at this carefully in light of what has been said, though, Smith and Hadreas play on the ideologeme.

Aside from making a strange claim about human nature, Smith identifies speech and listening with offering by writing the verb “to offer” with both arguments and shillings. He presumes in his very usage that an argument is an offerable thing, just as a shilling is an offerable thing. Bracketing the claim about human nature, it is clear that the argument is entirely rhetorical. Smith merely transfers the verb “offer” so it works with both subjects: argument and shilling. It is just true, he says, appealing to human nature, that offering shillings and offering arguments are the same. One might object that this utterance is just a figure of speech, but Smith doubles down on the ontological intensity of the utterance: offering a shilling is “in reality” offering an argument. In a way, Smith relies on Hadreas’s central insight—that speech is a necessary part of money transactions—to claim that speech is equivalent to money. Yet, while money transactions do entail speech relations, speech relations do not entail money transactions. Offering an argument is not in reality the same as offering a shilling. While it may be tautological or metaphorical to say that an argument is the kind of thing one offers, and it might be in tune with one’s pro-capitalist leanings, it is certainly not trivial. If an argument were a situation of offering similar to that of offering shillings, then I would no longer have the arguments I offered once I offered them, just as I would no longer have the shillings I offered once I offered them. Whether a gifting, bartering, or reciprocal transfer of substance—under any of the meanings examined—it does not make sense to say that discussion is an exchange of ideas.

Hadreas includes an argument that could rectify Smith’s claim, however. Hadreas suggests that offering a shilling is in reality offering an argument because every exchange of currency *is also* an exchange of promises. Seeing money and speech as two different things, the former of substance and the latter of relations, is therefore to make a distinction without a difference. But the argument against Smith above can be extended to disagree with Hadreas’s account as well. Certainly speech is antecedent, simultaneous, and consequent with exchange. Promises must be in place for an exchange to take place and occur during the exchange itself. To claim that they *are* the same, the ontological claim that Hadreas and Smith make, is to claim a sameness in distinction. It is easy to say that an exchange *is also* an exchange of promises, but just because we can conjugate the verb “exchange” to refer to speech does not mean that it is sensical or good to do so. Promises may be necessary and sufficient for exchange, but it does not mean that promises *are* exchanged.<sup>11</sup> While the exchange of money requires, marks, and

---

<sup>11</sup> In terms of the U.S. Supreme Court decisions regarding speech and money, the key philosophical point here regards the First Amendment and the conditions of speech. Does the First Amendment protect the necessary and

occasions an exchange of promises, the two are not identical. It would be a violation of free speech to limit someone's ability to promise something, but this is an entirely different matter than limiting someone's ability to give money—though we can readily admit that giving money requires promises. Offering money and speaking/listening are such categorically different things that the limitations on one have nothing to do with the limitations on the other. Therefore, I disagree with Smith and Hadreas and the SCOTUS on philosophical grounds. Yet I can understand how, in a capitalist social formation, it is tempting and easy to believe Smith and Hadreas, which leads to a final point.

## Ideology

The allusive ease with which Smith (and Hadreas, to some extent) writes the verb “to offer” to talk about arguments is a clue as to why it so sensible to do so. This ease is the same with which Smith claims human beings have a natural inclination to barter, truck, and exchange. Bracketing the attribution of truth or falsity to claims about human nature again, it is a political move to make such an allusion. Smith is advancing an ideology, arguing in the very terms of his utterances for a vision of political-economic life. The tautology or nontriviality around linking speech with money through equivalency and saying that discussion is an exchange of ideas comes from the same allusive impetus. Among the other perspectives already considered, here is another—which is ultimately a socialist version of Milton's argument from sacredness: the discussion–exchange ideologeme is a result of the deep influence of money on Smith's liberal-capitalist imagined relation to real conditions of his existence, or what Louis Althusser (2014) calls ideology. Of course, if one ideologically prefers a political-economic arrangement where bartering, trucking, and exchanging are predominant then it would make sense that one would cast other activities in the same mold. Exchange becomes a *gestalt*. For example, an ideology that values technology will claim that our minds are, in reality, computers. An ideology that values war will talk about deploying arguments, humans being naturally aggressive, and talking as same thing as fighting. An ideology that values strong state power will say that humans are ruthless without government. And on and on. Smith's ideology informed how he imagined the day-to-day activities of social life, like talking and listening. He had exchange in his head. To the extent that this capitalist ideology—one that imagines all kinds of non-exchange-like behaviors as being exchange-like—is a prevalent one throughout the apparatuses and institutions geared toward reproducing our social formation, we do the same thing. Thus emerge the educational implications of the foregoing analysis.

In Marxian theory, having exchange in one's head—when money, exchange, and commodities make impacts on one's inner world—is called reification.<sup>12</sup> Assuming that exchange in the discussion–exchange ideologeme has a money-meaning, the proposition that discussion is an exchange of ideas is true, in this perspective, only to the extent that money, exchange-value, and commodities have made significant internal impacts on the consciousness of the speakers who utter it. Timothy Bewes (2002) writes that reification is thingification. Insisting that discussion is an exchange of ideas when it clearly

---

sufficient conditions for speech, or speech itself? On the one hand, speech must happen during exchange for the exchange to go through. But do limits on exchanges constitute limits on speech? Do the necessary and sufficient conditions of X fall under the range of protections for X?

<sup>12</sup> See Lukacs, 1971, p. 60.

does not make much sense to say so is evidence of thingifying speaking and listening. Georg Lukacs writes that commodities can stamp their imprints on consciousness, such that even parts of the body become “things which [one] can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world” (1971, p. 60). Talking and listening are a case in point here. Paulo Freire echoes this stamping process in his writing on the banking model of education. “[T]he person is not a conscious being (*corpo consciente*); he or she is rather the possessor of a consciousness: an empty ‘mind’ passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside” (1970/2000, p. 75).

The theory of reification explains why the discussion ideologeme is both tautological and non-trivial. On the one hand, it makes complete sense to say that discussion is an exchange of ideas. Exchange of ideas is just the definition of the word, the turn of phrase or idiom or metaphor with which we speak about discussion, or perhaps the move in the language-game of discussion. On the other hand, it is not trivial that discussion is said to be an exchange of ideas: it makes no sense to say that speaking and listening entails the sacrifice, subtraction, or trading of any resources or goods. When confronted with its non-triviality, one might think, “Well, discussion *just is* an exchange of ideas. Leave it at that.” This “just-isness” is one of the most important consequences of reification. The sociologist Martin Burris returns to Marx’s original articulation of reification, defining reification as “a form of social consciousness in which human relations come to be identified with the physical properties of things, thereby acquiring an appearance of naturalness and inevitability” (1986, p. 22). Thingification imbues things with a necessity, a false naturalness and solidity, that compels one to think that “it”—whatever it is—just is what it is. Reification closes possibility, crystallizes freedom, cuts off the inevitable contingency of things. When activists chant “Another world is possible!” they are insisting that things are not just what they are, but that they could be otherwise. They are breaking reified notions that have been stamped and imprinted into consciousness, chipping away at the manufactured consent that ruling classes in the social structure have won through the reproduction of certain ideologies. Language is part of this reproductive process. Again, while it does not take much argument to show its nonsensicalness, the discussion–exchange ideologeme makes a certain sense. The explanation on offer for this nonsensical sensibility is widespread reification, and the maintenance of consent to capitalist ideology.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the Freire passage above, the educational implications become clearer. A consummate philosopher of education, what Freire points to in this passage is that stamping and imprinting consciousness is educational work. When we think of conscious beings as having empty minds that can be filled with deposits, when we talk about heads, minds, bodies, talking in terms of deposits, we are violating the integrity of those things. The violation of their integrity harkens back to Milton’s claim that treating truth, knowledge, and discussion as exchangeable infringes on their sacredness. Freire might argue that students’ humanity is at stake, and that any reifying utterance threatens such violation and infringement. I would extend Milton’s argument politically as well, which Freire I imagine would permit. A reifying utterance which thingifies discussion promotes a social formation, capitalism, that I believe to be unjust and oppressive. Uttering propositions that imagine discussion as exchange

---

<sup>13</sup> Human capital theorists will be familiar with claims such as these, and will most likely shrug and ask, “So what?” Drawing from Theodore Schultz’s landmark speech introducing human capital theory, where Schultz considers the reasons why economists before 1964 did not consider human knowledge, skills, and behavior as “capital,” one reply is that intuitively understanding speaking and listening as an economic activity is “an insult to dignity.” The claim about teaching reification by saying discussion is an exchange of ideas is token of that type: it is an insult to dignity (Schultz, 1972).

reproduces that social formation. In a small way, it maintains and manufactures consent to a capitalist's imagined relation to real conditions.

## Conclusion

As educators, writers, researchers, intellectuals—as speakers whose words matter—we therefore have an obligation to speak responsibly. Volosinov (1973) calls for exactly this kind of responsibility in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. If words determine and are determined by the social-political conditions surrounding their utterance, if language impacts society like water impacts land, then as speakers we have an obligation to propagate the society we want. Our livelihoods are made through close attention to words. The implication is that we have a responsibility to recognize that our language is ideological and to speak in ways that promote the ideologies to which we subscribe, and, just as importantly, to not speak in ways that promote ideologies that threaten and infringe the sacredness, humanity, and integrity of our students. This obligation holds both for the sake of students' consciousness, in Freire's sense, and for the social formation that we reproduce when we speak, in Althusser's. In other words, we must recognize the ideological quality of our language and—to use a term from Althusser—that our speech interpellates our readers and students. What we teach when we say that discussion is an exchange of ideas is that things like discussion are equivalent to market transactions. We shore up the capitalist ideology; helping, in an everyday way, to manufacture consent to the ideology. Certainly there are other avenues for reification to take hold, and those avenues should be the subjects of other essays. This article has focused on one small instance—small yet powerful because it is small: saying that discussion is an exchange of ideas. While mundane and commonsensical, I believe that calling attention to such things hidden in plain sight has a significant intellectual impact: first because it is clearly within our individual purviews to speak differently, and second because analyzing such mundane utterances can lead to revelations about other ideologemes, and ultimately social formations.

As academics, we teach when we speak. In a narrow way, the educational implications of this analysis fall mainly on our shoulders as we write our articles, books, and essays and as we speak with our students. But in a broad way, the implications of this essay also fall on anyone interested in reproducing ideologies that are not exchange-based, committed to promoting imaginations of real existence that do not privilege buying and selling. Those interested in creating another social world should speak like it. Returning to the passages listed at the outset of the article, the discussion-exchange ideologeme is present in the political unconscious of each of them. Speaking responsibly requires becoming conscious of this political unconscious, asking authors to wonder whether it is right to imagine the real conditions of discussion as an exchange of ideas—whether that teaches the right lesson. Will we reify and reproduce capitalist ideology, or challenge it by rooting it out of what we can clearly control: what we say? As the legal scholar Wright (1976) wrote, one's response reveals what one is willing to teach.

## Acknowledgments

Thanks to Megan Laverty, David T. Hansen, Tyson E. Lewis, Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, and Daniel Friedrich, who saw these arguments through many iterations.

## References

- Althusser, L. (2014). *On the reproduction of capitalism: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses* (G. M. Goshgarian, Trans.). London, England: Verso.
- Althusser, L. (2016). *Reading Capital: The complete edition* (B. Brewster, Trans.). London, England: Verso.
- Backer, D. I. (2017). The mass psychology of classroom discourse. *Educational Theory*, 67(1), 67–82.
- Bewes, T. (2002). *Reification, or, the anxiety of late capitalism*. London, England: Verso.
- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2012). *Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.
- Buckley v. Valeo, 424 U.S. 1 (1976). Retrieved from <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/424/1/case.html>
- Burbules, N. (1993). *Dialogue in teaching: theory and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Burris, V. (1988). Reification: a Marxist perspective. *California Sociologist*, 10(1), 22–43.
- Derrida, J. (1992). *Given time: I. Counterfeit money* (Vol. 1). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dillon, J. T. (1994). *Using discussion in classrooms*. London, England: Open University Press.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (2000). *The pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. Berman Ramos, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum. (Original work published 1970)
- Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. New York, NY: Continuum International.
- Graeber, D. (2011). *Debt: the first 5,000 years*. New York, NY: Melville House.
- Greene, R. W. (2007). Rhetorical capital: Communicative labor, money/speech, and neo-liberal governance. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4(3), 327–331.
- Grice, H. P. (2000). Logic and conversation. In R. J. Stainton (Ed.), *Perspectives in the philosophy of language: a concise anthology* (pp. 269–289). Toronto, ON: Broadview. (Original work published 1975)
- Hadreas, P. (1989). Money: a speech act analysis. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 20(3), 115–129.
- Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (1998). A study of reflective thinking: Patterns in interpretive discussion. *Educational Theory*, 48(1), 33–58.
- Honneth, A. (2008). *Reification: a new look at an old idea*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Hulan, N. (2010). What the students will say while the teacher is away: An investigation into student-led and teacher-led discussion within guided reading groups. *Literacy Teaching & Learning: An International Journal of Early Reading & Writing*, 14(1–2), 41–64.
- Jameson, F. (1981). *The political unconscious*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986). From symbol to sign. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva reader* (pp. 63–73). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2008). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- LeDoeuff, M. (2002). *The philosophical imaginary*. New York, NY: Continuum International.
- Lipman, M. (2003). *Thinking in education*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Lukacs, G. (1971). *History and class consciousness*. London, England: The Merlin Press.
- Lytard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Mauss, M. (2000). *The gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*. New York, NY: WW Norton & Company.
- Medvedev, P. (1978). *The formal method in literary scholarship: A critical introduction to sociological poetics*. (A. Wehrle, Trans.). Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Milton, J. (1860). Areopagitica: A speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing to the Parliament of England. In R. Demaus, *The prose and prose writers of Britain, from Chaucer to Ruskin*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Adam and Charles Black. (Original work published 1644)
- Pigou, A. C. (2013). *The economics of welfare*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Quine, W. V. (1951). Main trends in recent philosophy: two dogmas of empiricism. *The Philosophical Review*, 60(1), 20–43.
- Robbins, L. (1935). *An essay on the nature and significance of economic science*. London, England: Macmillan.
- Schultz, T. W. (1972). Human capital: policy issues and research opportunities. In *Economic research: retrospect and prospect, volume 6, human resources* (pp. 1–84). Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c4126>
- Simmel, G. (2004). *The philosophy of money*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Smith, A. (1982). Lectures on jurisprudence. *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, 5, 395–554. (Original work published 1766)
- Suzuki, H. (2001). Money and discourse: from a realist perspective. Retrieved from [http://www.criticalrealism.com/archive/iacr\\_conference\\_2001/hsuzuki\\_md.pdf](http://www.criticalrealism.com/archive/iacr_conference_2001/hsuzuki_md.pdf)
- Tarde, G. (1969). Opinion and conversation. In T. Clark (Ed.), *Gabriel Tarde on communication and social influence: Selected papers*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1898)
- Vološinov, V. N. (1973). *Marxism and the philosophy of language* (I. R. Titunik & L. Matejka, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walton, D. (2010). *The place of emotion in argument*. State College, PA: Penn State Press.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R. (1986). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, J. S. (1976). Politics and the Constitution: Is money speech? *The Yale Law Journal*, 85(8), 1001–1021.

## About the Author

**David I. Backer** is Assistant Professor in the Educational Foundations and Policy Studies Department at West Chester University, Pennsylvania, United States. His work focuses on politics, economy, and education. Email: [dbacker@wcupa.edu](mailto:dbacker@wcupa.edu)