

A New World: Redefining the Legacy of Min-Zhan Lu

Brian Ray

ABSTRACT: This article discusses exchanges between a number of scholars during the 1990s centering on Min-Zhan Lu's controversial essay "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" In some ways, "Conflict and Struggle" blazed a trail for later work in "hybrid" or "mixed" forms of academic writing while at the same time igniting debate over Mina Shaughnessy's legacy. Rather than take sides, the author considers what perspectives and considerations were left out of this years-long standoff and attempts to reconcile this issue in BW theory through relevant but less talked-about work in linguistics. The concept of linguistic charity, an area of growing interest in composition studies, offers a particularly refreshing new direction for discussion regarding the ambiguous and often controversial role of Standard English in our pedagogies.

KEYWORDS: Mina Shaughnessy; Min-Zhan Lu; linguistic charity; essentialism; grammatical instruction; Standard English

After the publication of Min-Zhan Lu's 1991 *JBW* essay, "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," a ten-year debate ensued over the needs of BW students that pitted longstanding scholars against those who argued that Shaughnessy's landmark book, *Errors and Expectations*, overlooked cultural and linguistic differences in the nation's increasingly diverse classrooms. Both sides conceded little territory in the articles and commentaries appearing in *College Composition and Communication*, the *Journal of Basic Writing*, and *College English*—and the debate ended in stalemate. While these differences may no longer occupy the pages of journals, writing teachers know that they inhabit departments and thicken the air of BW classrooms. By revisiting the debate, I hope to identify common ground between the two camps. Such ground exists when viewing their differing positions through the linguistic concept of charity, which Kevin Porter outlines in his 2001 CCC article "A Pedagogy of Charity: Donald Davidson and the Student-Negotiated Composition Classroom." Language itself is a process of negotiation in which users must adjust to each other's ways of understanding and communicating. Such a view of language permeates the philosophies of Shaughnessy as well as her ostensible critics. Recognizing this relationship should highlight their

Brian Ray is currently pursuing a PhD in English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He previously taught at the University of South Carolina after completing his MFA in 2007. His first novel will be published in the summer of 2009.

© Journal of Basic Writing, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2008

shared heritage. It also shows that to advocate for greater consideration of the tensions between discourse styles, as Lu does, does not mean that she intends to chisel away at the ivory tower of academia with a hammer and sickle. Instead, her approach provides a way to enhance students' education by placing academic discourse next to home discourses and emphasizing the differences between them. By giving students more authority and responsibility to explore and reflect on how their ways of communicating and thinking change via exposure to the academy, Lu seeks to address and utilize ambivalence toward academic writing and Standard English.

A reconsideration of Lu's work also offers an alternative conception of the relationship between basic writing theory and the larger discourse of composition. In her 1998 *JBW* essay, "Iconic Discourse: The Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy," Jeanne Gunner examines the "number of intra-community ideological conflicts that have surfaced in the past decade," one of which involves exchanges between Lu and those whom Gunner identifies as more traditional BW theorists (25). She concludes that the legacy of Mina Shaughnessy is one of the "constraining discursive rules" that have contributed to the tension between those within BW and those like Lu who have been viewed as outsiders coming from the larger composition community to impose impractical or irrelevant ideas. Gunner also identifies Lu's early work as not only a source of the "first major intra-community conflict" between BW theorists and the broader composition community but also a "real threat to the authority of the icon" of Mina Shaughnessy and the teacher-hero aura surrounding open admissions at CCNY (City College of New York), where Shaughnessy worked (27). Despite how she has been read, however, Lu poses no threat to the underlying premises of such models if seen through the practice of charity. If anything, Lu expands on the project of error analysis by making a case for the students' role in that process. Ultimately, Lu also shares Shaughnessy's ultimate goal of empowering students to choose from multiple forms of discourse for any given occasion.

The First Shots

What would eventually turn into a dead heat issue began with Min-Zhan Lu's first articulation of a pedagogy focused on linguistic conflict in her 1991 *JBW* article "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." In this essay, Lu critiques the assumption that students can gain confidence and ability with academic discourse "in isolation from . . . the dynamic power struggle within and among diverse discourses" (25). She holds that a separa-

tion of language and meaning—common among linguists in the 1960s and 1970s—prevents *Errors and Expectations* from fully helping students overcome the tension between home and school discourses. If students are taught to separate their ideas from the words used to express those ideas, then they are taught to ignore the possibility that exposure to academic language will change the way they think. As Lu acknowledges, Shaughnessy's pedagogy aspired to give students the "freedom of deciding how and when and where to deploy different forms of discourse" (27). Lu argues, furthermore, that "some of [Shaughnessy's] own pedagogical advice indicates that an essentialist view of language could impede rather than enhance one's effort to fulfill these tasks" (28). The implication is that Shaughnessy herself would not disagree with this major premise of Lu's work.

As an example, Lu studies Shaughnessy's response to a claim made by a student about the relationship between advancement and college education. The sentence reads as follows:

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. (Shaughnessy qtd. in Lu 29)

Lu questions Shaughnessy's original attention to grammatical and stylistic concerns in this sentence. When Shaughnessy suggests the deletion of "fillers" such as "In my opinion," "some sort of advancement," and "maybe," in an effort to improve the sentence's clarity, Lu sees such suggestions as more than mere editing. The removal of these qualifying words not only makes the sentence sound more resolute, it removes any doubt about the claim being asserted. The student may have used these qualifiers to express his own doubts about the necessity of a college education. As Lu puts it, the alleged "fillers" might indicate "his uncertainty or skepticism towards the belief that education entails advancement," and so she concludes that, by "learning 'consolidation'" of his style, "this student is also consolidating his attitude towards that belief" (30). Rather than focus all attention on this student's possible skepticism, however, Lu offers a compromise. "I think the teacher should do both," she says, meaning that a teacher might make stylistic suggestions but also ask the student in question if the revisions hold true to his original intentions (30).

Additionally, Lu takes issue with Shaughnessy's decision to privilege a "formal" rather than "contextual" approach to other conventions of academic discourse, such as "academic vocabulary." In *Errors and Expectations*,

Shaughnessy makes the case that students may see the acquisition of new meanings of familiar words as a threat to their identities. For example, the word “ideal” often functions as an adjective meaning “perfect” in casual conversation, whereas academics sometimes use the word “ideal” to indicate an expectation at odds with reality. A “contextual” approach would highlight conflicts of meaning like this one, whereas a “formal” approach would treat the concept of shifting meanings in a kind of vacuum, focusing on “prefixes and suffixes” of words to illustrate the same basic premise. The “formal” method may minimize students’ resistance but, as Lu says, doing so “only circumvents the students’ attention to” this issue and merely “delays . . . their need to deal with [the] possibility” of acculturation through language instruction (35). As an alternative, Lu recommends using both “formal” and “contextual” methods of vocabulary building.

The foregrounding of such conflict ultimately serves, in Lu’s mind, to reaffirm students’ cultural backgrounds—which we otherwise risk devaluing. If BW teachers do not remind students that they are aware of and sensitive to the differences between their own language and that of the university, pressure to conform to the dominant culture of academia will likely lead to polar reactions: on one hand, students may be completely absorbed into the academy, cutting ties to their home language and identity, while, on the other, they may retreat from college due to the anger and frustration resulting from poor grades and low self-esteem.

Despite the first impression that Lu’s 1991 article may give, her primary motivation lies much less in a critique of *Errors and Expectations* than in a disruption of the “linguistic innocence” that Shaughnessy herself disclaimed but that nonetheless leaked into her pedagogy. Closing her article, Lu challenges the notions of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who argues in *Cultural Literacy* that “an essence in the individual . . . exists prior to the act of communication . . .” (Hirsch qtd. in Lu 37). She takes issue with Hirsch for perpetuating the idea of academic discourse as a force that can cultivate and improve on other forms of discourse by demanding a “more thoroughly developed” and “more consciously organized” version of home discourses that by his comparison seem “simplistic” and “unreasoned.” Such comparisons make academic discourse a touchstone, Lu says, a standard by which to evaluate all other forms of expression.

The only issue I question here is Lu’s ostensible conflation of language planning, which often entails conscious and direct intervention by policy-makers regarding the structure and acquisition of language, and teaching practice—given her stated desire for students to “call into question and

change” the “function of formal English as a timeless linguistic law” (36). Her goal certainly is a tall order for students who in fact possess questionable means, at this stage in their lives, to enact such change. One could disagree with Lu on grounds that such ideals should be argued for in other forums—before faculty senates and government organizations that in fact have the means to institute policies against language discrimination. Indeed, Lu is not often explicit about the specifics of building such a movement among students in the classroom, but a reasonable interpretation would suggest she only means that if teachers help students acquire academic discourse while actively helping them resist acculturation, then these students will eventually be in a better position to fulfill Shaughnessy’s hopes of language choice. This assertion becomes the closing call in many of Lu’s essays, from “Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy” to her 2004 CCC article “An Essay on the Work of Composition,” in which she says,

It is our responsibility to call attention to the potential desires, capabilities, and needs of all users of English to actively participate in the redesigning of standardized englishes [. . .]. Composition can and should take up such a responsibility. A course in composition is one of the few courses required of a majority of [. . .] future Working Persons, Tourists, Consumers, Teachers, CEOs, Portfolio Men, Consultants, Politicians, Leaders of institutions or life worlds [. . .] (44)

Such closing calls, of course, become a lightning rod for critics, who accuse Lu’s pedagogy of ignoring the real political situation of students for the sake of a misplaced ideology. Granted, such work, as Lu defines it, places a heavy load on composition, let alone basic writing, a load that would be better shouldered by the larger university. Furthermore, Lu’s ideas—as presented here—have the added effect of seeming rather insensitive to the material conditions of writing teachers. Such critics find it easy, then, to summarize Lu’s position as one that tosses fundamental principles of BW theory out the window. They tend to misread Lu as telling teachers to salute a portrait of Che Guevara before sitting down to hash out plans with their students to, in the course of a semester, eradicate academic discourse. The fear of failing to educate BW students has become an obstacle to the exploration of ways we can utilize Lu’s linguistic conflict while navigating the practical necessity of helping students to acquire Standard English. We should neither reject

the political and economic demands placed on writing theory and practice nor bow down to these demands. They exist in dialectic.

Theoretical Crossfire

While many teachers and scholars recognize the unfair power dynamics that have resulted in the devaluation of other forms of English, they hold that a basic writing classroom should not serve as a platform for instituting language change. Doing so would risk limiting the students' acquisition of formal English and, as a result, lower their chances of succeeding in college and beyond. In reality, Lu poses no such threat to students—despite the idealism with which she sometimes writes. The ultimate goal of her project is merely to help students mitigate the sense of betrayal and tension between their public, academic, and private lives—to engage that tension in positive ways rather than ignoring it. Many BW teachers and researchers agree that one of our goals as educators is to inculcate in our students, to use Lillian Bridwell-Bowles' words, "a socially and politically situated view of language and the creation of texts—one that takes into account gender, race, class, sexual preference, and a host of . . . other cultural issues" (349).

Yet Min-Zhan Lu, who in many ways inaugurated the discussion of hybrid discourse in the work of BW students, suffered much scrutiny through her own nuanced articulation of this conception of language. A number of leading composition scholars saw Lu's work as an attack on Shaughnessy, as well as a threat to the enterprise of composition itself. Following the publication of her 1992 *College English* article "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?", a number of such scholars joined to express condemnation. Their opinions comprise the "Symposium on Basic Writing, Conflict and Struggle, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy" (Laurence et al.) in a 1993 issue of *College English*.

The symposium consists of commentary by well-known voices in BW theory: Patricia Laurence, Peter Rondinone, Barbara Gleason, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul Hunter. The symposium concludes with a response by Lu. Of the five writers, everyone except Hunter (who does not discuss Lu specifically) dismisses Lu's pedagogy as divisive and dangerous to the success of BW students. Patricia Laurence, an early collaborator of Shaughnessy's and, at the time, a chair of CCNY's Writing in the Disciplines Program, opens the symposium with an echo of Fredric Jameson's advice to "Always historicize" (Jameson qtd. in Laurence 880). In her view, a critique of the "linguistic innocence" in *Errors and Expectations* was unjustified given the political

situation at CCNY, namely the outright hostility between open admissions students and the college's faculty.

Laurence also contests Lu's conflict-oriented pedagogy on the grounds that linguistic and cultural conflict is already a "subtext" at City College, which possesses a far more diverse student body than the institutions where Lu has taught (882). "To have employed a vocabulary or metaphor of 'conflict' or 'struggle' (then or now) rather than the language of understanding, caring, exchange, and reciprocity would have been counterproductive, irresponsible, and explosive" (882). Laurence revisits the tensions between those in the 1960s who wanted access to a college education and City College's elitist and resistant faculty, which resulted in riots and physical conflict in 1969, when CCNY's campus was seized by members of the local community.

Peter Rondinone, a former student at CCNY during open admissions and later a professor at LaGuardia Community College, reacts against the "alarm" Lu expresses in "Conflict and Struggle" at his "unequivocal belief" that BW students will find themselves at odds with their families and communities as they pursue higher education (883). "I have hoped to open the classroom to discussions of this possibility," he says, "because I've felt that this issue has long been a dirty little secret" (883). In this sense, he actually echoes Lu's first essay on Shaughnessy, in which she calls for teachers to devote more attention to students' possible acculturation by the academy. However, Rondinone makes a seemingly contradictory move when he interprets Lu's notion of the "mestiza consciousness" as "hovering between two worlds—the uneducated and the educated" (884). Rondinone's home culture, he says, "has little values worth clinging to," which of course may not hold true for many BW students. While the New York Italian-American community he describes had maintained an "anti-intellectual" attitude and punished those who pursued better opportunities, he seems to acknowledge in the symposium that every BW student brings a different set of experiences to the institution.

Barbara Gleason, who was at that time director of composition at City College, states that Lu's poststructuralist view of language is not suited to BW instruction. She also follows Laurence in criticizing Lu's alleged failure to consider Shaughnessy's historical context: "If Shaughnessy and her colleagues had a 'distrust of conflict and struggle,' City College in the early 1970s was not the place for them to be" (887). Their turn toward solidarity and calm reflected practical necessities rather than a decision between formalist and poststructural perspectives on language. Gleason also remarks that to "say that Shaughnessy's pedagogy and research were based on the

premise that form is separate from meaning is to say that Shaughnessy was influenced by some of the most commonly accepted premises and theories of her time" (887).

In his portion of the symposium, Thomas J. Farrell simply says that "Lu's prescriptions for Basic Writing today hardly seem worth pursuing" (891). In their place, he does not advocate any form of grammatical instruction. Instead, he only advises teachers to have students read and write about controversial public issues. His position elides the symposium's central concern about grammar, discourse, and linguistic conflict. Though he does not offer very clear support for his attitude toward Lu, Farrell has throughout his career been a staunch proponent of Standard English and an opponent of CCCC's 1972 resolution (adopted in 1974) on the "Students' Right to Their Own Language," which he says in a 1984 issue of *College English* "encourages students to assume a contumacious attitude towards those educators who would require them to learn Standard English" (Farrell and Reynoso 821). In his mind, "contumacious children may refuse to learn standard English, just as they refuse to learn other things," but "the non-learning of some children is hardly a good reason for abandoning the policy of requiring all children to learn the standard forms of English" (822). He presents a good case against those who, like Wendy Demko Reynoso, writing in the same 1984 issue, were "working to see standard English usage removed as a criterion" for college success (Farrell and Reynoso 821). Regarding Lu, however, Farrell does not distinguish her project of conflict and struggle from those of others who during the 1980s opposed Standard English.

Farrell also omits the fact that, throughout his career, he has advocated for a BW course that does not "attack the dragon error head-on," as does *Errors and Expectations*. He prefers a minimalist approach to grammar, stating for example in a reply to Patricia Laurence's comment on his 1977 *College English* article, "Literacy, the Basics, and all that Jazz," that errors in student papers diminish drastically when students are asked to write about issues they find engaging. "I suggest that concerns for error need to be set aside for a semester," he says in his response to Laurence, "and in that time the students need to write a lot, instead of doing grammar exercises" ("Slaying the Dragon Error" 233). Ultimately, Farrell's flippant dismissal of Lu implies that he sees no difference between her pedagogy and the earlier challenges to Standard English—and thus no possible connection between Lu's pedagogy and his own.

In her response, Lu also misses an opportunity to identify common ground between herself and her peers. Though she successfully defends her

position, her contribution to the symposium does not state a hidden fact: that her pedagogy is not in direct conflict with most approaches regarding the teaching of basic writing. Her response focuses primarily on the accusation that her language polarizes, pointing out that Laurence's allegation itself, rather, polarizes by placing conflict and struggle at odds with a vocabulary of "understanding, caring, exchange, and reciprocity" (Laurence et al. 895). In fact, the kind of conflict Lu desires will take the form of sympathy and understanding toward students (895). Furthermore, she says, her pedagogy is meant to "offer a way of thinking beyond the trap of polarization which seems to have dominated much of the earlier debate over 'the students' right to their own language'" (895). She also admits that "it would be 'naïve and self-serving' to assume that the 'dialogue' and 'resistance' promoted in the kind of classroom I depict can be absolutely free of social and discursive constraints" (900).

Essentially, Lu agrees here with Farrell that one cannot avoid the task of teaching Standard English. In reference to Gleason's accusation that her pedagogy lacks practical application, she says that "It is true . . . that any discussion of how to practice such a pedagogy in the form of a step-by-step teaching manual would contradict the injunction of this pedagogy to attend fully to the specific and dynamic interaction inherent in all discursive practice" (901). Lu agrees that her project requires further work in this regard. Her essays written after the *College English* forum show how teachers can actualize her pedagogy without having their courses descend into linguistic civil wars.

Ceasefire or Attrition?

A consideration of articles and responses to the 1993 symposium show how deeply this encounter resonated with BW teachers and scholars. A 1998 article by Laura Gray-Rosendale, "Inessential Writings: Shaughnessy's Legacy in a Socially Constructed Landscape," responds to Lu and others by using textual evidence from *Errors and Expectations* to dismiss accusations that Shaughnessy's pedagogy wished to simply pacify students who feared academic acculturation. Gray-Rosendale argues that Shaughnessy consistently articulated a perception of language as "dependent upon diverse rhetorical constraints and conditions, many of which rely upon external issues of context and social environment" (56). Shaughnessy's entire attitude toward "error," Gray-Rosendale notes, depends on what was then a revolutionary conception of "language use as context-dependent" (56). For further proof,

she quotes Shaughnessy's statement in *Errors and Expectations* that linguistic decisions are "variously shaped by situations and bound by conventions, none of which is inferior to others but none of which, also can substitute for others. . . . [A student's] errors reflect upon his linguistic situations, not . . . his educability" (Shaughnessy qtd. in Gray-Rosendale 57). Gray-Rosendale makes a strong case. Unfortunately, the article is predicated on the assumption that Lu has accused Shaughnessy and the entirety of *Errors and Expectations* of adhering to an accommodationist pedagogy.

Lu's perception of Shaughnessy takes on a very different tone from what Gray-Rosendale and others describe in "Life Writing as Social Acts," the review of Jane Maher's 1998 biography *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, in which Lu and co-author Elizabeth Robertson acknowledge the way Shaughnessy's students saw her, as a teacher "always eager to 'sit you down' to figure out what exactly was going wrong with your writing and 'do absolutely anything to get you to the next step' (Maher qtd. in Lu 125). Here Lu refers to Shaughnessy as a "trailblazer" who "achieved" higher levels of "status [for] composition" (127). She goes on to assert that Shaughnessy's writing "challenged" the view that basic writing was "sub-college-level work involving only teaching and service, never scholarship" (130).

Unfortunately, the comments exchanged in subsequent issues of *College English*, immediately following the 1993 symposium, had by 1999, the time of Lu's review, exacerbated the misunderstanding between these parties nearly beyond hope of clarification. In the first of two comments by Patricia Laurence on the symposium appearing in 1995, Laurence insists that Lu did not adequately historicize her discussion of Shaughnessy, a failure apparent in her "language" that "belies her claim at every turn" ("A Comment on the Symposium on Basic Writing" 104). As an example, Laurence reminds readers of the troubled colonial history and racism connoted by the word "mestiza" and "meztizo," terms used by Spanish settlers to distinguish social classes by skin color. She faults Lu for "plaster[ing]" such a word "onto current educational and cultural discussions in America" (104). She asks, "Why should I, a teacher of English, be complicit in perpetuating a colonial metaphor in America . . . ?" (105). Finally, she argues that Lu still resists the language of "dialogue, understanding, caring, exchange, reciprocity, and negotiation" and sees them in opposition to "conflict" and "struggle" (105). Finally, Laurence again states that conflict already exists at CCNY, due to its diverse student body. Lu responds to Laurence, saying only that it "further illustrates the differences between our views" ("Min-Zhan Lu Responds" 106).

Gerald Graff, who is invoked at times in the symposium, comments on Laurence's comment in the October 1995 issue, arguing that while Laurence is right to point out that conflict and "clashing perspectives" have become a growing presence in institutions of higher learning, students still need teachers to help them "grasp . . . what is at stake in the conflicts" (730). He agrees with Lu when he states that "if the institution doesn't think such conflicts are important enough to bother engaging them in front of and with students, then why should students bother about them?" (731). Even when diversity is factored into the student body, as Laurence has observed, it will not be harnessed productively without guidance from teachers. Surprisingly, Laurence responds to Graff in the same issue. She admits that "students [at CCNY] undergo rapid and difficult psychological, educational, and cultural change compressed in the space of one generation," conceding Lu's point to some extent, though she still maintains that Graff's and Lu's notion of bringing conflicts from *outside* the university is not necessary since these conflicts already exist *in* the university ("Patricia Laurence Responds" 731).

All three—Graff, Laurence, and Lu—seem to agree on principles, just not terminology. One calls the pedagogy "conflict," the other "caring," though all would accept that BW teachers must ultimately demonstrate understanding and sympathy to students as they reposition their relationship in regard to subjectivity and language. Of course, linguists such as Geneva Smitherman have long argued that "students need . . . not models of correctness . . . but broader understanding of the intricate connection between one's language and his cultural experience, combined with insight into the political nature and social stratification of American dialects" (Smitherman qtd. in Alim and Baugh 50). A compelling anecdote from Smitherman's 1977 book, *Talkin and Testifyin*, tells of a math teacher who abandoned his syllabus to drill students in formal grammar, ignoring their high test scores in the face of the "improper" words and phrases they used to define multiplication and division. Thirty years later, not much has changed at some institutions. While CCNY may run a program that promotes understanding and sympathy, a swath of universities and community colleges have yet to institute portfolio evaluation of BW students, insist on "drill and grill" methods of teaching, and use composition textbooks that fly in the face of *Errors and Expectations*.

In fact, a 1994 survey of "seventy-five preservice teachers from a large urban university" by Robert L. Bowie and Carole L. Bond, appearing in the *Journal of Teacher Education*, revealed that sixty-one percent of teachers they questioned thought that students who wrote or spoke a nonstandard form

of English “operated under a faulty grammar system” (113-16). Such studies only push for greater recognition of marginalized forms of English in order to improve instruction. The entire mission of research, spearheaded by programs and initiatives like the Academic English Mastery Program, strives to improve the quality of education for minority students by “infus[ing] curricula with research-based strategies that facilitate the acquisition of SAE in its oral and written forms, while concomitantly validating the home language and culture of the students” (Alim and Baugh 44). These programs seem to be quite successful, as studies indicate, though public backlash against them has been severe. Strangely, the disagreements centering on the *College English* forum never referred to Smitherman or linguistic perspectives on Standard English. Everyone seemed to resist the injection of further polarization.

A Third-Party Diplomat

What Lu, Shaughnessy, and other theorists share regarding the attention to competing forms of discourse is a concept that Kevin Porter introduces in his 2001 CCC essay, “A Pedagogy of Charity.” Adapted from Donald Davidson’s research in linguistics, the notion of pedagogical “charity” observes that, in order for communication to occur, both interlocutors must “share a world”—both parties must assume the other is a rational being with “mostly true and coherent beliefs” (585).

For Davidson, communication involves guesswork more than anything. Interlocutors must work toward matching up their utterances, expectations, and the effects they have on others. As Stephen Yarbrough states in his discussion of Davidson’s work in his 2007 book *Inventive Intercourse*, “If communicative success depended upon ‘getting it right’ the first time at bat, then seldom would anyone achieve communicative success” (32). In linguistic charity, “What is important from the beginning is not that the interlocutors’ ‘codes’ match, but that the interlocutors share a similar method of adjusting their use of signs when responses don’t match anticipations” (32). Lu’s approach, too, hinges on teachers and students “adjusting their use of signs” in order to understand one another. Additionally, part of Davidson’s project lies in moving beyond a conception of language that enables us to only assume we understand our interlocutors because we think we share a language in common.

In regard to the composition or BW classroom, such a concept requires that we should resist the temptation to think we automatically know how to “correct” a student’s paper. We can guess as to what a student really means

when he or she makes a comma splice. But we cannot approach a paper or a student conference as if we were the ones who wrote the paper, just as communication is an illusion if we interpret words only according to our expectations rather than the intentions of the speaker and the truth conditions of the utterance. An unclear phrase or problem in diction becomes an occasion for negotiation—not merely correction.

In his application of Davidson's "charity," Porter argues for a more open classroom, one in which teachers and students negotiate their way through various situations, including error. So often, any opportunity for dialogue is lost when teachers write corrections on student papers or simply slap grades on them without sufficient commentary, and when teachers do offer commentary on papers in introductory courses it often arrives in the form of exhortations. Rather than dictate the need for thesis statements, active voice, or smooth transitions, Porter advocates more "charitable" approaches that seek to understand why, for example, a student neglects to add the letter "s" to the end of certain plural nouns or singular verbs. Above all, charity requires teachers to "accept others as rational beings with mostly true and coherent beliefs," which is a prerequisite if "we wish to communicate with them" (Porter 584-85). Simply writing "I don't understand what you mean here" on a student paper often opens a conversation that allows teachers and students in conference to make greater progress.

This more constructive approach to teacher response to student writing also leads to more constructive peer review sessions as students learn alternative responses to each other's writing, questions like, "How do you see this paragraph connecting to the previous one?" as opposed to mandates in ballpoint or whirlwinds of arrows (Porter 580). It is precisely this charitable spirit that Lu appeals to in her work, but which she forgets in her responses to members of the symposium. Such a linguistic concept, that language is not a system but an act of interpretation, is in keeping with the ideas of Ann Berthoff, who has argued that "meanings are not acquired but hypothesized and tested by developing significances and judging contexts, by acts of the mind which are usually identified as *interpretation*" (216).

Negotiation and interpretation are in fact the cornerstone of another BW scholar who has developed a reputation as a critic of Shaughnessy. In his 1992 *Rhetoric Review* article "Rethinking the Sociality of Error," Bruce Horner argues that original philosophies in BW encourage teachers to "decry their [students'] implication in politics" in order to expedite their acculturation (179). In his view, such teachers fail to consider their students' different "notions of error and editing" (179). Instead, Horner argues, classrooms must

engage in “linguistic contemplations” and make students aware of the way “error” is “socially determined” by a privileged group. His approach “enables a teacher to understand the logic of a student’s errors” and asserts that basic writers need much more than instruction in grammar, spelling, and syntax (186). Of course, understanding “the logic of a student’s errors” is the main thesis of Shaughnessy’s pedagogy. So Horner’s position can hardly be said to challenge fundamental principles in BW theory; rather, it seems to build on them.

While seeking the logic behind linguistic choices does not present an altogether new approach, as Horner admits, his notion of negotiation does. “Rethinking the Sociality of Error” provides an extension—a way forward—in how students and teachers interact on the front of linguistic (and social) difference. While Shaughnessy’s method instructs teachers to investigate student work and to deduce a student’s logic from patterns among ostensibly random errors, her discussion of “error” leaves unsaid a statement about the effect of power relations on BW students. While it is difficult to imagine Shaughnessy bossing around her BW students during individual conferences, it is easy to imagine someone else making false assumptions: “After contemplating *Errors and Expectations*, and a careful reading of your paper, I have discovered the logic of your errors, and now I will explain them to you.” Students, however, need to play a more active role in these meetings so that they acquire a deeper understanding of error, rather than simply learning to heed seemingly arbitrary exhortations. “Negotiation is not a matter of one party persuading a second to adopt the position of the first,” Horner states. Instead, “*both* writer and reader hold a degree of power and authority” (175).

The parallels between Horner, Lu, Shaughnessy, and others become clearer when viewed through the common denominator of linguistic charity. This basic premise informs most existing BW theory and operates as a kind of essential warrant beneath the work of composition. Therefore, it behooves us to keep this core but often neglected concept in front of us as we read and respond to one another’s ideas. Ironically, Davidson also may hold a few lessons for composition scholars to make sure our signs correspond before we attack one another’s positions. To further demonstrate that Davidson’s linguistic charity circulates throughout these previously opposed pedagogies, I will reconsider Lu’s controversial essay that precipitated the 1993 *College English* forum and then move on to project some possibilities for application of her methodology.

Revisiting “Conflict and Struggle”

Lu describes her pedagogy, in her segment of the 1993 symposium, as one that offers “a way of thinking beyond the trap of polarization which seems to have dominated much of the earlier debate over ‘the students’ right to their own language’” (“Symposium on Basic Writing” 895). An historicized re-reading of Lu’s landmark essay, “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?”, reveals to what extent this “earlier debate” had polarized discussions about Standard English in the classroom. The political climate of the 1970s and 1980s is at least partially responsible for the level of miscommunication between Lu and other composition scholars. The Reagan era indeed saw a growing rift between educators regarding academic discourse, owing to disagreements over the 1968 Bilingual Education act, CCCC’s 1974 resolution “Students’ Right to Their own Language,” as well as the 1979 Ann Arbor Black English case, in which the U.S. District Court of Eastern Michigan ruled that the educational policy at Martin Luther King Elementary School reinforced a language barrier between a minority population of students and their teachers. The decision mandated teachers and administrators to take immediate steps toward helping these students acquire Standard English through language instruction sensitive to their cultural background.

Reactions to the resolution on the students’ right, for example, appear in CCC throughout the 1970s and 1980s. President Reagan opened the 1980s on an auspicious public note, in fact, stating in 1981 that cultural and linguistic conflict would prevent non-native speakers from “go[ing] out into the job market and participat[ing]” (Reagan qtd. in Gonzalez, Schott, and Vasquez 28). In the wake of the Bilingual Education Act, the “Students’ Right” resolution, and Ann Arbor, groups began sprouting up nationwide to combat a perceived threat against Standard English, which bled over into colleges and universities. Organizations such as US English, whose membership climbed to nearly 300,000 in just four years between 1983 and 1987, continuously sought a constitutional amendment that would make Standard English the official language of the United States (Gonzalez, Schott, and Vasquez 24).

While NCTE published a Resolution in 1986 denouncing any such attempt at a constitutional amendment, composition teachers argued fiercely in the pages of the field’s journals over the relationship between these competing discourses. One high school teacher, writing in a 1988 issue of *The English Journal*, argued that Standard English is “the social glue that holds this multicultural country together” (Sundberg 16) and that “no statistics

... show that either proficiency in English or the quality of education in the United States has improved as a result of bilingual instruction" (17). The background information here provides only a snapshot of the split dividing those who saw new developments in linguistic theory as relevant to composition theory and those who, like Ann Berthoff, maintained while rebutting CCCC's resolution on the "Students' Right" that "Structural Linguistics has nothing to tell us about composition or the composing process" (216).

Words like "conflict" and "struggle," then, would automatically have had a polarizing effect on readers from the 1980s through the late 1990s, despite Lu's intentions to recuperate these words from their troubled history. Those who dismissed Lu seem to have failed at teasing apart the broader political climate from her work, which was perceived as advocating an extreme position but which in fact called only for greater sympathy and understanding toward students unfamiliar with academic discourse. Lu states that "Open Admissions at CUNY was itself an attempt to deal with immediate, intense, sometimes violent social, political, and racial confrontations. Such a context seemed to provide a logic for shifting students' attention away from conflict and struggle and *towards* calm" ("Conflict" 907). The central point of Lu's essay does not critique Shaughnessy or her legacy so much as highlight the disconnect between developments in linguistic theory since her time (she died in 1978) and the social and political climate of teachers employed in BW programs in the 1990s.

This notion becomes clear when Lu questions Ann Murphy, who in her 1989 CCC article "Transference and Resistance" exempts BW students from a poststructural view of language. "Her essay," Lu summarizes, "draws on her knowledge of the Lacanian notion of the decentered and destabilized subject" while maintaining that BW students "may need centering rather than decentering, and cognitive skills rather than self-exploration" (Murphy qtd. in Lu "Conflict" 908). "Murphy's argument demonstrates her desire to eliminate any sense of uncertainty or instability in Basic Writing classrooms" (908). For Lu, it is the "pain" of uncertainty and tension rather than the tension itself that needs elimination (909). Lu does not seek to replace a Shaughnessy-centric pedagogy but instead to extend and "mobilize the authority [Shaughnessy, Bruffee, and others] have gained for the field" (909). Her conclusion makes an explicit call for contemporary BW teachers to "do what [Shaughnessy and her contemporaries] did not or *could* not do" on account of historical circumstances (910, emphasis mine).

Lu spends as much time on Shaughnessy's contemporaries at CUNY during the 1970s as she does on Shaughnessy. Irving Howe becomes a

prominent figure in this essay, as one who rejected the either/or approach to competing discourses and sought to help students achieve “equilibrium” between home languages and those of the university and, as he states in his 1990 *Selected Writings*, to motivate them toward the goal of “*living with the tension of biculturalism*” (Howe qtd. in Lu 897). He stressed that teachers and institutions should demonstrate more understanding and sympathy toward students who are not only repositioning their relationship between home and university now but who will do so for the rest of their lives. Lu praises Howe’s philosophy but, as she does with Shaughnessy, shows how certain weaknesses have prevented a fuller realization of his goals. For one, Howe was himself “more convinced of the need to live up to this ideal than certain about how to implement it in the day-to-day life of teaching” (898). Despite these ideals, Howe also worried that opening the gate to nontraditional students would threaten the survival of Western culture (898).

Lu critiques Leonard Kriegel as well for, despite good intentions, assuming that “business in the classroom could go on as usual so long as teachers openly promise students their ‘freedom of choice’” (901). Promising “freedom of choice” is not the same as living up to that promise, and it neglects the pressure to accommodate that BW students undoubtedly feel. No doubt, teachers and scholars like Gleason may understand Lu’s point but feel extreme skepticism when it comes to the execution of this philosophy. Done poorly or irresponsibly, it can leave students and teachers alike in a polarized state of mind. It can also, as Ann Murphy worries, leave students lost in a maze of linguistic considerations more paralyzing than a poor grade on a paper. However, these fears do not qualify as justified reasons to accuse Lu’s pedagogy of naivety or subversion.

A Way of Teaching

Gray-Rosendale and others express fear that the linguistic and cultural ambivalence Lu advocates for “may make it seriously difficult for students to ascertain the conventions of academic discourse, conventions about which they have a fundamental and democratic right to know” (62). Such articulations of fear leave BW teachers unclear about how much “conflict” they might anticipate when applying Lu’s method. A salve lies in the examples Lu gives in many of her later essays. When Lu illustrates her pedagogy in her 1994 CCC article “Professing Multiculturalism” and her 2004 CCC piece “An Essay on the Work of Composition,” she asks students to devote their attention to one particular “error” at a time, rather than uprooting all academic

conventions at once. In “Professing Multiculturalism,” she spends a large amount of time on a student’s marriage of the phrase “can do” to “is able to do” that results in the phrase “can able to.”

Lu’s exploration of various motives behind the students’ choices comprises many pages. I will simply say that Lu demonstrates to her class in this example that the Chinese student who made this “error” actually knows as much about grammar as the others do, but merely has a tendency to write “can able to” because the Chinese translation for “can” and “be able to” is the same (451). Also, a look at ways in which the words “can” and “may” appear in other parts of the student’s essay shows grammatical competence, implying that something in the student’s attitude toward the interchangeability of these words—“can,” “may,” and “to be able to”—led to this particular “can able to.” Lu suggests that Americans have learned from their native language and experiences that when one can or may do something, then they are also able to, whereas students from some other cultures maintain a distinction. Therefore, “it becomes clear that the revision . . . in these two segments can no longer take place simply at the level of linguistic form” (452). In her 2004 essay, Lu spends pages considering various reasons why a public sign she encounters on a visit to China says “collecting money toilet” rather than simply “public toilet.” Lu merely says that, in these situations, we cannot assume the way we as teachers might “fix” certain problems equals the way the student would solve them. Such statements share some basic philosophical insights with Davidson’s concept of charity, which indicates that her pedagogy does not pose such a threat to the role of academic discourse in writing classrooms as previously feared.

Keeping Davidson’s concept of linguistic charity in mind, these examples that Lu gives converge with the practices of progressive BW teachers, who, as Gleason says, “look at the remedial class as an opportunity for more instruction on invention, revisions, and peer response, rather than for a different kind of instruction, such as skills and drills” (888). Perhaps many BW teachers’ reluctance to espouse Lu’s pedagogy relates to the knowledge that we will likely not realize every possible error in a student paper as an opportunity for this deep level of exploration. We feel pressure from all angles to quickly prepare students for success in college and on the job market, and we see these immediate duties as superseding the cumbersome work of helping students to resist acculturation by the academy. This problem is precisely why Davidson’s “charity” is so important. Because most BW teachers will not stop over every error, we need to ensure that, when we do stop on an

error, we take care not to skim over ostensibly small differences in meaning made by our corrections.

Another persuasive example from Lu's "Conflict and Struggle" narrates W. E. B. DuBois's first writing assignment in a Harvard English class, a paper which received a failing grade because, as DuBois says, "I was bitter, angry and intemperate" at an Alabama senator's recent article attacking African Americans. DuBois's emotions overwhelmed his knowledge of grammar, which led to the teacher's assumption that he simply did not know how to write. Lu reads DuBois's experience as an instance when Standard English and grammar "would have constrained his effort" to express his emotions. The case goes to show that "writing teachers need to become more understanding of the students' racial/political interests" ("Conflict" 903). In this case, Lu does not instruct BW teachers to simply pass such papers. Negotiation becomes the key here—a word that Lu, Horner, and Laurence each use. In schools that emphasize process theory and portfolio evaluation, a student like DuBois would have the opportunity to discuss an angry, ungrammatical paper and determine a course of revision.

Laurence herself professed an approach similar to Lu's three decades ago. In the previously mentioned comment on Farrell's 1977 *College English* article, "Literacy, the Basics, and All That Jazz," she explains her method of conferencing with students early in the semester. She says that "I discuss my impressions of what [the student] has communicated in his first essays, and I make a point of teaching one simple grammatical principle or asking a thought-provoking question about organization or the conventions of writing . . ." ("To Thomas J. Farrell" 231). Such a session shares a great deal with Lu. Applying Lu's theories, a BW teacher would not only introduce the grammatical principle in relation to the student's work, as Laurence does, but also discuss the differences in meaning when that single principle is applied to sections of the paper at hand. Such a practice does not justify Ann Murphy's fear that BW students would be overwhelmed by an allegedly poststructural teaching philosophy. Lu's ideas only become a threat when applied irresponsibly—say, if the teacher attempted to explain a multitude of grammatical rules at once, while simultaneously applying Lu's idea of conflict. Thus, if these pedagogical approaches share certain basic principles in theory and practice then the differences drawn by scholars throughout the 1990s, as I have presented them, need not prevent teachers from exploring ways of applying linguistic conflict in their classrooms and individual work with students. Teachers do not need to pick a side (Lu versus Shaughnessy) before determining how they will approach the relationship between aca-

demographic language and other forms of English. The historic battle between the guardians of Shaughnessy's legacy and the new wave of radicals operates largely as a myth. The battle arose from a series of misunderstandings, in a heated socio-political climate that simply was not conducive to calm and reasoned debate about competing forms of English and alternative ways of addressing linguistic and cultural differences in the classroom.

Future Work

Our discussion may suggest some pragmatic ways of helping students eventually achieve the ability to choose among many varieties of discourse in a given rhetorical situation. But further work remains to be done on how teachers may practice such methods when faced with growing course loads and increasing class sizes. It is well understood that labor conditions would strain the best of today's Shaughnessys. Admittedly, the most profound absence in Lu's pedagogy—as in that of many others—lies in her reluctance to address this reality. More “enlightened” pedagogies such as portfolio assessment and contextualized work on grammar offer a place to start. Most importantly, teachers need to resist the temptation to make assumptions when students do not meet our expectations. Many of our students may write what we call “poor” papers because they are experiencing emotions similar to those that DuBois experienced as a freshman at Harvard.

Lu's vision of a “mestiza consciousness” culminates in one's ability to transcend the “‘borders’ cutting across society and [our] psyches,” borders that “‘separate’ cultures” (Lu qtd. in Gray-Rosendale 63). Gray-Rosendale asks whether or not “cutting across such borders” places “a great burden” on “the student and the teacher” and wonders if it is “a realizable goal for the composition class” (63). If it is not a realizable goal for a single writing course, we need to consider how these goals can be realized in sequences or stretch programs (see Glau) as well as beyond our English and developmental studies departments. Lu challenges composition and BW to assume the duty and responsibility of instilling linguistic sensitivity in our students. However, we should also attempt to instill greater linguistic sensitivity among BW teachers and scholars and across disciplines and programs, not through calls for revolution, but through acts of charity.

Works Cited

- Alim, Samy H., and John Baugh, eds. *Talkin' Black Talk: Language, Education, and Social Change*. New York: Teachers College P, 2006.
- Berthoff, Ann. "Response to 'The Students' Right to Their Own Language' CCC, 25 (Special Fall Issue, 1974)." *College Composition and Communication* 26.1 (1975): 216-17.
- Bowie, Robert L., and Carole L. Bond. "Influencing Future Teachers' Attitudes toward Black English: Are We Making a Difference?" *Journal of Teacher Education* 45.3 (1994): 112-18.
- Bridwell-Bowles, Lillian. "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing within the Academy." *College Composition and Communication* 43.3 (1992): 349-68.
- Farrell, Thomas J. "Slaying the Dragon Error: A Response to Patricia Laurence." *College English* 39.2 (1977): 233-37.
- _____. "Literacy, the Basics, and All that Jazz." *College English* 38.5 (1977): 443-59.
- Farrell, Thomas J., and Wendy Demko Reynoso. "Two Comments on James Sledd's 'In Defense of the Students' Right.'" *College English* 46.8 (1984): 821-22.
- Glau, Gregory R. "Stretch at 10: A Progress Report on Arizona State University's *Stretch Program*." *Journal of Basic Writing* 26.2 (2007): 30-48.
- Gonzalez, Roseann Duenas, Alice A. Schott, and Victoria F. Vasquez. "The English Language Amendment: Examining Myths." *The English Journal* 77.3 (1988): 24-30.
- Graff, Gerald. "A Comment on Patricia Laurence's Comment on the Symposium on Basic Writing." *College English* 57.6 (1995): 730-31.
- Gray-Rosendale, Laura. "Inessential Writings: Shaughnessy's Legacy in a Socially Constructed Landscape." *Journal of Basic Writing* 17.2 (1998): 43-75.
- Gunner, Jeanne. "Iconic Discourse: The Troubling Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." *Journal of Basic Writing* 17.2 (1998): 25-42.
- Hirsch, E. D. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- Horner, Bruce. "Rethinking the Sociality of Error: Teaching Editing as Negotiation." *Rhetoric Review* 11.1 (1992): 172-99.
- Howe, Irving. *Selected Writings: 1950-1990*. New York: Harcourt, 1990.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Kriegel, Leonard. *Working Through: A Teacher's Journey in the Urban University*.

- New York: Saturday Review, 1972.
- Laurence, Patricia. "A Comment on the Symposium on Basic Writing." *College English* 57.1 (1995): 104-105.
- _____. "Patricia Laurence Responds." *College English* 57. 6 (1995): 730-31.
- _____. "To Thomas J. Farrell." *College English* 39.2 (1977): 230-33.
- Laurence, Patricia, Peter Rondinone, Barbara Gleason, Thomas J. Farrell, Paul Hunter, Min-Zhan Lu. "Symposium on Basic Writing, Conflict and Struggle, and the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy." *College English*. 55.8 (1993): 879-903.
- Lu, Min-Zhan. "An Essay on the Work of Composition: Composing English against the Order of Fast Capitalism." *College Composition and Communication* 56.1 (2004): 16-50.
- _____. "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" *College English* 54.8 (1992): 887-913.
- _____. "Min-Zhan Lu Responds." *College English* 57.1 (1995): 106.
- _____. "Professing Multiculturalism." *College Composition and Communication* 45.4 (1994): 442-58.
- _____. "Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence." *Journal of Basic Writing* 10.1 (1991): 26-40.
- Lu, Min-Zhan, and Elizabeth Robertson. "Life Writing as Social Acts." *College Composition and Communication* 51.1 (1999): 119-31.
- Maher, Jane. *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1997.
- Murphy, Ann. "Transference and Resistance in the Basic Writing Classroom: Problematics and Praxis." *College Composition and Communication* 40.2 (1989): 175-87.
- Porter, Kevin. "A Pedagogy of Charity: Donald Davidson and the Student-Negotiated Composition Classroom." *College Composition and Communication* 52.4 (2001): 574-611.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Smitherman, Geneva. *Talkin and Testifyin*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Sundberg, Trudy J. "The Case against Bilingualism." *The English Journal* 77.3 (1988): 16-17.
- Yarbrough, Stephen. *Inventive Intercourse: From Rhetorical Conflict to the Ethical Creation of Novel Truth*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2006.