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Teaching Linguistic Adaptation to Context with Margaret
Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale

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Abstract

The Swedish National Agency for Education states that English students in upper secondary school in Sweden need to learn how to adapt their language according to context. This might be a skill that a large part of these students already master, to some extent. However, that specific knowledge might be implicit, and thus, the students need to both gain awareness of that skill, and to develop it. The aim of this study is to show how such awareness can be taught, and the skill developed, by means of a directed reading of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel, according to Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, is typically multi-voiced and stratified, and thus a productive object to analyze for the purpose of teaching adaptation to context. Additionally, Atwood's novel specifically deals with a totalitarian society, where language adaptation is presented in an exaggerated way. This narrativized model of the function of language in different contexts, it is argued, provides an efficient text in terms of teaching how and why speakers might be forced to change their language according to context. This leads to a second teachable aspect presenting itself, since all education must rest on a foundation of democratic values and human rights. The right to one's language is connected to this demand, in terms of variety and constraints. Hence, in a project such as the one proposed, the students also need to reflect on the relation between language adaptation and power. The study uses Pierre Bourdieu's model of language and power as a means of showing how the code-switching of the students, and the linguistic struggles of the protagonist in *The Handmaid's Tale* are both connected to power. In the study, passages where language adaptation is in effect are presented as a means of showing the potential of the novel. Furthermore, a lesson plan for the project is proposed, as well as criteria for assessment. The suggested approach to teaching these aspects of the English subject is considered, in the light of the examination presented in this research, a suitable one. However, the concept could be further explored by additional readings of other narrative texts where the usage of language is a prominent theme.

Keywords: Margaret Atwood; Pierre Bourdieu; Language; Power; Teaching; Code-Switching, *The Handmaid's Tale*

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1. Introduction

The demand for language adaptation to context appears in many social contexts and groups (Trudgill 89). It is most likely of importance in job or university applications; language might be adapted as a speaker moves from the workplace to the stands at the football stadium; and, in what is probably the most famous of contemporary cases, failure to speak in accordance with a certain context often serves as a point of criticism towards the controversial president of the United States (Will). Additionally, in all these examples, language adaptation is connected to some form of power; it might be a question of strictly economic pressures, a matter of fitting in, or, a distinguishing trait of the right to maintain a certain political position. Hence, it seems both logical and relevant that Swedish students of English should be taught this skill, since it is likely to be a determining factor in many aspects of their future life as English speakers. It is, simply put, a reasonable position that the students acquire the language skills needed to gain access to these different contexts of power.

Accordingly, The Swedish National Agency for Education states that the English students in the Swedish upper secondary school should learn how to adapt their language to different “situations, purposes and recipients” (Skolverket, “Curriculum” 1). This might seem rather straightforward; however, the task of teaching language adaptation according to different contexts is more complex than it looks at first glance. The above terms bear with them a depth that is daunting. Defining what “adaptation” means, especially in relation to the factor “different” in combination with three parameters as open as “situations”, “purposes” and

“recipients” is always going to be highly individual, specifically if we take into account the factor of positionality. To exemplify: “different” could signify both dissimilarity and distinction, a situation might be socioeconomic, cultural, geographical or all at the same time, a purpose might be individual gain or the avoidance of punishment, a recipient might be a group of people, a specific media or an individual. Hence, determining how to teach a type of detailed adaptive competence that covers all factors of the goal presented by The Swedish National Agency for Education is extremely complex, and given the amount of time a teacher might dedicate towards that specific goal, it is most likely an unattainable one.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that there is a problematic meta aspect at work here, since The Swedish National Agency for Education’s directives are in themselves documents informed by varying ideological interests. Consequently, they create a hegemonic framework which governs the teachers, the way we teach and what is being taught (Assarson 46). Hence, the school itself is a context to which the students must adapt their language according to certain standards, formed by a number of factors, where the curriculum is one. Moreover, the demand that the students learn how to adapt their language, and by doing so achieve a grade in the English course, is likely to have some bearing on their access to other spheres of power in their future life. So, as we teach the students that they need to adapt their language, and how to do so, we simultaneously impose the demand they adapt their language to the context they are in during the process.

So what to do with this unattainable, ideological, yet relevant goal then? To some extent, it has to be approached pragmatically. The directives of The Swedish National Agency for Education are something all teachers need to relate to. And while these ideologically informed directives cannot be ignored, they might be approached critically, creatively and with transparency toward the students. In the light of this realization then, the teacher can decide to teach the awareness of the linguistic reality that different contexts¹ in any English-speaking contemporary society might, more or less explicitly, demand that a speaker adapts and uses different variations of one’s linguistic repertoire, for different reasons, depending on the context the speaker finds

¹ “Context” will, hereafter, be the term used to refer to the three aspects “situations”, “purposes” and “recipients”.

herself in. This is precisely what this study demonstrates; that this awareness, in combination with some practical applications of certain aspects of the English language, can be taught by a project based on a teacher-guided reading of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Furthermore, a certain focus also needs to be directed towards the relation between language and power,² and the problematic aspect of communicating the school's role as a context that demands adaptation, as will be demonstrated below.

In order to show how *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used to teach these factors, an analysis of the novel, informed by Pierre Bourdieu's theories on language and power, will be presented. Furthermore, this teaching potential of the novel will be applied to a lesson plan, based on Lev Vygotskij's pedagogical theories of social learning, as a means of demonstrating how language adaptation and its connection to power can be taught practically through a project designed for upper secondary school.

2. Background: What is Adaptation and Context?

Before moving on to the pedagogical and literary aspects of this study, linguistic adaptation and context as key concepts need to be further explored. Peter Trudgill will provide us with terms that might help us in clarifying the task at hand, through his *Sociolinguistics - An Introduction to Language and Society*. To describe the ability to adapt and modify one's language and to shift between language varieties when social situation demands, Trudgill applies the concept of *code-switching*³ (201). This is the term that will be used in this study as well. Moreover, Trudgill establishes that research shows a relationship between language variation⁴ and social situation (105).

² The term "power" needs to be defined, for the sake of clarity. In this study, it will be used to describe the ability or capacity of an individual or a group to do something, to act in a certain way, to direct or influence the behavior of others or to control others or events pertaining to the context over which a certain group or individual has power.

³ Code-switching, as used in this study, will both signify deliberate strategies, but might also refer to an unconscious process. The mode of usage depends on the context and the user, from case to case.

⁴ The term "variety" will be used to define differing forms or variations of language, including styles, registers, levels of formality, dialects and other languages.

He also argues that, in a general sense, languages vary according to different factors surrounding a speaker (81). Hence, it is likely that the students in a Swedish upper secondary school already are used to adapting their way of speaking and writing according to context, and, they most likely do it because it is a general pattern in their usage of language. However, their level of actual awareness of this phenomenon, and their practical skills in adapting their English, might vary. Thus, there is a teachable factor at work within the hypothetical student group.

Having established that the students most likely possess the ability to code-switch, but might lack in awareness and practical skill in English specifically, let us move on to context. We have described the hopelessness of defining all of the many possible variations of context, yet, we have to somehow limit the task to make it manageable. To begin with, we need to look at a couple of determining factors that establish how and why a speaker adapts her language. Trudgill refers to *registers* as our different modes of language being produced by a particular kind of social context, and how they vary in vocabulary, but not dialect, depending on differing aspects, for example work and school subjects (80-81). Furthermore, Trudgill presents differences in rank, between speakers, as a defining contextual factor; these differences might exist because of class, age, organizational aspects or place (89). Hence, in terms of teaching linguistic adaptation to context⁵, the teacher might use the above aspects as an introductory framework when discussing and limiting the topic with the students (see appendix 1). However, the students might of course find other factors that define how and why one speaks with a certain register in a given situation.

2.1 Choosing the Teaching Material - On The Handmaid's Tale

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was first published in 1985, and has been widely read since then. The novel has been the subject of academic research, has been adapted to film, and opera, and, most recently, a TV-series produced by Hulu. The novel describes a dystopian state in which the U.S government has been overthrown

⁵ "Adaptation to context" is the technical concept and formulation that will be used to describe the shifting of registers and styles according to the demands of a specific context, or, in other terms, the linguistic market on which we offer our linguistic products. The term is constructed specifically for this study.

and replaced by a Christian fundamentalist dictatorship. This new state, Gilead, enslaves their fertile women, few in numbers, and makes of them “Handmaids”, who exist among the lowest casts in a heavily hierarchized society. They get raped every month by their host families, who belong to the upper classes of Gilead. If a Handmaid gets pregnant as a result of the rape, and gives birth, her child is seized and the Handmaid is moved to a new family. The novel follows one of these slaves, Offred, as she narrates her life in Gilead through a number of sound recordings that she makes during an unspecified time.

Due to the popularity of the TV-series, and to the acclaim that Margaret Atwood has received over the years, it is likely that some of the students are familiar with the novel beforehand. The possible familiarity of the novel, the recent rising popularity of the dystopian sf genre and the status of the TV-series as a much discussed cultural object, might be beneficial when introducing the text to the students, insofar as that they might recognize it and feel that it has some credibility and relevance for them (Alter).

2.2 The Potential of the Novel

The novel as such offers a productive material for teaching the above stated knowledge requirements since it, in this case, presents us with an exaggerated version of a hierarchical, layered society. Offred, from her position among the subordinated caste, is forced to adapt her speech according to context throughout the narrative. She code-switches when it is demanded from her.

In a broader sense, Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin formulates that the novel as a genre, through its organization, offers exactly the type of laminated textual material that would provide the students with a productive object of examination, in a project as the one suggested in this study. He writes:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. The internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages

that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day [...] this internal stratification present in any language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite of the novel as a genre.

(Bakhtin, *Discourse* 1192)

If we accept Bakhtin's account of the linguistic diversity of the novel, and his idea of the stratification of language, the novel as narrative text appears an efficient textual source for the purpose of teaching adaptation of language to context. The narrative premise of *The Handmaid's Tale*, that is, Offred's navigation through a hierarchical societal structure, seems to further add to this productive quality.

Finally, we should perhaps recognize that the *The Handmaid's Tale*, in terms of many of its major themes, belongs to the specific genre of Science Fiction, and perhaps, even the parallel genre of Speculative Fiction. Here, however, the distinction might be vague or non-existent (Manusco). The totalitarian society in *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Offred's account of her life as a slave, could be interpreted as dystopian, while its abrupt ending and break with Gilead might be read as utopian. Such speculations might seem overly detailed; however, they should be mentioned if we want to anticipate and pre-empt the possible objection that Science Fiction is too detached from reality to use as teaching material. I would like to propose the opposite: it is precisely the extreme stratification and hierarchical structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* that makes it a productive text for teaching linguistic adaptation to context. And while other literary genres might offer the same type of plot and potential, in which a character moves across varying social spaces, the freedom of constructing an exaggerated scenario that Science Fiction offers, by its detachment from narrowly realist ambitions, might be part of its strength as teaching material rather than a potential point of criticism.

Hence, the choice of the novel as object of study, and *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular, as the specific example, comes with a number of advantages: it would both provide a text that serves the purpose, and, in the best of possible scenarios, bear some cultural relevance to the students.

2.2 Previous research

There has been a vast amount of academic scholarship written on language, power and *The Handmaid's Tale*. The possible usage of Atwood's novel as teaching material has also been explored. Among the many works on *The Handmaid's Tale*, Harriett F. Bergmann's "Teaching Them to Read: A Fishing Expedition in *The Handmaid's Tale*" seems perhaps the most relevant to this study, as she explores the didactic potential of the novel. Here, focus is on the linguistic aspects of the novel, as well as its learning potential (Bergmann 847). Bergmann argues that the Gileadean regime subjugate the handmaids by "defamiliarizing their own language" (848). Furthermore, Bergmann concludes that Offred adapts and learns to use the language of the regime to fit in with the new order that the language reflects (848). Offred even makes the new language her own as a means of survival (850). Bergmann's textual analysis of the novel opens up for the type of language-focused teaching that this study aims to present, and the main ideas of her analysis of the novel are both well argued and relevant; however, whereas she stops at the analytical level, this will be a more practical approach to teaching through *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Among the other prominent scholarly works on Atwood's novel, language and power, Danita J. Dodson's "'We lived in the blank white spaces': Rewriting the Paradigm of Denial in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*" should be mentioned, as it emphasizes the relation between language and power even further. Dodson argues that Offred's orality, that is, as narrator, should be explained as a means of survival in a scenario where women have been deprived of the tools of literacy (72-73). In this study, Offred's role as narrator will be further examined in terms of teaching potential.

Finally, Karen F. Stein makes an important point concerning the power struggle and the individual's right to language, when she asserts that Offred's recordings could in fact be read as an attempt to steal back the language of the ones in power (269). This manner of observing language constrictions and varieties in terms of ownership coincides partially with the analytical view on certain passages in this study, since it implies that linguistic capacity is something that can be controlled and possessed, and thus, fought for.

3. Aim: What to teach

Linguistic adaptation to social context has been identified as the main factor to be taught, and it has been suggested that it might be done through a guided reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*. However, there is another mandatory, teachable aspect closely connected to language and who controls it, how we use it, and its societal function. The Swedish National Agency for Education states, in their curriculum for upper secondary school, that:

according to the Education Act, the education should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values and human rights, covering the inviolability of people, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people, gender equality and solidarity between people.

(Skolverket, "Curriculum" 10).

Hence, we would be in conflict with the directives from The Swedish National Agency for Education if we only taught the students *how* and *that* they need to adapt their language to social context, since this also raises of questions about *who* gets to talk in what way, and when. Language, and the right to speak according to one's individual preference (threats and discrimination aside), is attached to the "inviolability of people, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people" (Skolverket, "Curriculum" 10). And thus, the other compulsory, teachable factor is this: The students must not only learn when and how to adapt their language, but also learn how and why language might be connected to power, and furthermore, they need to critically analyze and evaluate how the demand that they adapt their language according to context might stand in conflict with the above introduced definition of democratic values.

3.1 *Language and Power*

To understand how the right to employ one's preferred variety of language, the explicit and implicit right to speak in your own manner, is connected to the freedom and integrity of the individual, we will make use of the concepts of *habitus*, *capital*, *the linguistic market* and *symbolic power*, as developed by French sociologist Pierre

Bourdieu. The term habitus is employed to designate systems of dispositions produced by the constitutive structures of a particular type of environment (Bourdieu, *Outline* 72). Furthermore, the habitus is produced by external factors, but acts as an organizing principle within individual agents: it might possess them, but might also be possessed by them (Bourdieu, *Outline* 18). If we apply this logic to the specific case of Swedish students in upper secondary school, their English, as an aspect of their habitus, is of course informed by the multi-sourced, swarm-like output of media that defines their contemporary context. And thus, their habitus, of which their linguistic repertoire is a part, develops as they are most likely exposed to a vast number of varieties and cases where speakers are forced or choose to code-switch. What the students implicitly learn then is how certain linguistic traits refer to and function as markers of certain social contexts, and additionally, it seems likely that the students, consciously or unconsciously, would identify themselves with one or several specific varieties, and thus one or several certain contexts. Bourdieu describes this process as the more or less unconscious acquisition of cultural capital, where factors of language, such as pronunciation, might be marks of this form of capital (Bourdieu, “The forms” 18). Capital then, as a term, describes different defining forms of accumulated labor (materialized or embodied), which implicitly or explicitly regulates the games of society, that is, its relations and hierarchical structures (Bourdieu, “The forms” 15). Capital might be economic, symbolic, social or cultural, for example, and these forms of capital might in turn be used in transactions between agents, as a means of gaining other types of capital, and of making advances in said social game of society. What needs to be recognized here, however, is that even though these transactions could be conscious operations, they are most likely not deliberate choices, but rather, systematic yet unintentional moves informed by the habitus in its encounter with what Bourdieu calls the field (*Logic* 66). The conceptualization of these processes is what Bourdieu names the “feel for the game” (*Logic* 66).

So, certain prerequisites of a linguistic repertoire might define, to some extent, the embodied cultural capital that makes up part of one’s habitus, what Bourdieu might refer to as “linguistic habitus” (*Language* 37). In the case of the Swedish students in upper secondary school, this means that the skill to code-switch according

to certain expectations might lead to a certain acquisition of cultural capital. That is, the student's embodied linguistic capital lets them gain access to particular objects, acknowledgements and contexts, for instance, membership of specific social groups, or achieving certain grades or diplomas. These gains might, in turn, lead to further acquisition of different forms of capital, such as economic capital through job offers, for example. In the distorted case of *The Handmaid's Tale*, this logic is visible throughout the whole novel. The difference between Offred's and the Swedish student's need to adapt their language, lies in what is at stake, and in the level of awareness. In the student's case, the stakes might concern the opportunity of making certain unconscious gains or transactions of capital in a social game where said student most likely does not fear for his or her survival. In Offred's case, her life is at stake. She is faced with the constant threat of violent, physical punishment should she through her language for a moment fail to uphold the linguistic rules set up by the Giledean regime. In the following quote, her fear of the Eyes, the covert organization regulating Gilead by surveillance and violence, inhibits her speech. Japanese tourists, through an interpreter, ask Offred and her friend if they might take their photo, but Offred does not dare answer: "I look down at the sidewalk, shake my head for *No*. What they must see is the white wings only, a scrap of face, my chin and part of my mouth. Not the eyes. I know better than to look the interpreter in the face. Most of the interpreters are Eyes, or so it's said" (Atwood 86).

To further develop the relationship between language and power, we could consider this quote an untypical, yet clear example of Bourdieu's concept of linguistic transactions as relations of symbolic power,⁶ in which the power relations among speakers or communities are realized (Bourdieu, *Language* 37). Bourdieu's usage of the terms, one could intervene, might usually apply to less drastic situations than the one described, and to situations where the social agent is not explicitly aware of her linguistic choices. Nevertheless, when Offred refuses to speak, in accordance with the expectations of the regime, she maintains her position in the hierarchical structure that governs Gilead. Thus, language functions as a marker and as a way to gain access to

⁶ Bourdieu defines symbolic power as a power constituted by factors of the social world, that can be won. Among these he lists "credit and discredit, perception and appreciation, knowledge and recognition-name, renown, prestige, honour, glory, authority" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 252).

further capital, and as a way of distinguishing oneself from or associating oneself with others. In this case, Offred distinguishes and classifies herself as not of the higher classes. Bourdieu describes both how the linguistic habitus generates the social capacity to use linguistic competence accordingly in a determinate situation, and how the structures of the linguistic market imposes themselves as “a system of specific sanctions and restrictions” (*Language* 37). These restrictions might be implicit in the linguistic market of the students, but in Offred’s case they are magnified, and thus the novel offers a valuable, amplified example of the relation between linguistic habitus and the linguistic market, and the expectations and restrictions they impose on their agents. Such an example seems an exemplary one for studying the connection between language and power, and the hierarchical structures governing the interaction between agents in a society.

4. Method: How to teach

As we understand what factors need to be taught, and why *The Handmaid’s Tale* will prove an efficient material when teaching these factors, let us move on to the matter of method. The project proposed in this study, to begin with, could be taught at any level of English in upper secondary school, that is, level 5 (in the case of a highly proficient student group), 6 or 7, since the requirement that the students should be able to adapt their language to purpose, recipient and situation recurs for all three courses (Skolverket, “Syllabus for English” 3-14). However, the teacher would have to take into account factors such as the level of grammatical understanding and depth of vocabulary of the group of students, how experienced they are as readers of literature, what their average ability seems to be in terms of language adaptation to context, and adapt the teaching accordingly. In the proposed lesson plan, (see appendix 1), English 6 is the chosen level, and the hypothetical class a group where the students are deemed proficient and experienced enough to be able to read and benefit from an analysis of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. In the following section, the primary didactic approaches to the project will be addressed and explained.

4.1 Social learning

Throughout the whole sequence of lessons (except for the written exam), the students are expected to discuss the material that they are exposed to, compare their findings and analyze them together (see appendix 1). All such instances in the sequence are informed by and motivated by the theories of social learning, that is, an understanding of learning as a process that is social, and thus, developing through communication and interaction between students and teacher (Lundahl 206). Russian theorist Lev Vygotskij argues that this is necessary because, without social communication, there is no development of either language or the cognitive process (10).

In terms of structure, the students are introduced to the project, the aim, course requirements, some practical examples of language adaptation to context and the novel in the first two lessons (see appendix 1). Consequently, they will hopefully gain an understanding of both the goal of the sequence of lessons, the teaching material and the skills they are to acquire through collective discussion and analysis. Furthermore, it is through the introductory discussion question in this first part of the lesson plan that the teacher might, in dialogue with the students, be able to both define what language adaptation is, and to establish some factors that could help determine some of the contextual aspects that determine when and how the students need to adapt their language (see appendix 1). During these discussions, as well as in all other moments of discussion in the teaching sequence, the teacher is expected to scaffold⁷ the group conversations. This is to be considered a primary practical effect of the social pedagogical approach to the lesson plan. In the lessons following the sequence introduction, the students are to read and analyze the text in groups, and, produce a written analysis of the language use in these passages. The purpose of this is twofold. Firstly, the students need to gain awareness of both the connection between language and power, and of language adaptation as a practical phenomenon, that is, how it is actually manifested. In theoretical terms, this means that the students gain awareness

⁷ The term "scaffolding" will be used to explain a process of temporary, often individualized support, that the teacher offers the students during the lesson, to help them further understand a certain material, or to acquire new skills. The term resembles and aligns with Vygotskij's theory of social interplay (254).

of the relationship between linguistic capital and markets, which would have an empowering effect, in the best of cases. The aim is for this to happen through the group discussions. Secondly, the students need to practice their own skill in language adaptation. The goal is, here too, for this skill to be acquired as the groups write their collective analysis according to the project specifications (see appendix 1).

4.2 Individual reading

Aside from the collective efforts of analysis and production that make up a large part of the project, the students will also have to read the novel individually, and to make an initial, individual directed analysis of the text in connection with this (see appendix 1). In terms of pedagogical method, this process should be defined as a combination of the bottom-up and top-down approaches to teaching reading in a secondary language. The project applies, to a certain extent, bottom-up processing, a methodology where the readers must learn to recognize certain linguistic factors preemptively, factors that they are to recognize and analyze as they proceed with the reading (Brown 358). In this case, it is mainly through the introductory part of the project and the supportive documents provided by the teacher that the students negotiate and define what aspects there are that mark language adaptation. The project also demands that the students draw on their own intelligence and experience to understand how language adaptation works in the text, and how it is connected to power, thus, the top-down methodology is present here too, and, as argued by Douglas Brown, a combination of the two might be the most effective when teaching reading to second language learners (358). In this specific case, the reading has a clear purpose, and as will be further demonstrated below, these methodologies in combination will combine in an effective way in this project, to teach these specific goals. Firstly, the students will be provided with the terminology and textual understanding that a directed reading demands. Secondly, the students are exposed to and practically use language adaptation in their own lives, as has been established, and thus, their own experience is of importance to be able to grasp and relate to the

text.

4.3 *Speaking*

As for the speaking part of the lesson plan, it might be the most complicated part of the project. Speaking is such a dominant part in all aspects of the sequence of lessons; yet, as has already been established, we cannot possibly aim to teach all practical aspects of language adaptation in English. Thus, while the *how* is connected to the *what* in this particular part of the project at hand, some type of limitation is required to make the project manageable and effective. To be able to set such a limitation then, we need to make use of a more general sociolinguistic perspective on language adaptation, without losing sight of what is relevant to the students. Trudgill defines the distinction between formal and informal language as one of the most important effects of language adaptation to social contexts, and since the students will be moving, during the course of the project, between a context that often demands a more formal language (the school), and one that offers the possibility to use a less formal mode of expression (communication with family and friends), this seems as a relevant, limiting focus in terms of their acquisition of practical skills in language adaptation (82-83).

What is important to distinguish here, however, is the point Wheeler and Swords argue in their *Code-Switching: Teaching Standard English in Urban Classrooms*: the focus, when discussing formal and informal registers, should not lie on "good" or "bad" language, neither on the "right" or "wrong" aspect, since this scarcely has anything to do with the productivity of the students' own language use, rather, the emphasis should be the efficacy of certain varieties in different settings (58). Furthermore, Wheeler and Swords address the terms "appropriate" and "inappropriate", and argue that we should be defining modes of language as varieties that work or do not work in a given setting (58). In the lesson plan presented in this study, the question of defining language varieties hierarchically according to any believed, variety-specific intrinsic values will be approached according to the method suggested by Wheeler and Swords. Furthermore, this approach will be addressed in

the first lesson, where these factors are discussed, and where the teacher is given the opportunity to problematize any beliefs of what might constitute good or bad language (see appendix 1).

Teaching *how* to speak, then, is one thing, but actually getting the students to speak is another aspect of the lesson plan, and thus, it needs to be isolated and approached as such. Brown suggests a broad spectrum of strategies to apply and issues to deal with when creating a productive and efficient speaking classroom. In a project such as the one proposed, the teacher would have to pay attention to a number of strategic approaches to be able to provide a classroom where as many students as possible participate in the speaking, and thus, benefit from the social learning environment as described above. In terms of conversation structure, Brown proposes turn-taking as a strategy to facilitate conversations (322). In the lesson plan, turn-taking is used to structure the conversations in Part 2, since the teacher will not be physically or temporally able to scaffold all groups at the same time (see appendix 1). In terms of affective factors, Brown is less specific, but rather states that the teacher needs to create the kind of climate that encourages students to speak, no matter the success of their attempts (324). Such an approach is of course expected of the teacher in the project presented, even if it is not an explicit part of the lesson plan. Finally, the teacher should pay attention to the interlocutor effect when dividing the class into smaller groups, that is, the awareness that one learner's performance is always colored by the interlocutor the learner is talking to (Brown 324-325). Practically, this means that the teacher needs to pay attention to both group dynamics and student proficiency levels when making groups.

4.4. Writing

In the writing-focused part of the proposed project, as well as the exam, the students are asked to write according to different stylistic prerequisites (see appendix 1 and appendix 2). This presupposes that the teacher has previously taught some basic differences between different styles of formal and informal English, as well as the notions of colloquial speech and dialectal differences, in their earlier education.

Furthermore, the students are also provided with a written document of writing guidelines for each of the practical variations they are supposed to practice throughout the project. They are to use this document as support when practicing the different forms of writing (see appendix 1). And, as for the novel, the students will discuss what traits might define Offred's speech as formal and informal (see appendix 1). Additionally, Brown proposes the inclusion of examples of "good" writers to efficiently teach second language writing, and while the term "good" might be problematic, research seems to show that the inclusion of examples of authentic text is an effective way of teaching writing (390-403). In the lesson plan, such examples are included and discussed with the student group in lesson 2-6 (see appendix 1). Brown also proposes an enhanced focus on the compositional aspects of writing, the building of student repertoires of writing strategies, and the importance of feedback from instructor and peers (392). Accordingly, peer feedback will, in this case, mostly come from the process of the student groups, instructor feedback will be provided during the scaffolding process and formatively in their online documents, the compositional aspect will be raised during the example discussions, and finally, the building of a repertoire of strategies will hopefully take place as the students progress throughout the course of the project (see appendix 1).

4.5 Analyzing the text - Offred and Serena Joy

When it comes to the analytical reading of the novel, in terms of language adaptation and its connection to power, we can hope to prepare the students through the task in the last part of the second lesson (see appendix 1). Here, they acquire some knowledge of what language adaptation looks like in the novel, and how it connects to the Gileadean hierarchy. Among other preparatory strategies for reading comprehension, Brown mentions the importance of identifying the purpose of reading (366). This is partially done in lesson two, but also as the project is introduced (see appendix 1). Furthermore, Brown emphasizes the need to teach relevant strategies in a reading project (366). This will be done accordingly at the end of lesson 1 (see appendix 1). Among the strategies that will be discussed with the students in this

sequence of lessons, instructions to guessing strategies and silent reading techniques will be presented (Brown 367-369). As for vocabulary analysis and the distinction between literal and implied meanings (Brown 370,) these will be explained in relation to the example passage read at the end of lesson 2 (see appendix 1). Here, it should also be explained that the reason for this first passage being discussed after the students' reading of the first part of the novel, is that they should be acquainted with the setting and main characters before we they start discussing the text.

As for this passage, the students will be introduced to Offred's first dialogue with Serena Joy, the matriarch of the house, also known as the Commander's wife (the Commander being the head of the household, and a man of power in Gilead). The students will be asked to analyze the language adaptation in the passage. Here, the study question concerning the "why" addresses the question of the defining hierarchy structuring Offred's relation to and interaction with Serena Joy, while the re-writing task serves the purpose of clarifying the potential of language, how meaning can be produced through different arrangements of language (see appendix 1). One or more of the students might react to both the particularities of vocabulary choice or possible implied meanings, but if they do not, the teacher could use the following discussion to introduce these factors by using examples from the text. As for vocabulary and word choice, and its connection to power, the teacher might point to the usage of "ma'am" as a an expression signifying submission and carefulness, and if the class seems susceptible, raise the question of what Serena Joy's disliking of this expression might signal (Atwood 57). Additionally, the teacher might choose to introduce the concept of implied meaning by asking the students what the short dialogue concerning the number of Offred's placements might signify, as Serena Joy asks Offred "This is your second, isn't it?", to which Offred replies that it is her third, which leads to Serena Joy laughing as she notes that this is "not to good for you" (Atwood 55). Should the students fail to analyze the possible connotations of the sentence "Not too good for you", the teacher might need to explain that it is implied (and what implication means) that Offred might be punished should she continue to fail to produce children for her host families (Atwood 55). This implication, in turn, might be interpreted in a number of ways: as a threat, a warning or a ridicule, for instance.

To further explain and examine how the novel might function as an example of implied meaning, we might once again draw on Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory. It is, in this case, through his concept of double-voiced utterances that the function of implication in *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes more distinct, and appears clearly as a possible point of analysis for the students. The concept as such is used to describe the process where two voices, in a novel, seem to be speaking simultaneously through one utterance, functioning as a demonstration of the dialogic nature of the human consciousness (Harris 446). The practical consequence of this concept is that there is, possibly, a multiplicity of meaning to a given utterance (Harris 446). Hence, implication can be distinguished as present in an utterance because it might be read and understood not only as single-voiced speech, but rather, as containing several voices. If we return to the sentence "Not too good for you", and analyze it as an utterance in a layered structure of speakers, it is firstly an utterance by the author, that is, Margaret Atwood, secondly, it is produced by the narrator Offred, who in turn quotes the character Serena Joy (Atwood 55). In the two first cases of the layers in this example, the speaker reports the utterance of another speaker for her own benefit. Bakhtin describes this double-voiced structure as he writes that the author may "make use of someone else's discourse for his own purposes, by inserting a new semantic orientation into a discourse which already has, and which retains, its own orientation" (*Problems* 189). Here, he argues that "in one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices" (189). And thus, we are faced with a moment in speech where there is an implied second meaning underlying the original, first meaning of a statement. The relation between the author, the narrator and the speakers is the one that makes implications possible. And when these utterances are read by a reader who is more or less attuned to this complexity, she might acknowledge implication as a factor, and perhaps even the structure behind it.

Finally, as for the task of defining Offred's speech as formal or informal, some of the students should be able to recognize her replies to Serena Joy as formal, through the usage of the word "ma'am", for example (Atwood 57). This is assumed because, as mentioned, the students should be familiar with the concepts beforehand. The portion of Offred's speech that is informal is in quantity larger, but might be more

difficult to identify, depending on the students' average experience of reading and defining structures, stylistics and conventions in literary texts. Nevertheless, one or several of the students might point out that Offred uses a highly informal, personalized style when she speaks as the narrator of her story; if not, the teacher could use a sentence like the following, and focus on the usage of contractions as an attribute of informal English: "I don't listen long, because I don't want to be caught doing it" (Atwood 43). Here, the power-perspective might also be raised, by the students, or the teacher if needed. The approach would then be to discuss why Offred might be able to speak more freely and informally as she narrates the story, and possibly, some of the students might discover that she might feel more inclined and free to speak in an informal, less restricted way because of the assumed secrecy of her recording situations.

As a large part of the teaching method described above builds on individual experience and reader response of Atwood's text, and accordingly, demands that the students localize and analyze certain parts of the text, directed by the central study questions in the project, it should be communicated to the students that there can be no right or wrong in finding textual examples, as long as the students argue and build their analysis on textual examples from said passages, and, as long as the passages they choose correspond to and bear relevance to the focus of the project. This logic stems from literary critic Wolfgang Iser's theory of the dynamic text, in which a work is virtual, positioned between text and reader (1974). Consequently, this means that each reading, by definition, is unique and informed by the contextual position of the reader. Furthermore, as Iser points out, one reader cannot experience another reader's own experience of a given text, which in turn further underlines the need for student-to-student communication in the project (1975). And, additionally, it must be understood that whatever passages the teacher originally designated as productive examples of language adaptation and its connection to power, these too are informed by his or her contextual position, and thus, the teacher must approach any other findings by students with an open mind, with curiosity and interest, as well as a critical approach and a will to communicate.

4.6 Further Remarks

Lastly, two more points should be made concerning the project. To begin with, students with possible learning disabilities, neuropsychiatric conditions or any other condition that might affect their position as learners might of course need certain adjustments to be able to benefit from the project at hand. Concerning reading disabilities, the possibility to listen to the novel rather than reading it has already been mentioned in the lesson plan (see appendix 1). However, other adjustments might also be done, even if they are not mentioned explicitly. The examination might be done orally and group sizes might be changed, for example. It should also be noted that the page numbers in the lesson plan are marked as XX since we do not know which edition of the book the students will be working with, simply because this is a matter of school purchases concerning the specific school at hand.

5. Assessment

What the proposed project teaches, and what it gives the teacher the opportunity to assess, are not two aspects in complete alignment. While the knowledge requirements for English 6 state that the students should be able to discuss, with varying levels of nuance and balance, some features in contexts and parts of the world where English is used, and that they should make comparisons with their own experiences and knowledge, this does not explicitly mean that they should be able to describe and analyze the connection between language and power, nor is it entirely applicable to the novel, since it describes a fictional, dystopian society, even though it could be argued that it represents contemporary phenomena (Skolverket “Syllabus for English”, 3-14). Hence, the language-power aspect is mandatory to teach, as a part of all education in upper secondary school, but not necessarily something that needs to be assessed in this project. Consequently, the exam at the end of the sequence of lessons is designed, above all, to assess the students’ ability to adapt their language and their understanding of the phenomenon as such. In this exam, they would have to demonstrate their adaptive skills both by adequately describing language adaptation in

the chosen passage that they are presented with, by referring to word choice and implied meanings, and they would have to produce their own, distinctively adapted text as well, to demonstrate their own capacity to adapt language to context (see appendix 2). So, the students' ability to adapt their language according to context, and their understanding of language adaptation, shown through their comprehension of written text are the two factors that are being primarily assessed (see appendix 1). As for the communication and definition of knowledge requirements, the students are presented with these two areas of assessment in the beginning of the project; however, as in almost all English projects, the students will produce material that gives a basis for assessment of other criteria as well (speaking and other aspects of writing, for instance) (see appendix 1). Nevertheless, they are, for the sake of focus and clarity, given two specific factors toward which the major focus of the project is primarily directed (see appendix 1).

The assessment given in the project will be both summative and formative. The students will only get summative feedback (material matched to knowledge requirements) on the exam, since research shows that summative feedback merged with formative feedback is an ineffective combination, because the summative aspect eliminates the effect of the formative comment (William 109). Hence, it is during the project, and not the exam, that the student groups will receive formative feedback. The teacher will produce strictly formative comments on the first, second and third of their analytical texts. This commentary will be written in their online documents, and some anonymous excerpts will be discussed in full class during lesson four and six, with the purpose of having all students benefiting from relevant examples (see appendix 1). The timing of the formative feedback is a crucial factor for producing formative commentary that helps the students develop (William 111). In this project, the formative assessment is distributed at points in time when it seems most probable that it connects with their development in terms of both practical skills and the understanding of language adaptation (see appendix 1).

In the exam, the students are given the following, short dialogue between Offred and another handmaid, Ofglen, which they are to analyze according to four questions.

“The war is going well, I hear,” she says.
 “Praise be,” I reply.
 “We’ve been sent good weather.”
 “Which I receive with joy.”
 “They’ve defeated more of the rebels, since yesterday.”
 “Praise be,” I say. I don’t ask her how she knows. “What were they?”
 “Baptists . They had a stronghold in the Blue Hills. They smoked them
 out.”
 (Atwood 65-66)

This passage is chosen because of its compact, relatively short format, which leaves the students with what should be sufficient time to write the exam during one lesson. Furthermore, the passage contains some explicit examples of formalized language adaptation, such as the Gileadean salutation “Praise be” and the standardized answer “Which I receive with joy” (Atwood 66). Aspects such as these makes it possible for the teacher to directly assess the students’ understanding of the text. Additionally, Offred’s approval of the war going well opens up for further analysis, as a student could argue for this being a false statement, based on the context and knowledge they have of Offred’s character (Atwood 65). Hence, the passage has material which may be processed by students at the lower levels of the knowledge requirements, as well as for those at the higher ones. Here, it should also be noted that these examples are just that, and that the students might of course perform other readings of the text in their exams. In any case, their readings will provide material for the teacher to assess their comprehension of language adaptation, as part of the knowledge requirements (Skolverket “Syllabus for English”, 3-14). Furthermore, in some instances the teacher might need to draw on material produced outside the exam to be able to fully assess the students. For example, the A-level knowledge requirement stating that the students should understand implied meaning in written text might require the teacher to examine the material produced outside of what is produced during the written exam (Skolverket “Syllabus for English”, 3-14).

Concerning the other parts that the teacher should summatively assess in this exam, both the practical language adaptation skills, according to the exam instructions, and the knowledge requirement concerning their proficiency in writing are areas of focus (Skolverket “Syllabus for English”, 3-14).

6. Possible problems

There are, as with all projects of this kind, many areas that might be criticized or considered problematic. They vary in importance and weight, and some of them might be the product of context-specific variables, and thus, they cannot all be addressed in this study. However, there are three possible problematic areas that should be discussed because of their crucial status within the project.

Firstly, there seems to lie a challenge in teaching awareness of the relation between language and power, as described by Bourdieu, because in terms of language proficiency and the familiarity with theories of this kind, the potential student group is most likely not ready to read, process and discuss his works. The text would, presumably, be on a language level that is much too difficult for the students, in terms of grammar, vocabulary and structure. Additionally, their unfamiliarity with this type of reasoning might make the text too difficult to process conceptually. V. Y Mudimbe describes this problem in his highly personal article *Reading and Teaching Pierre Bourdieu*. Granted, Mudimbe describes the process of teaching Bourdieu to university students; however, given that the French theorist demands overwhelming rigor from older students, farther progressed both in terms of language proficiency and intellectual capacity, we might take this as an indication of how difficult Bourdieu's theoretical apparatus might seem to students at upper secondary school (Mudimbe 160). Thus, it is the basic concepts of Bourdieu's, as described earlier, that might be mediated to the students through Atwood's text. It is, as has been demonstrated, precisely because Atwood so explicitly narrates the processes as conceptualized by Bourdieu, that her text might lead to some basic understanding of his concepts.

This leads us towards the second problem: the context in which the connection between language and power is being taught. Here, it should be recognized that the students and the teacher are part of a hierarchical structure themselves, since they are working within the structure of the school and the classroom. The teacher occupies a position of explicit power, most prominently in his grading of the students. And thus, any demand that the teacher makes carries with it the implied statement that failure to cooperate might affect the students' grade, and possible access to further education.

The teacher might (and should) of course attempt to counter-act this implication, and emphasize the learning aspect of the classroom; however, the grade structure makes it impossible to completely disregard the hierarchy. Bourdieu explains this power relation by defining the school, and the act of schooling as performed by the teacher, as a structure where symbolic violence is actualized (Mudimbe 151). The specific problem here then, is that the students are expected to critically analyze, evaluate and understand the relation between language adaptation and power, but they are to do so within a structure that itself imposes demands on language adaptation on the students. In this project, this problematic aspect is approached in the early stages by raising the question of the school's demand on language adaptation to the students, in the hope that they are able to recognize and critically examine this problematic aspect as a part of the project itself (see appendix 1). This does not solve the problem, but it does address it in a transparent way, and integrates it in the project.

The third problematic aspect concerns the task-based reading and its potential interference with the reader's experience of the text. As the students approach Atwood's novel with a clear goal in mind - the analysis of language adaptation and its relation to Gilead's power structures - there is a possibility that their experience of the text is inhibited in terms of aesthetic pleasure, enjoyment and the will to further explore a text. Research shows that this might be the case (Åberg 92). Furthermore, The Swedish National Agency for Education state that the English education in upper secondary school should encourage students' curiosity in language and culture, and thus, the consequence might be a conflict between different aims in the teaching (Skolverket "Syllabus for English", 1). Nevertheless, directed readings of a given material, like the one proposed in this project, might be necessary to target certain goals. Angela Marx Åberg reaches this conclusion in her article "Uppgift eller upplevelse? Om läsuppgifters roll vid litterära texter i spåkundervisning", as she argues that, while target based reading might have its negative effects, the teacher is ultimately left with a decision to make, where the desired effect of the reading must be considered (94). Task-based reading is, conclusively, a matter of prioritization. In this project, it is deemed a necessary methodological approach for the sake of targeting and teaching certain specific aspects of the knowledge requirements.

7. Reading the novel

Given that we subscribe to Iser's reader-response theory, as already presented, we have to recognize that each reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* will look different, both in terms of individual readers, and in terms of student groups. As each new student discovers and presents different approaches to varying passages in the novel, changing from every time the project is executed, new insights and discussions will arise. Furthermore, each group is likely to react differently to the novel, as they inform and influence each other. Hence, any suggested teacher response to the novel has to be indicative. The teacher must, as in all cases of teaching, be prepared and capable to adapt to both the group's and the individual students' needs and ideas to be able to accomplish a sequence of lessons that is as beneficial for the students' learning process as it can possibly be. Thus, all examples of readings of *The Handmaid's Tale* in this study are to be viewed as suggestions, and not a locked approach to teaching language adaptation and its connection to power by reading Atwood's text.

Aside from the four examples from the novel already presented and analyzed in terms of their didactic potential, that is, Offred's interaction with the Japanese tourists, her first encounter with the Commander's Wife, her dialogue with Ofglen and her role as narrator, we will look closer at two different approaches to one more passage from the novel, to further demonstrate how the text might be used to teach language adaptation and its relation to power.

In the first approach that we are to look at we will consider it a means of discussing and teaching the practical skill of language adaptation. The passage describes the encounter between Offred and the Commander, before they head out to the hotel where Gilead's male elite meet to drink and have sex with women excluded and hidden from the larger part of the Gileadean society. Here, they only serve as pleasure for the visiting men. The passage itself could be analyzed from two possible perspectives, that is, it could be discussed how the Commander adapts his language to Offred's presence, and the other way around. This part of the novel seems likely to be recognized and brought up by most student groups, since it is framed by such a clear

hierarchy, and thus, it leaves room for the teacher to help the students pinpoint certain aspects of language adaptation when he or she is scaffolding. The Commander's usage of the adjective "little," for instance, can be discussed as a linguistic strategy used by the hierarchy's dominating agent to temporarily even out the imbalance in power between the two speakers, as he attempts to push the boundaries for what the inferior party might accept (Atwood 481-482). Furthermore, the passage can be used to further discuss and explain implication as a factor of language adaptation, as the Commander asks Offred if she is "Up for a little excitement?", to which she responds with a "Pardon?", but then comments the possible meanings of the statement speculatively, as narrator (Atwood 481-482). The word "Pardon," in turn, might be considered a way of expressing politeness in a context that demands formal language use, and conversely, it might also be recognized as a sign of frustration or irritation (Atwood 482). Thus, as shown from a short part of a longer passage, the potential approaches to the text are numerous, and consequently, the teacher must work in dialogue with the student group, emphasize how crucial the social aspect of the learning process is, and direct the effort when needed, without losing the ability to attentively let the students themselves interact and follow their reasoning when they perform productive readings of the text. This mode of social interplay between teacher and students aligns with the psychological process described by Lev Vygotskij as the systematic cooperation between the pedagogue and the child (254). This type of cooperation needs to be constantly present, because of the complexity of the project.

In the second approach, the teacher might use the same passage to discuss how the characters' language adaptation is connected to power. The dialogue between the Commander and Offred would prove a valuable opportunity to ask the students how they perceive gender as a component of the power structures in Gilead, and how this might be expressed through language. Here, from the teacher perspective, Bourdieu's idea that a gendered view of the world is part of the agent's habitus will serve as the underlying theory (William & Krais 58). And, additionally, the concept of symbolic domination achieved by symbolic violence (which in this case would be linguistic), exerted through "the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus" would function as the defining structure regulating Offred's

and the Commander's interaction (Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* 37). The Commander's initial greeting and demeaning question - "How is the fair little one this evening?" - and the way Offred comments it as narrator might be the first point of reaction for the attentive student (Atwood 481). However, it is the later parts of the dialogue that opens up for a nuanced view of the relations of power governing speech in this case. Here, the Commander offers Offred a revealing, objectifying costume and says "I hope it fits", to which Offred answers, "You expect me to put that on?" (Atwood 484). This answer is followed by an ambiguous reflection on her feelings for the dress, where she expresses both disapproval and pleasure (Atwood 484). Thus, the teacher could potentially direct the students toward this part, and ask them what they make of this ambiguity. One possible conclusion would be that this is in effect symbolic domination as described by Bourdieu, exerted through schemes that, "below the level of the decisions of consciousness and the controls of the will, set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself" (Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 37). This would of course have to be discussed with the students in less rigorous terms, by asking what they make of the assertion that Offred is, perhaps, resisting the restrictions of the Gileadean regime, but that she might also be caught in a way of speaking that is so controlled by the ways that she and the Commander have learned to act and talk, that it is almost invisible to themselves. Additionally, the teacher might want to raise further questions in relation to this dialogue, as a means of building on Bourdieu's theoretical groundwork. Letting the students speculate on how Offred and the Commander have learned to talk the way they do would be a manner of approaching the question of acquiring the determining factors of the linguistic habitus, without using Bourdieu's terminology. Asking the students what Offred and the Commander might gain from talking in the way that they do could be a manner of discussing how linguistic transactions function in particular social games.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the exemplified approaches presented in this study do not explore the full potential of Atwood's novel. However, they might serve to give an indication of the text's capacity to illustrate the connection between language and power, as well as its potential in teaching practical language skills. What

should be recognized; however, is that the novel with its many encounters between characters of different social standing, can be discovered, read and analyzed in many more ways than those proposed here, without losing sight of the proposed learning goals.

8. Conclusion

The claim throughout this study has been that Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* can be used as teaching material, in combination with a pedagogical approach that emphasizes social interaction, to teach both the awareness of language adaptation to context as a societal demand, the practical skill of adapting one's language, and how said adaptation might be connected to power. As shown by a proposed sequence of lessons, the novel offers various opportunities for the students to both analyze and understand the practical aspects of language adaptation, as well as its relation to power.

The project is not without challenges. Bourdieu's theoretical models of power, domination and linguistic habitus serve as ground for the description of the relation between language and power, and while it gives the project a structure and the means for understanding this relation, it is also where one of the difficulties lie. The challenge is teaching his complex, theoretical ideas without using a terminology much too advanced for the students. However, the advantages of using Bourdieu's work as an underlying theory is deemed greater than the potential difficulties this brings. Furthermore, the fact that the students are asked to analyze and evaluate the connection between language and power in an already hierarchical context, the classroom, must not be forgotten, since this context itself affects the way the students speak. This aspect is anticipated and approached openly with transparency and critical reflexivity. Additionally, there might be a risk that a reading as directed as the one proposed damages the reading experience. However, it has to be acknowledged that task-oriented reading might be necessary as a means of focusing the student efforts, if the teacher is to target and teach specific knowledge requirements.

As for the novel itself, this study has demonstrated its potential as teaching material, by drawing primarily on a reading of the text as narrativization of Bourdieu's theories in literary form. Here, it is the dialogical aspect, and the different modes of character interaction in an hierarchical context, as well as their different speech types, that has been the primary object of analysis.

In terms of additional research, the concept of teaching practical language adaptation and its connection to power by reading literature could be further examined by added readings of other narrative texts where the context based usage of language is a prominent theme. Here, other genres could be explored, or the potential of Science Fiction as a means of exploring language and power specifically could be examined by additional readings of novels and short stories in that very genre. As for realist literature, Édouard Louis's *History of Violence* could perhaps be used as an source for examining the specific connection between language varieties and class, whereas Ursula K. Le Guin's Science Fiction-novel *The Left Hand Of Darkness* could offer an opportunity to further explore the connection between gender and language.

In conclusion, the suggested approach to teaching these aspects of the English subject could be considered, in itself, a model for teaching language adaptation and said adaptation's relation to power, through the reading of literature. Other texts aside from *The Handmaid's Tale* might be used in the same manner, with the same purpose, and a change of text could, potentially, slightly shift the focus of the teaching sequence.

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Appendix 1:

Lesson Plan

The Handmaid's Tale - Adaptation and Context

Level: English 6

Duration: 6 lessons and a written exam

Introduction:

By reading and discussing the novel *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, you, the student, will observe and reflect upon the usage of language in the novel, how it is being governed and, ultimately, draw parallels to your own actions as language users.

Task:

- Reflect on your own behavior as a speaker of English. How/why do you adapt your language?
- Read the novel and discuss it in your assigned groups.
- Write the exam.

Aim:

For you to gain awareness of the demands to adapt your language to context, to practice said adaptation, and to reflect on the connection between power and language, and the demand that we as speakers adapt our language according to context. The project aims to, to some extent, develop your proficiency in spoken and written English.

Knowledge requirements of focus:

E:

Students can understand the main content and basic details of English spoken at a relatively rapid pace, and in written English in various genres, and in more formal

contexts. Students show their understanding by in basic terms giving an account of, discussing, commenting, and drawing conclusions on content and details , and with acceptable results act on the basis of the message and instructions in the content.

Students can also express themselves with fluency and some adaptation to purpose, recipient and situation.

C:

Students can understand the main content and essential details, and with some certainty , also implied meaning, of English spoken at a relatively rapid pace, and in written English in various genres of an advanced nature. Students show their understanding by in a well grounded way giving an account of , discussing, commenting and drawing conclusions on content and details, and also with satisfactory results act on the basis of the message and instructions in the content.

Students can also express themselves with fluency and adaptation to purpose, recipient and situation.

A:

Students can understand both the whole and details, and also implied meaning of English spoken at a rapid pace, and written English in various genres of an advanced nature. Students show their understanding by in a well grounded and balanced way giving an account of, discussing, commenting and drawing conclusions on content and details, and with good results act on the basis of the message and instructions in the content.

Students can also express themselves with fluency and good adaptation to purpose, recipient and situation. Students work on and make w

PROJECT OVERVIEW:

Part 1: Two lessons

Lesson 1: What is adaptation?

Project introduction.

Main question (write down your thoughts):

Do you adapt your language depending on social factors? If so, in what way do you adapt and what might those factors be?

Discuss the following questions in groups of 3 to 4 students:

- 1: How do you write and speak in different contexts?
- 2: Why do you adapt your language, if that is the case?
- 3: Are there good and bad ways of speaking English? If so, what defines the different ways as either good or bad?
- 4: Can we talk about language as effective and ineffective? What defines these types of speaking and writing?
- 5: Does the school you are in, and your teachers, demand that you speak in a certain way? If so, in what way? Is this problematic?

After the discussion, we will examine all of the questions in full class, and try to come up with a definition of language adaptation that we all agree on. Afterwards, the teacher will introduce the novel we are going to work with: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood.

Finally, we will discuss reading strategies, and what to look for when reading *The Handmaid's Tale*.

NB. For students with dyslexia or other factors that might inhibit their reading, the novel can of course be listened to as an audio book.

To do at home (Before lesson 1): Read the first part of the novel (pp. XX-XX)

Lesson 2: The Novel

We start the lesson by summarizing and freely discussing the first part of the novel.

In this lesson, you will get to see two examples of adaptation of language according to context. After reading them, you will analyze and compare these examples, and try to point out the differences between them (pay attention to the usage of contractions for example).

Example 1:

A short text message between friends, about the novel.

Example 2:

A short academic excerpt about the novel.

In the final part of the lesson you will be assigned an example from the first part of the novel, one of Offred's dialogues with Serena Joy. You will discuss the example in your groups, and try to define in what way Offred adapts her language and why she does it. You should also discuss if you think Offred's way of speaking in the first part of the novel could be defined as formal, informal or both, and try to find examples. Finally, you will re-write one of her lines in a way that you think she would talk had she had the liberty to speak as she wanted. After your group discussions, we will compare your findings in class, read your sentences and talk about vocabulary and meanings.

Part 2: Four lessons

In the second part of this sequence of lessons, we focus on reading the novel. You are to read the assigned passages at home before each lesson (see lesson plan below), and find your own examples of language adaptation. Note where these examples happen

(page numbers), and try to briefly answer the study questions below for one or more of the passages, so that you can participate in, and contribute to your group discussions.

During each of the four lessons, you discuss what you have found in groups of three to four students per group. Write these findings and submit them in an shared online document on [the preferred online platform].

In your groups, try to answer the study questions below, use the questions for each of the examples that you have found. You might only have time to write about one passage per lesson, so discuss which one might be the most interesting before you start writing. If you have trouble choosing one, ask the teacher for help. Make sure that you, over the course of the four lessons, focus on at least one of each group member's passages. In terms of turn-taking, the group member whose passage your focusing on will get the word first, and gets to share his/her/their thoughts. Afterwards, take turns sharing your thoughts about the passages, and finally, open up to free discussion and start writing.

Give each passage a headline according to the following template: Passage + Number + Pp. XX-XX:

Study questions:

- 1: Who is adapting their language in the passage? With whom are they speaking?
- 2: In what way does the person(s) adapt their language? Be as specific as possible, and use quotes.
- 3: Why does the person(s) need to adapt their language here?
- 4: What does the situation feel like? (For example, dangerous, relaxed or funny?)

At each lesson, you describe your findings in the online document through different types of English, according to the list below. At each lesson, there will be one secretary per group.

To do at home (Before lesson 3): Read the second part of the novel (pp. XX-XX)

Lesson 3: Reading and analyzing

The lesson starts with a full class discussion of a short example of academic English.

After this, and before the group discussions, we will briefly discuss what happened in the part of the novel that we read before the lesson.

In your groups, help each other out in identifying different passages where language adaptation to context happens, and analyze them according to the questions.

Try to write your analysis in formal, academic English. You are not expected to produce perfect academic English, but rather, discuss how it should be done and help each other out in producing the text (use the guidelines uploaded on Fronter/Schoolity/Hapara).

To do at home (Before lesson 4): Read the third part of the novel (pp. XX-XX)

Lesson 4: Reading and analyzing

The lesson starts with a full class discussion of a short example of a blog post, followed by a brief discussion of language adaptation from your written examples.

After this, and before the group discussions, we will briefly discuss what happened in the part of the novel that we read before the lesson.

In your groups, help each other out in identifying different passages where language adaptation to context happens, and analyze them according to the questions

Try to write your analysis in informal English, in the form of a blog post. Discuss how it should be done and help each other out in producing the text (use the guidelines uploaded on Fronter/Schoolity/Hapara).

To do at home (Before lesson 5): Read the fourth part of the novel (pp. XX-XX)

Lesson 5: Reading and analyzing

The lesson starts with a full class discussion of a short example of an article.

After this, and before the group discussions, we will briefly discuss what happened in the part of the novel that we read before the lesson.

In your groups, help each other out in identifying different passages where language adaptation to context happens, and analyze them according to the questions

Try to write your analysis in formal English, in the form of an article. Discuss how it should be done and help each other out in producing the text (use the guidelines uploaded on Fronter/Schoolity/Hapara).

To do at home (Before lesson 6): Read the last part of the novel (pp. XX-XX)

Lesson 6: Reading and analyzing

The lesson starts with a full class discussion of a short example of a text message, followed by a brief discussion of language adaptation from your written examples.

After this, and before the group discussions, we will briefly discuss what happened in the part of the novel that we read before the lesson.

In your groups, help each other out in identifying different passages where language adaptation to context happens, and analyze them according to the questions. Pay extra attention to the conference at the end, and try to define how it distinguishes itself from the other parts of the novel.

Try to write your analysis in informal English, in the form of text messages between friends. Discuss how it should be done and help each other out in producing the text (use the guidelines uploaded on Fronter/Schoolity/Hapara).

Part 3: The Exam (one lesson)

During this written exam, you will both analyze a given passage from *The Handmaid's Tale*, and adapt your language when you write about it. You will be given instructions on how to adapt your language at each of the exam questions.

This way, you will both demonstrate your understanding of language adaptation, and your practical ability to adapt your own language.

Appendix 2:

The exam

Format:

Digiexam

Word limit:

400-800 words

Instructions:

During this written exam, you will both analyze a given passage from *The Handmaid's Tale*, and adapt your language when you write about it. You will be given instructions on how to adapt your language at each of the exam questions.

Question 1: To be written in academic English (Formal)

Who (or what), in this given situation, defines *when* and *how* Offred and Ofglen get to speak? Are they forced to speak in a certain way, if so, *why*?

Question 2: To be written in academic English (Formal)

Define in what way Offred and Ofglen speak. Is their language formal or informal, do they show signs of submission, expressions of power, emotions or any other signs? Exemplify and argue by using one or more examples from the text.

Question 3: To be written as an email to a friend (Informal):

Do you think it's fair that the Handmaids have to adapt in this passage? Why/why not?

Question 4: To be written as a short argumentative blog post (Choose between formal or informal language, or somewhere in between):

Should any way of speaking (formal, slang, informal, academic English) be considered more correct than the other. Why/why not?