Societal Semantics: The Linguistic Representation of Society

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Though various theories of hegemony have provided theoretical backgrounds that guide some sociological writings, many scholars agree that one of the most logically- and empirically-sound conceptualizations of hegemony was articulated by the Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci in the early part of the twentieth century. Gramscian hegemony consists of a fundamental value-consensus that society, as a whole, has accepted.

While challenges have been made to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, his model continues to play an important part in understanding society. The will argue that the idea of hegemony remains relevant in the post-Marxist age, if not precisely in the ways it has previously been articulated, because of the nature of human language. Language, as it has developed, serves as the primary means used by human beings to conceptualize. As such, people often overlook the shortcomings of the medium. However, language does have its shortcomings, from creating artificial categorizations that affect the way humans think about the world in which they live to implicitly generating assumptions about society and government.

Examining media and cultural practices, this paper argue that the fundamental existence of hegemony, or a value consensus, is replicated in modern America by language usage and the effects this usage has on the way citizens “represent” the society in which they live.
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Introduction

In the 1920s and 1930s, as Marxism became a force on the international political stage, a young Italian named Antonio Gramsci sat in a prison in his fascist homeland, writing on some of the most pressing issues of the day. Among other things, Gramsci formulated a unique theory of hegemony – a theoretical concept that was crucial to Marxist thought but, up until that point, did not stand on a strong, logical foundation. In the years since 1937, when Gramsci died in an Italian prison, many scholars have explored further the concept of hegemony, but with very different results.

This paper will discuss the importance of language in creating and maintaining a hegemonic order. Even though numerous scholars recognize the important role language plays in everyday life, few have directly connected this role to broader theory of hegemony and the ways in which language can impact it. Even Gramsci, who did extensive writing on the functions of language in politics, did not develop his definition of hegemony based on language. This does not imply, however, that language is incompatible with, or ruled out by, the Gramscian definition. Rather, as this study will attempt to show, language buttresses hegemony, primarily by affecting the way in which citizens view societal relations.

To begin, one must possess a basic understanding of hegemony as conceived by Gramsci. In his writings, Gramsci sought to correct the missteps taken by Marx in proclaiming the inevitability of communist revolutions. Indeed, as history led Gramsci to believe, and has confirmed thus far, capitalism does not necessarily result in a revolution in which the working class demands economic equality. Gramsci sought to account for
this flaw in Marxist theory. He expanded on the conception of hegemony that earlier Marxist writers had completed, making it more theoretically- and empirically-sound (Laclau and Mouffe 1988). Gramsci defined hegemony as the internalization of the social logic, values, and assumptions of those with control over production by the working class (Gramsci 2003). As citizens became socialized, they came to view the order of their lives as a part of the “natural” order of mankind – a type of common sense. Therefore, the working class failed to rise up, oftentimes, not because they had no interest in securing better conditions, but rather because it appeared they would be challenging the “natural” order of the world. By imbuing citizens with their values and beliefs, those who controlled the means of production essentially inoculated themselves from any serious challenges to their power.¹

Before one embarks on a quest to locate hegemonic relations in society, one must first examine the Gramscian definition to be certain that this study does not define its terms on incorrect assumptions Gramsci makes. One area of concern involves the belief implicit in Gramscian hegemony that society is a stratified entity consisting of two major classes. Is it possible that such a complex and fluid system as society could be accurately described as simply an arena for the interaction of two aggregated groups of people?

Scholars have shown that individuals can distinguish themselves as members of a specific class through the way in which they use language. As one study has shown, the dialects or sociolects which individuals speak identifies them to the outside world as

¹ For an in-depth discussion and evaluation of Gramscian hegemony, see the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1988).
members of a particular socioeconomic class and inhabitants of a specific geographic area (Schäffner and Wenden 1995, 24). Citizens that live in close proximity to one another, have similar levels of wealth, and (thus) speak in similar dialects will form associations. Simply put, classes will form based on mutual knowledge and experiences. Many scholars of the early twentieth century based their works upon this fact (Gramsci 2003, 325; Mosca 1939, 21) and more recent work has continued to acknowledge it (Mills 1959, 19; Schumpeter 1951, 141). Raymond Aron sums up the idea of class formation succinctly in *History, Truth, Liberty*:

> Individuals exercise different trades and professions, they have unequal income, they have different lifestyles, they do not enjoy the same prestige. This heterogeneity tends to become hierarchical and collective...This heterogeneity, hierarchized in groups that each admit of a certain homogeneity, can be called stratification. All modern industrial societies are stratified and are destined to stay that way for a long time. (1985, 205)

Though research has shown that Americans in particular often strive to be perceived as independent of any class ties (Merelman 1984, 240), the work of Aron and others demonstrates that modern society is stratified into classes. Later, this paper will demonstrate how this stratification can be divided into two classes in a contemporary way while still staying true to the essence of the Gramscian definition.

Still, this analysis runs the risk of oversimplifying the true nature of society. Some may argue that class ties based on income, geographical proximity, and professions are only one part of the puzzle. They may contend, for instance, that despite the fact that Americans place less of an emphasis on civic associations than they once did (Barber
discounting certain civil groups would misrepresent society. After all, even if Americans are eager to shed their group ties as members of social classes, other groups help to reinforce identity. Labor unions, for example, have traditionally been an important group with which many individuals identify. Still other organizations, such as political parties, interest groups, and social clubs can exact political pressure that will prevent one class from gaining an inordinate amount of power. However, even in this conception, groups do not possess as much influence as one would initially believe. Unions, along with other social organizations, often reach a point where the complete realization of their goals would, in effect, put them out of business. At this point, these associations inevitably choose existence over effectiveness (Edelman 1971, 24; Edelman 1977, 93). To illustrate this, imagine the American Civil Liberties Union securing all of its demands from the United States government, or the National Rifle Association doing likewise. The leaders of these organizations may be loathe to render themselves obsolete, for they too have families to feed. Most of these groups have no real traction to challenge elite values, and those that become powerful enough to challenge the exiting system find it in their interest to refrain from doing so completely. Therefore, social classes, on the whole, remain by far the most stable yet influential groups in stratified democratic societies.

From this starting point, this study will examine the role that language plays in sustaining a stratified hegemonic order. It is critical to note that some of the authors cited in this paper have formulated their own distinct definitions of “elite,” “hegemonic class,” “political class,” “ruling class,” et cetera, and of “subjugated classes,” “workers,” and so
on. Some definitions originate in socialist conceptions and are thus more economically-oriented, while others focus solely on codified political power. Still others take a more modern view that merges these two aspects of power. For this paper, it is not necessary to complete an evaluation of each individual writer’s conception of the particular classes or to distinguish the differences between their definitions. To eliminate any logical fallacies, this study will not use any statements or ideas by the authors cited that are unique to the definitions they employ. For instance, Gaetano Mosca terms his elites the “political class,” and argues that this class behaves conspiratorially (Pareto 1967, 78-79 intro). Because few have found evidence to confirm this fact in Western democracies, this paper will disregard any statement Mosca makes that apply solely to his “political class.” However, the following paragraphs will still include broader arguments by Mosca. For example, Mosca’s statements on intransigent political parties that alternate in power are cited. Since these statements do not apply solely to his conception of society (and have been confirmed by others such as Gramsci 2003), they present no logical or empirical difficulties.

What then of the classes of stratified American society? This study will adopt an expansive definition of the hegemonic class as the group of individuals who have the ability to significantly influence the political sphere (for clarity and variety in analysis, the paper will use the terms elite and elites interchangeably with hegemonic class, though scholars such as Mills 1959 distinguish between the two). Individuals not in the hegemonic class will be called non-elites or the subjugated class. One objection to this definition (when viewed through the prism of language) remains: there may be those who
can articulate their ideas without being overtly political, especially in the current media-driven age in which ordinary citizens (non-public figures) have more access to the media. Based on the definition employed here, however, anyone with access to media and the public is by nature a politically-powerful individual. By definition, the hegemonic class, then, would include experienced politicians. It would also include prestigious business leaders, intellectuals, wealthy individuals, influential artists, and the news media. Though not exclusive – the hegemonic class could include many others not listed here – the professions and positions listed above supply the most members of the elite. Such a broad and unfixed definition will eliminate any inaccuracies or simplifications in this study of language. Hegemony, as conceived in this paper, depends on an articulation of values and assumptions – a practice which multiple individuals can exercise. In a diffuse, loosely bounded culture, like the United States, in which the media plays an important role (Merelman 1984, 110), one’s conceptualization of a hegemonic class must be open to the possibility that many individuals have the ability to influence the hegemonic order at one time or another. Therefore, then, it would be a mistake to artificially narrow the definition of elites in that it would miss some critical facets of democratic hegemony.

In addition, despite the work of some scholars mentioned above (i.e. Mosca), it would be incorrect to believe that the hegemonic class (or the subjugated class, for that matter) partially or entire comprehends its status or existence, or that it works with significant cohesion. Too many scholarly studies have failed to find any conspiratorial cohesion within classes; therefore, this paper would err in assuming this fact based on the hypotheses of a few early writers. Furthermore, it must be made clear that, though a
hegemonic class exists, its interests do not necessarily run counter to those of the subjugated class. It is another subject for research to determine whether a hegemonic class can effectively secure the most desirable outcome for all of society. This paper is not a critique of the elite, arguing for their overthrow as a means to fix all the problems of society; rather, it is an attempt to offer an accurate analysis of modern society.

Working from these premises, this study attempts to show that the effects that language has on the organization of society and the minds of citizens directly impact the way in which all citizens come to understand and represent society. Foreign policy scholars, in describing the decisions world leaders must make commonly use this “problem representation,” which is explained in the first section. The paper argues that problem representation can be generalized beyond the realm of international politics – by looking at language as a key factor in representing democracy to a nation’s citizens. The second section includes a detailed discussion of the exact representation that American English portrays of American democracy and the shortcomings of a democratic system that it does not portray. This section is a direct response to pluralist authors who contend that democracy is, primarily, a setting in which each citizen possess an amount of power roughly equal to that possessed by any of his fellow citizens. The third section ties together the problem representation of American society, created by modern language, with hegemony, arguing that language itself has become the very type of internalized value / assumption, accepted by the masses, that defines Gramscian hegemony. In viewing society through the lens of language, then, this paper concludes that one can
locate a set of hegemonic relations, roughly equivalent to the ones described by Gramsci, in present-day America.

Representing Problems

Some of the best work on problem representation originates in the fields of foreign policy and international relations. In these areas, political scientists pinpoint specific confrontations as “problems” – ranging from World Wars I and II to the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. Scholars have completed excellent quantitative work in these realms. Studies on problem representation look at the ways in which government officials and decision makers view specific situations. For instance, some leaders may formulate the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians as one that leads to instability in a volatile region, thus increasing the likelihood of international terrorism. Others may view the struggle primarily as one between two conflicting religions, and thus will likely believe that international pressure will do little to ease tensions. Still others might see the conflict as primarily a human rights issue. The different conceptions leaders have of this, or any, problem will affect the ways in which they approach it, their determination of whether or not they can resolve it, and the solutions they will propose.

In the field of foreign policy, a large amount of work has systematically shown that language has a significant effect on how leaders represent problems. In one study, Peter Howard discusses U.S. foreign policy towards North Korea as a product of language constraints. Howard looks at data on the types of language (or, more specifically, the word choices) that these two countries have used in their interactions
with each other. He argues that the language “game” that began with the 1994 treaty between the two nations created a set of rules that serves as a mutual expectation, forcing all future proceedings to remain within the context of negotiation. As a result, certain actions drifted outside the realm of the doable because they did not fit the framework unintentionally delineated by the initial negotiations between the United States and North Korea. “In viewing international politics as a game,” Howard explains, “language defines the logic of possibility underlying the structure of world politics. Causality comes in the form of constraints and mechanisms. An actor can only choose from a limited list of potential alternatives, and each of those alternatives has an internal logic determined by its constitutive rules.” (2004, 813). Earlier, more comprehensive studies have not contradicted Howard’s conclusions.

Yuen Foong Khong argues that analogical reasoning helps define foreign policy choices. Khong, in a systematic analysis of U.S. policy debates during the Vietnam War, discovers that government officials (including those he considers the brightest in their field) often fall trap to a false logic in which they pick analogies for foreign policy problems based on artificial similarities between events. Thus, Vietnam became inextricably linked to the Korean War in the minds of nearly all Johnson administration officials. These officials saw the Vietnam and Korea in a similar light - as Asian nations in danger of falling to communism - and assumed that the solution to one must approximate the solution to the other. Important distinctions between two very different nations at two very different points in time became inconsequential once policymakers had created a line of analogical reasoning that linked the two based on more superficial
similarities. Khong explains: “Historians and political scientists who study how decision-makers ‘learn’ from the past have observed that policymakers tend to rely on the analogies that come most readily to their minds, that they are impressed by superficial similarities, and that they seldom probe more deeply or widely in search of less obvious but perhaps more relevant analogies” (1992, 35). Despite the nuances and important differences between two foreign policy events, officials will generally come to accept them as near-perfect matches.

Building on the work of Khong, another scholar has shown the importance of metaphor in foreign policy decision-making. Metaphors, which represent situations based on concepts from fields outside the realm of the problem (i.e. a game as a metaphor for war), can affect the way officials make sense of a given problem. Thus, U.S. policymakers came to view the conversion of a nation to communism as a force that would cause the fall of other nations because the “domino metaphor,” which had come to represent the situation, suggested that further falls were “inevitable” (Shimko 1995, 77-78). Officials became entangled in language constraints that not only represented and simplified real problems but also came to be a part of the real world.

The risk lies in generalizing Khong’s and Shimko’s conclusions, which apply specifically to foreign policy thought, to such a degree that they lose their explanatory powers. However, psychological studies (most of which do not apply solely to the field of foreign policy) serve as the backbone of their work. Both authors base their conclusions on problem representation on an aspect of human cognition discovered by psychologists – schema theory. The theory states that people will often process
information from the “top down” – that is, they will discover representations that help them simplify the main facets of a situation and disregard facets that do not fit into their conceptualization (Shimko 1995, 74). In Khong’s explanation, Vietnam became understood through the frame or heuristic of Korea based on superficial similarities. Leaders ignored the aspects of the Vietnam conflict that did not fit into this schema. Psychology allows one to generalize the process of top-down processing past the realm of foreign policy, demonstrating that this process occurs in everyday decisions.

Donald Sylvan and Stuart Thorson give an excellent explanation of the importance of problem representation. The authors note that the principle of extensionality – which states that the representations of elements in a set has no bearing on which element a person will choose – does not apply in many areas of cognition. They demonstrate that one’s choices in the political arena frequently depend on one’s representation of those choices (1992, 710-712). Indeed, even the work highlighted previously, that of Shimko and Khong, confirms that the United States government made policy choices on two of the most important issues of the twentieth century not on the basis of the policies and problems themselves but on how metaphorical and analogical reasoning depicted the situations.

To further illustrate their argument, Sylvan and Thorson discuss the famous Müller-Lyer Illusion, reprinted below.
Most people, if asked to choose the figure that depicts the longest horizontal line segment, would pick the middle one. However, a frame of reference demonstrates that all three horizontal line segments are of equal length.

As the illustrations show, the representation of a situation has an effect on the ultimate choice one will make regarding that situation (Sylvan and Thorson 1992, 712).

A large amount of scholarly work recognizes that, contrary to common assumptions, language does more than express the realities of everyday life. Linguists and political scientists agree that language is a human action, not a neutral analog that only describes reality. In the following pages, we will view language as the diagonal line.
lines depicted in the Müller-Lyer Illusion – a representation of modern society that affects the way citizens represent it. We will survey what language teaches us about American democracy and how it organizes human action in society. We will view language not only as an organizing tool for society, but also as a heuristic that frames human thought and cognition. From this work, we will come to discern how language represents the “problem” of American society to its citizens.

Language Usage in Modern Society

As Gerhard Höpp states, “Language is not only a means of communication but an integral part of reason itself” (quoted in Lorenz 1978, 129). Despite this, only a handful of scholars have explored the implications that language presents for political relations; furthermore, even fewer have applied a theory of language towards describing domestic politics. To begin doing so, I will take account of an aspect of language that greatly shapes human cognition – simplification.

Boiling any complex object down to a single term (as every person does thousands of times each day) involves a certain degree of simplification. A “television,” for instance, can vary greatly in size; may be plasma, flat screen, or projection; may or may not include a built-in VCR or DVD player; may be manufactured by a variety of companies; and so on. However, an average person will likely only call it a “television” all the same. In fact, though some people have multiple televisions in their home, they still call each distinct one by the same name. Linguists have found these facts to be

and The Politics of Misinformation (2001), demonstrates that language is itself an action. Also useful are Konrad Lorenz, Behind the Mirror (1978) and Noam Chomsky, Problems of Knowledge and Freedom (1971).
characteristic of human language – people understand context and proximity and assume that spoken language will pertain to relevant objects (Poole 1999, 34). In his writing on human knowledge, John Locke argues that man does not have the necessary mental capacity to give every distinct object a name of its own and still retain an understanding of all of these objects (Locke 1959, 14). Thus, people create simplified “groups” in which each of the members shares some important characteristics with the others. For example, people speak of “birds” (and also of “robins”), “cars” (and also of “Pontiacs”), “houses,” “food” (“pizza”), and “televisions.” Each one of these simplifications has a distinctive level of specificity, but all of them describe distinct objects or creatures in a single term.

While simplifications may appear relatively innocuous when we speak of electronic boxes, they can have important ramifications in society. For, people generalize about not just animals, food, and machines, but also about important political issues. Much as it does when categorizing objects, language frames issues and general discussion in such a way that people or ideas become one-dimensional. Elites, who, by definition, most often set the terms of discussion, highlight one trait on which they wish to focus, thus removing others from view. Elites may do so consciously – for instance, politicians who support gun control policies will try to establish the fact that strict gun control laws will save lives in hopes of simplifying the terms of the debate over complex legislation into a simple, easy-to-make choice. However, fewer people recognize when

3 Interestingly, Locke goes on to argue that general naming categories do not harm knowledge (17). However, authors discussed in the paper beginning on page 16, such as Edelman, have done more in-depth work on this point, finding that simplifications do affect a person’s conceptualization of reality.
politicians, for example, use simplification subconsciously, without partisan aim. Candidates will often speak of the “middle class” and propose legislative solutions to problems that affect it. At this point, the debate about legislation has already become artificial (that is to say, unnatural) because the representation of the problems involves the simplification of millions of citizens into one single entity (“the middle class”) - of diverse, heterogeneous interests into a homogenized whole - that desires and will benefit from a certain policy. Broad generalizations frame the debate, understanding of an issue, whether or not citizens believe a policy will be effective, and the ultimate course of action chosen. When people define the terms of debate in a simplified manner, consequences become hidden, thereby causing choices to be false or incomplete ones. Though often not knowingly invoked, these simplifications still have important effects on politics.

They also play an important part in the understanding of society. In invoking references to different groups of society (i.e. immigrants, the middle-class, or parents), elites group together large numbers of people. To represent millions, thousands, or even hundreds of people by a single label misrepresents the nature of society. However, once categorization becomes socially customary, hegemonic and subjugated classes alike will employ it. Each citizen brings to mind a mental picture of what an “average” immigrant, middle-class member, or parent looks like. As a result, stereotyping can create or erode support for policies that deal with each specific group based on how society views the average members of that group. The level of support is in many ways artificial, because it derives from a simplified representation of a large number of people. If elites have
effectively persuaded citizens that the average immigrant endangers or threatens society, immigration policies will likely reflect this view. Similar arguments can be made about groups ranging from welfare mothers to CEOs. Once society comes to view people with similar backgrounds, experiences, or positions as aggregates, the discussion of them and choices made regarding them will not take into account individual dynamics of these aggregates.

Murray Edelman has completed insightful work on the effects of simplifications in society. He notes that not only do simplifications represent contentious (and, indeed, all) political policies, thereby giving citizens false choices, but also that simplifications characterize the general societal standards by which people measure the world. For instance, even the framework that people employ to make sense of events around them, such as the distinction between good and bad, is a stereotype in and of itself (Edelman 2001, 12). Authors have founds that even these value judgments - though humans generally perceive them as natural - are nothing more than socially-constructed norms, albeit indispensable ones (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, 119).

Public language further drives the simplification process (Edelman 1977, 109-112). The average citizen uses public language – informal talk or slang which people employ when speaking with those with whom they are comfortable - constantly. When speaking in public language, people often will omit qualifying words (due to familiarity with their audience), further creating simplifications. As a result, “Sentences become less and less complete and qualifiers more blatantly omitted as more and more is taken for granted, premises are more often left unquestioned, group ties grow stronger, and outside
groups are perceived as more dangerous” (Edelman 1977, 112). Other authors explain how “in-group” language, which relies on related assumptions, becomes an unquestioned backbone of society (Alford and Friedland 1985, 29-30). Indeed, challenging assumptions that a speaker does not explicitly enumerate can be difficult to do.

The power of classifications and simplifications is more intense than one would originally imagine. Indeed, even a person who interacts first hand with others from a different “group” in society will tend to organize his or her conceptions of the world in stereotyped classifications (Mills 1959, 312). Each human being, either consciously or subconsciously, considers him or herself a member of a variety of groups. For instance, people will often feel more comfortable around and identify with those that have similar professions, life experiences, educational backgrounds, family structures, or aspirations. An AIDS patient may see himself as connected with other AIDS patients, a mother with young children will often feel more at ease sharing her family challenges with other mothers than with a divorced woman, and college students often find their relationships with high school friends to be less satisfying than they did before they left for college. Each person sees himself as a part of a variety of “in-groups,” and those with different experiences as members of “out-groups.” One study has found that language helps to maintain the current order by not only identifying and simplifying members of undesirable out-groups but also by forcing them to take greater responsibility for their actions than in-group members do for theirs. Scholars demonstrate, for instance, that people use the active voice much more frequently when describing the unsavory actions of out-group members. On the other hand, in-groups, including most of the hegemonic
class, will often absolve themselves from responsibility through the use of passive sentences (Schäffner and Wenden 1995, 24). Indeed, one of the distinct markers of educational status in society is the increasing use of weak, passive sentences (such as this one).

Language also structures higher education, creating assumptions among even the most brilliant scholars about the nature of society. A vast majority of academic work – in the classroom and on the research desk - falls within departments such as political science, linguistics, philosophy, history, and so on. Oftentimes, these fields serve to facilitate better communication and understanding of relevant issues, similar to the divisions of this paper. They can also, however, affect the way in which citizens represent American society. Authors explain that the differentiation of academic fields from one another “creates special languages that render certain kinds of intellectual problems invisible. Divisions of intellectual labor thereby reinforce institutional structures” (Alford and Friedland 1985, 27).

Alford and Friedland also note how intellectual categorizations can often marginalize certain theories (1985, 27). Once scholars come to accept the division of their intellectual labor and work within their limitations, they focus on ideas and topics relevant to their areas of expertise. In addition to their work, scholars join academic organizations that relate to their fields of study. They subscribe to and edit journals that deal with topics of specific interest to them. And they recognize and reward those that excel in their field. On the other hand, an insightful scholar who combines, for instance, elements of philosophy and economics, will likely not receive the same level of
recognition as someone who does equally good work in the field of economics alone. The Nobel Prize Committee does not confer prizes for work in the field of “Miscellaneous.” In fact, people may come to find their very well being dependent on fitting into a specific field or structure, for a career and salary often depend on it. As previously discussed, there comes a point at which leaders of civic associations will no longer find it productive to carry out all of the goals of their organization. In this instance, language serves to redefine goals and limit the permissible range of actions.

Intellectual divisions act as a conservative force on society, slowing the possibility of radical change, because change must come one field at a time. Elites find other ways to slow the possibility of change through the use of language. One linguist, for instance, explains that societies codify a “standard language” to maintain order. Upon codification, the language becomes a part of curricula; as a result, the standard language tends to a conservative force that slows change in society (Poole 1999, 111). Another brake on societal change parallels the simplified classifications discussed earlier. Some writing argues that the designations given to problems affect the public’s conception of the issue as political or nonpolitical (Edelman 1977, 28). This would not be of interest if it could be shown that the public defines issues and categorizes them on its own. However, a study by McCombs and Shaw revealed “a strong correlation between issue emphasis in the mass media and voters’ ranking of major campaign issues. Voters did not selectively perceive the news in order to protect positions important to themselves or their groups, but instead depended on the media to define the political world for them” (Merelman 1984, 110). By defining an issue with language that causes the general public
to ignore it as “out of bounds,” the hegemonic class, which includes the media, makes it nearly impossible to question that aspect of society. The subjugated classes will fail to even consider the issue as part of the political process as they represent it. These issues become a taken-for-granted part of society – in fact, the public will generally acquiesce to elite values on issues that they perceive as occurring outside of the political realm (Edelman 1977, 136).

Forging a Consensus

Richard Merelman’s excellent work on culture and society, *Making Something of Ourselves*, studies a variety of aspects of American life. In the work, Merelman challenges the common assumption that a culture must be “tightly-bounded” to keep its unity. He discusses the United States as a “loosely-bounded” society – one in which citizens have a wide range of mediums and viewpoints open for them to access. While giving the appearance of a tolerant and diverse society, however, these modes of cultural transmission, Merelman contends, reduce the power of individuals to challenge the government because the cacophony of other viewpoints continually drowns them out. He notes that “a loosely-bounded culture contains an absorptive dynamic which attempts to engulf potential critics or dissidents” (Merelman 1984, 183). It also “absorbs diverse ideas and forges them into a superficial consensus” (Merelman 1984, 189). For instance, elites make honorific titles (like those conferred upon academics who excel in certain fields) available to all people, requiring minimal sacrifice (Merelman 1984, 66). Doing so allows citizens, at a minimal cost of power to our leaders, to feel that they have a stake in the government. The hegemonic class, however, does not employ honorific titles
solely as a thinly veiled façade behind which it can hide. These titles also serve as incentives to encourage citizens to buy into elite values and ideas. One scholar argues that soldiers, who possess the ability to monopolize force in society, have effectively ceded control of its use to the discretion of ordinary citizens. As a result, soldiers earn a chance to receive laurels and praise, thus moving up the ladder of power within society (Mills 1959, 174). A citizen, much like a soldier, garners prestige and admiration by meeting the requirements for honorific titles (doctor, teacher, manager, etc.). The hegemonic class has laid out these requirements, ensuring that each man who earns them will have, at least at some level, bought into the general assumptions of society. Furthermore, the availability of honorific titles serves another, possibly more important function: when a hegemonic class allows others to become a part of it, the class, in effect, maintains the current structure of society by incorporating the possible leaders of the subjugated classes into its own ranks (Pareto 1967, 258). Gramsci notes that the hegemonic class, as a result of its construction as a dynamic entity, can incorporate into its ranks all the elements of society (Gramsci 2003, 260). Unlike in times past, when governments used force to minimize the power of citizens seeking to disrupt the societal order, governments now preempt threats to their power by offering titles and incentives to those who may have the ability, motivation, or inclination to challenge the existing power structure. Threats do not disappear - they become part of the consensus.

As discussed above, the classification of issues as nonpolitical works as a further brake on change, defining parts of society that are outside the realm of contention. Even issues that the public perceives as political, however, suffer from inconsistencies that
challenge the dominant pluralist view. In reality, the public possess only a certain degree of influence in the political process – an amount certainly less than what is generally believed – and the language that describes politics makes this point implicitly clear (Edelman 1988, 97). Language about the political process serves as a type of ideology that citizens accept, often without question. It defines the way in which people represent society (and what role they have in it), thus helping to define their beliefs and actions. The very terms that describe the American political system further buttress these beliefs. For instance, each of the two major political parties in America has an intellectual backbone that frames its beliefs. Antonymic terms – liberalism and conservatism – denote these ideologies, as we will call them. As this paper will later show, words directly connect to thought – therefore, it is not surprising that citizens, more often than not, believe that they have an important and real choice to make between two eternally opposed parties. After all, the guiding philosophies of these two parties are denoted by opposite terms. In actuality, though, these parties do not stand steadfastly behind their ideologies, refusing to compromise, but instead will abandon some of their principles in exchange for time in power. As scholars note, the Democratic and Republican parties cast aside intransigence (Pareto 1967, 271). Even when one of these parties does not hold the majority of governmental power, it focuses its efforts on regaining influence, not on undermining the political system.

As they alternate in power; the voter must choose between one of these two consensus parties to have any real influence whatsoever (Mosca 1939, 154). In a study of elite theory, scholars have found evidence to support this position, noting that both the
Democratic and Republican parties have subscribed to many of the same assumptions since the 1940s (Dye and Ziegler 1984, 197). Mills offers a compelling argument in this vein:

The idea that the power system is a balancing society also assumes that the units in balance are independent of one another, for if business and labor or business and government, for example, are not independent of one another, they cannot be seen as elements of a free and open balance. But as we have seen, the major vested interests often compete less with one another in their effort to promote their several interests than they coincide on many points of interest and, indeed, come together under the umbrella of government. (Mills 1959, 266-267)

This argument raises a point relevant to this paper: language, which has delineated boundaries between areas such as “business,” “government,” and “labor,” hides many of the aspects of interdependency between these three. As Mills explains, this interdependency, though obscured by language, serves to ensure that the existing power structure will not collapse.

Outside the Status Quo

The hegemonic class often speaks forebodingly about the existence of another simplified class - political enemies who wish to alter the balance of power in society. Unlike the Democrats about whom the Republicans speak during a contested election, or vice versa, political enemies are characterized by the government as a whole as advocates of a complete overthrow of the existing political order. Using the natural issue simplifications that inevitably affect every area of political discourse, government officials and elites will highlight the terrible consequences that will follow any victory that political enemies have. The nonintransigent parties of the government will band
together to discredit this enemy, possibly labeling it a terrorist or radical to play upon the fears of the masses. Therefore, even a challenger of the hegemonic order may serve to further buttress it by crystallizing a shared target of resentment for both hegemonic and subjugated classes (Edelman 1988, 129).

Furthermore, certain designations dishonor or discredit those who do not meet societal standards. Frequently, they involve the medical field. One author relates the findings that classifications such as “mentally ill” are moral judgments about how well people conform to societal standards rather than scientifically-based determinations. Those with the ability to confer titles of sanity (often doctors, whose influence makes them a part of our hegemonic class) can thus determine the limits of acceptable action (Edelman 1977, 131). Gramsci gives an excellent summary: “However, it seems to me that one cannot start from the point of view that the State does not ‘punish’ (if this term is reduced to its human significance), but only struggles against social ‘dangerousness’. In reality, the State must be conceived of as an ‘educator’, in as much as it tends precisely to create a new type or level of civilization” (Gramsci 2003, 246-247).

Indeed, Gramsci may have been ahead of his time with these thoughts: subsequent research by Sarbin has shown that the word “dangerous” itself finds its roots in social position (Edelman 1977, 33). A study by Busten shows that the terms hospital staffs use to discuss patients determine the staffs’ attitudes towards the patients. For instance, staffs that speak of “privileges” as opposed to “rights” will be less likely to grant autonomy to patients, regardless of the patients’ behavior (Edelman 1977, 131). We can hypothesize that these conclusions may affect other instances: euphemisms that change the way the
public thinks about actions during wartime may create greater support for these actions and euphemisms that conceal undemocratic aspects of regimes may make the public less inclined to challenge these regimes.

The English language also helps to implicitly teach democracy by adapting and changing. Richard Merelman, who uses this fact in *Making Something of Ourselves* to show the “loosely-bounded” nature of American culture, in general, notices how readily American English incorporates new words. Quoting the work of Dillar, he notes that the acceptance of words from minority groups gives the American government an appearance of democratic tolerance (Merelman 1984, 64). As language recognizes them, minorities begin to feel that they, too, have an important stake in a democratic government and society. Further, Merelman explains that even traditional words have acquired multiple meanings, some of which further the impression of equality throughout American society. He states:

A word with an even greater vogue in recent years is ‘share.’ Contemporary American English uses ‘share’ to refer to everything from a quality of intimate relationships to its traditional meaning: the distribution of wealth. ‘Sharing’ of one’s feelings is a sure sign of ‘caring’ about people, of being ‘related,’ and of staying ‘in touch’ with others rather than being isolated. Typically, therefore, in institutions that specialize in culture transmission, ‘sharing’ appears as a central theme. Elementary school teachers in American schools are eager to ‘share ideas’ with parents and to have their students share their feelings with the class. Advertisers and pastors ‘share’ ideas with their audiences in an often clumsy attempt at influence. The language of sharing and contact is particularly appealing because it conforms to our conception of ourselves as equals. ‘Sharing’ is a relationship between peers, and the term thus legitimates linguistically the
efforts of schools, the mass media, and advertisers to transmit a democratic culture. (Merelman 1984, 58-59)

Criticism of statements like those of Merelman may argue that they erroneously represent the nature of word meanings. Many pluralists, for example, contend that dictionaries give rise to definitions (and thus dominant usages) of words, and that dictionaries themselves are a democratic form of expression in which all citizens have an equal stake (Alford and Friedland 1985, 27). However, those who have access to the channels of communication that pervade our society – such as politicians and the media – can most easily shape the ways in which citizens use language. All of these individuals have accepted the value consensus of society. To further this point, notice that those whom Merelman points to in having a hand in shaping the word “share” (“teachers,” “advertisers,” “pastors”) all have membership in the hegemonic class. Arguing that all citizens can shape equally a dictionary (or, more accurately, the common usages of language in society) simplifies the nature of the situation; certainly, common usages by ordinary people may have some effect on word meanings, but elites have the most important stake in defining American English.

The Power of Implication

Simplifications, as explained in the discussion above, conceal various features of the entities they represent. As implied before, if these concealed features include, for instance, whether a television screen is 25 or 28 inches, it may not be of extreme importance. However, the concealed features about the nature of welfare policy can have critical ramifications for the political order. Linguists recognize that most statements contain multiple levels of meaning, one of the most important of which is implication
(Austin 1962, 47-50; Poole 1999, 34). Political scientists, following in this work, note the impact of this fact on daily political life (Edelman 2001, 91).

Words that have latent political meanings shape an important part of the societal lexicon. Work on political language has shown that the language used to describe “hierarchies” frequently minimizes the importance of those lower on the chain of command, deflecting credit for much of their work to those who already possess the majority of the power (Edelman 1988, 54). One study exposes that the use of complex symbols and language has served, in some instances, to generate covert racist attitudes (Schäffner and Wenden 1995, 117-118). Others have highlighted the power of implication through references to specific genetic factors such as blood type (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950, 104). Throughout society, further examples can be located: the implication that intellectuals do not understand the “real world,” that the wealthy fail to work hard, that blacks are uncivilized, and that Southerners are uneducated. In all of these cases, the audience understands, on some level, the implications expressed. However, because speakers can employ hidden meanings in place of explicit ones, others have a more difficult time challenging these insinuations. Much as political enemies who willingly express their opposition to regimes serve as a target that governments can attack directly (thus increasing the support for the government), political expressions that overtly attack members of society can be easily challenged and discredited. Edelman states,

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4 Poole cites Paul Grice, who developed four maxims of communication: maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. The maxim of relevance “reflects the inclination for [a] man to assume that what [someone] said was relevant to his situation.” Such an assumption is only possible if one understands that the speaker implies certain things with his or her words.
Beliefs in political enemies seem to influence public opinion most powerfully when the enemy is not named explicitly, but evoked through an indirect reference...Implicit associations with an enemy lend emotional intensity to a public issue, while the explicit naming of an enemy makes it easier for the opposition to rebut the premise and create some self doubts among those who accept it. (Edelman 1988, 73)

Hidden meanings serve the dual purpose of creating subconscious undertones that frame debates while preventing opposition to unsavory positions from arising.

In all of the above cases, hidden meanings buttress the interests of the hegemonic class by devaluing the role of subordinates (in hierarchies), creating subordinate class tensions (racism), or implicitly discrediting challengers to the current power structure. Another, more recognized, form of hidden meaning conceals unpleasant realities of everyday life. Euphemisms, or “political metaphors,” can allow speakers to highlight the benefits from a course of action while overlooking its consequences (Edelman 1971, 70). In one essay, an author points to the word “democracy,” stating that, “It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it” (Orwell 1956, 359? 360?). The fact that no one has agreed upon a fixed definition of democracy does not matter: it is a rhetorical trick, a synonym for a type of good that forces citizens of the United States and other recognized democracies into contentment. Certainly, these citizens can express displeasure with the actions that their governments take, but they cannot question the overall structure of the political or societal arena. Elites define a broad variety of regimes as democratic and people approve of any government with this classification. Indeed, if democracy has become synonymous with “desirable,” elites can dismiss any challengers to the structure of democratic governments as people who want
something undesirable. The term democracy, a simplification in and of itself, hides the unpleasant realities from public view.

Authors have most commonly recognized the use of euphemism for describing war and its aftermath. One scholar, however, finds that elites use euphemism (my term) to describe the entire international philosophy of the United States. William Robinson argues that the United States has often engaged in unsavory international practices to benefit its internationally-situated elite. Using case studies, he shows convincingly that the justifications given by American leaders for international action involve faulty logic; despite their rationalizations, they seek to obtain the most beneficial outcome for American elites. The most common justification invoked, that of democracy promotion, cannot be verified logically or empirically (Robinson 1996, 55). Thus “democracy promotion,” a palatable goal for many, is really nothing more than a euphemism that conceals undesirable actions (Robinson 1996, 15). George Orwell, in his classic essay “Politics and the English Language” lists other terms, often involving war, that conceal unpleasant emotional realities of governmental actions (Orwell 1956, 363). Hegemonic classes will speak about “collateral damage” instead of the deaths of innocent civilians, “casualties” in place of deaths, “victory” instead of killing, “killing” instead of murder. Each one of the phrases that conceal hidden meanings serves to subconsciously frame the values and assumptions of the subjugated classes.

Ideologies

One thinker argues that the idea of progress has served as a powerful ideology for hundreds of years. As he explains, French intellectuals put forth the theory of continual
improvement to foster support for the regime by convincing citizens that it consistently bettered society, if only by small degrees at times (Sorel 1969, vi). A look towards modern America shows that citizens use the word “progress” in a similar manner. Elites often mask policy failures by stating that, though things have not unfolded as desired, “We’re making progress.” This phrasing forces citizens into contentment because the hidden meaning behind it implies that another government may not even secure a minimal level of progress. And yet another government will assuredly justify its faltering actions by a similar slogan. Edelman finds that leaders always seek to portray themselves as innovative trailblazers to maintain support for their actions (Edelman 1988, 53). The classification of elite action as “progress” simplifies the situation; at the same time, it ensures the basic consent of the people to the current societal order.

Balance of power theory serves as another ideology that frames the representation of society for many citizens. Taking note of the linguistic meaning of the term, one author remarks that “balance” implies a harmony or equality, which elites use to justify the societal order. Those that challenge the power of the hegemonic class do not only attack them but the entire equilibrium of society (Mills 1959, 246). The idea of balance, though, comes about not through empirical observations about society but through declarations by the hegemonic class. Raymond Aron comments that the West has “brought an end to class struggle, though admittedly not by substituting a miraculous harmony of interests for yesterday’s conflicts; instead, it has merely proclaimed, and prohibited the questioning of, the very fact that such a harmony exists” (Aron 1985, 244).
So far, we have demonstrated the shortcomings of human language usage in describing society. As has been shown, many of these shortcomings involve political issues and shape political cognition. In most of the cases discussed, the hegemonic class, which by definition has access to channels of communication, articulates the terms of political debates. If one could show convincingly that these terms were universal and timeless, that they had some natural weight behind them, then elites would not be as powerful as this paper conceives them. Indeed, if the hegemonic class only spoke of things universal and timeless, they would be little more than a mouthpiece giving voice to innate opinions in mankind. However, the nature of human cognition and language discounts the possibility that universal truth exists as described and articulated by humans to one another. Walter Kaufmann, in his introduction to the work of Nietzsche, captured the philosopher’s eloquent thoughts on this subject: “… knowing is not an attempt to mirror an independently real world, but rather a process of accommodating ourselves to the world in which we live and that world to us: truths are humanly constructed instruments designed to serve human purposes” (Nietzsche 1979, xxxi-xxxii). Nietzsche concluded that human understanding could only be as detailed as language allowed (Nietzsche 1979, xxxv). Scholars of political science must take the loss of detail discussed in the preceding pages into account. This paper attempts to do so.

*Language as a Means to Represent Problems*

Thus far, we have completed a somewhat extensive survey of language. We have examined the ways in which language contributes to citizens’ understanding and conception of government and, more specifically, democracy. We have also found the
ways in which language affects human thought and what this tells us about society. In
the preceding pages, the principle whose various aspects have been partially articulated
by many scholars – that language does not simply describe reality but serves to create its
own type of reality – has come into focus. The fact remains, however, that, no matter
how many examples we give to show the shortcomings of language, a hegemonic theory,
as conceived by Gramsci, can never be proven entirely.

Gramscian hegemony, which depends on the subjugated class internalizing the
values and assumptions of the hegemonic class, cannot be quantified. Were we to give
thousands of examples, we still could not reach an empirical threshold that would prove
the existence of hegemony in modern America. Likewise, finding no examples of
hegemonic relations would not rule out the possibility that they could one day be found.
The only satisfactory proof will employ logically-based conclusions grounded in
evidence, for no evidence alone can suffice. The following section, then, will make use
of the examples cited in this paper to develop a conception (framework) that can logically
verify the existence of, at least, some minor degree of hegemony. The section will draw
on work dealing with problem representation to come to its conclusions. With our
background understanding of problem representation, we can turn our attention to
hegemony and whether it exists as per this study.

To begin with, it is instructive to ask: if hegemonic relations, which involve a
binding value consensus that by definition deprives subjugated classes of some power,
exist, why do subjugated classes fail to take collective action to alter the power structure?
The question has important implications for any logical study of hegemony. As I
conceive of it, four possible answers exist. The first, and perhaps most obvious, solution says that language, though it has natural shortcomings which present false choices and mischaracterizations, is not significant enough to create an internalization of values on the part of subjugated classes. This answer, following in the pluralist vein, argues that hegemonic theories cannot and do not prove any significant anti-democratic tendencies in modern America (or in any other society, for that matter), but only show a few examples of imperfections in society. A second possible answer argues that the subjugated classes, while recognizing that elites (consciously or subconsciously) imbue citizens with certain values and misrepresent the amount of power the subjugated classes wield, neglect to take corrective action because they fear violent repercussions. Scholarly work challenges the validity of this argument: scholars recognize that force alone cannot maintain societal order. Rather, elites can only maintain societal order through a combination of force and a binding value consensus that Vilfredo Pareto termed “persuasion” (1963, 54).

Therefore, any explanation that argues that citizens do not challenge the political order solely out of fear of reprisals overlooks the fact that, at some level, citizens have been convinced into accepting the dominant order. The third possible explanation states that citizens understand they have been persuaded into accepting hegemonic relations – that is, they recognize the existing inequalities in the power structure that do not correspond to the world which they are taught exists – but they do not care to challenge them. Unlike the first two propositions, this one cannot be logically discounted out of hand. As remarked earlier, the existence of hegemonic relations does not necessarily mean that subjugated classes will not have their interests realized. In fact, it may be possible to
show that the current hegemonic order effectively secures the most desirable outcomes for all of society. Thus, this explanation does not contradict the fact that hegemony exists; it only hypothesizes that citizens prefer a hegemonic order of which they are conscious. Up until this point, however, no significant studies have found that hegemony exists in modern America and that Americans consciously and collectively recognize this fact. Further work must be completed in this area to prove or disprove this hypothesis.

A fourth possible solution has direct relevance to the work described in this paper. I propose that the reason why subjugated classes do not challenge the existing hegemonic order is because they do not represent the problem in the correct way and therefore cannot recognize hegemony. Formulating the power structure and government of American society as a “problem” allows us to better view the way in which the American people represent these institutions and the choices they make regarding their participation in them.

Why do citizens fail to represent society in the “right” way? As this study has shown, American English is a complex symbol that represents society, its power structure, and government is a variety of ways. Oftentimes, this representation is false – such as in the case of two diametrically opposed ideologies, liberalism and conservatism. More commonly, though the representation is incomplete – human limitations force us to generalize about people and issues, thus presenting incomplete choices in the political realm. These aspects of society are rarely questioned because they are hidden by one of the most natural of human actions – language. Subjugated classes internalize the same conception of the world as the one held by elites because language misrepresents this
conception as truth. This is the very essence of Gramscian hegemony - the representation Americans hold of their society is far from complete or accurate.

The question then arises: why do citizens fail to realize that their conception of society is incorrect? One author finds that “people actively construct multiple candidate explanations for important events, eventually selecting one as the believed explanation.” He goes on to state that “people are not disinterested understanders. They have rather strong predispositions for and against certain possible explanations” (Sylvan and Voss 1998, 33). While this statement holds true in regards to common problems and occurrences, one cannot assume that it will hold true when describing hegemonic relations. To argue that people construct various explanations for the entire order of society, on which hegemonic classes act, would be a gross simplification. As the previous paragraphs have demonstrated, this order, and its basic aspects, is taught to citizens, implicitly and explicitly, from a very young age. It is instilled as common sense, a background with which people will construct multiple explanations for other, less encompassing situations. Citizens will not be able to construct “multiple candidate explanations” for a problem that they do not perceive to exist.

Another study sheds further light on the failure of citizens to represent society as a hegemonic entity. This work, done on specific policy proposals for the South African government during its transition from apartheid, is much more relevant and applicable to the problem representations people possess of modern society. The study concluded that “expertise in solving complex but ill-structured political problems is MORE closely coupled to verbal ability and a person’s social status than to problem-solving successes or
cognitive abilities” (Sylvan and Voss 1998, 177). As conceived of in our study, there is little doubt the political hegemonic relations is a “complex” and “ill-structured” problem; indeed, language, which masks the true nature of society while appearing to be completely natural and logical, is itself a complex variable. Elites serve to structure thought about society by employing language to demystify and simplify it. Groups and categorizations, while appearing natural to the common man, produce arbitrary divisions in society and affect the way in which citizens think about it. Academic divisions and fields of work provide order to society at the cost of inflexibility. Word meanings give implicit, yet easy-to-understand, clues about the supposed ways in which people interact. These meanings also functions as sign posts the point citizens toward specific lines of thought about others. Taken together, these variables give structure to what is, in actuality, an ill-structured problem: the nature of society. The elites, who define the terms of language, are thus able to create a problem representation of society that, while not natural, appears to be so. The subjugated classes (and a majority of the hegemonic class), much like the political novices described in the study, do not posses the extremely advanced verbal ability to formulate their own problems representations; as a result, they

5 The study is explained in Chapter 7 of Sylvan and Voss (1998). Helen Purkitt, in “Problem Representation and Political Expertise,” surveyed twelve people with knowledge of South African politics and asked them to develop proposals to create a smooth transition from the apartheid-era government. Though all of those surveyed had some background in politics (the least educated participant was a general who had served in the South African military for decades, while the most seasoned subject had a PhD in political science and many years of practical political field experience), the author ranked the participants in a hierarchy from “novice” to “expert.” In the process of formulating their proposals, the experts were far more verbose than novices in describing the problem and articulating their thoughts and ideas aloud as they deliberated. In the end, the study discovered that experts, perhaps aided by their verbal ability, took the time to develop their own representations of the problem given them, while “novices” assumed that the problem given to them to fix had already been formulated in the correct way.

These findings are extremely important to our study of hegemony, because they imply that subjugated classes, which consist almost entirely of political novices, do not even posses the ability to formulate a representation of society or the political system different from the one given to them.
accept the one given to them by society. Many elites subconsciously accept this problem representation as well. It is of little surprise then that hegemony, put in place by the use of language, both exists and fails to be challenged by the subjugated classes of society.

**Conclusions**

Problem representation matters. It organizes human thought and helps human beings understand a complex and seemingly illogical world. It does not, however, do so neutrally: two people, employing two different problem representations, will come to view a single issue in vastly different ways, and will likely choose different solutions according to their representations of the issue.

In society, language is one of the key tools for creating individual problem representations. Language tells Americans almost everything they know about the country in which they live and about those that live around them. Because society is a stratified entity consisting of different classes (in this paper, we have defined them as the hegemonic class and the subjugated class), those with access to mediums of broad communication shape the ways in which language describes society more significantly than those without this access. As a result, the “problem representations,” which arise out of language subconsciously in the minds of all citizens, frame thought in such a way that both hegemonic and subjugated classes take their conception of society as natural. People speak about objects using the same terms, in the same way. This speech hides troubling realities, incorporating them into the value consensus that holds together society. As Gramsci notes, hegemony involves the internalization of the dominant ways of life and beliefs of a hegemonic class on the part of all citizens. In today’s society,
language has made this possible by rendering alternate representations of the social order unattainable.

In this study, we have used two seemingly unrelated apparatuses – problem representation and language – to construct a conception of modern society that points to a hegemonic order. However, as previously stated, hegemony has become so deeply rooted that it cannot be studied quantitatively, which would be the most insightful method. Therefore, scholars must use other tools in their studies. I would suggest that any further work attempting to locate significant hegemonic relations, using a framework different from mine, could be extremely beneficial to theories in this area. Furthermore, the above work on language is far from complete, and could be strengthened by greater work in the field.

There are some important limitations to the scope of this study of which one should take note. Firstly, because many of the examples used apply solely to American English or American government, this paper can only extend its conclusions to the United States. However, because language usage and human thought procedures do not vary greatly from society to society, further work done in a similar vein to this may show that many Western-style democracies give rise to a hegemonic order not unlike that found in America today. Specific work on the problem representations that language creates in other democracies which focuses on the use of language specifically in these countries can further amplify or discredit Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Secondly, so as to prevent misinterpretations of this paper’s argument, it must be reiterated that the work in this paper does not attempt to demonstrate any malevolent intentions of the hegemonic
class, nor does it claim to. Because language is so deeply rooted in the human psyche, it would be folly to claim, without any evidence to back it, that a “class,” which has no cohesive coordination or organization, can plot the development of an entire language so as to ensure that the class maintains power. Indeed, not only is it unlikely that the hegemonic class works in cohesion, it is quite possible that the existing hegemonic order is more beneficial, on the whole, to every member in society that any other power structure would be.

Finally, it must be stressed that it would be very impractical to alter some of the aspects of language of which this paper has taken note. For instance, though this paper spent a good deal of time highlighting the ill effects caused by simplified categories of which humans make use, it would be impossible to change this fact of life. Expecting each policy discussion to articulate the different effects that a certain law would have on each and every immigrant, for example, would not only be ridiculous, it would also be physically and mentally impossible. However, just because these facts cannot be changed does not mean that it is unhelpful to take note of them.

This study has argued that the work of Antonio Gramsci, which was completed early in the 20th century, still has a great deal of relevance, despite the triumph of both capitalism and democracy in the later half of this century. American society still retains some semblance of hegemony. This paper has shown that the problem representation of society created by language allows hegemonic relations to continue in modern America. Many deny this fact, precisely because the problem representation that accepted by
political novices has become ingrained in the collective psyche not for what it is, but rather for common sense.

By recognizing some of the shortcomings of language and the ways in which it gives an incomplete representation of society, one can better understand the world in which one lives.
Referenced Works


