The battle of the black box: axiological condensation's role in building procedural knowledge in the South African parliament

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Maton (in press) argues that two types of condensation of meaning take place in knowledge-building processes: epistemological condensation, in which abstract, decontextualized theory is derived from concrete, contextualized data; and axiological condensation, in which actions and ideas are associated with each other and loaded with a particular moral value. This paper describes how axiological condensation is involved in the production of knowledge in a meeting of the South African parliament's Portfolio Committee on Transport. This meeting was observed as part of a broader ethnographic study investigating the discursive effects of recontextualization (Bernstein 2003) between the spoken, written and visual modes in the South African parliament's committee process. In this meeting, members of this newly-constituted committee argued over whether or not to amend a draft committee report and in the process co-produced procedural norms for future committee meetings. Participants on both sides of the argument used axiological condensation and its reverse, decondensation, to portray their version of the procedure to be followed as morally superior to that of their opponents. This is revealed through an Attitude analysis (Martin and White 2005) of the members' talk, combined with elements of Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz 1982). The analysis demonstrates that axiological (de)condensation in this meeting occurs in waves and is accomplished through indexing events in a previous meeting of the committee as well as political discourses in the South African context of culture which have their origins in the apartheid era.

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