

A MULTI-FUNCTIONAL ESSAY PROMPT FOR
STATE MANDATED ASSESSMENTS,
USING AN EXAMPLE FROM
THE T.A.K.S. AS MODEL

by

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When I returned to the University of Texas at Arlington in 2001, at the age of 55, to complete my undergraduate degree, I was a published novelist who had forgotten how to write a thesis sentence. I had forgotten as well the American literary voices, such as Emerson and Thoreau, who were deeply embedded in my own work. It was my good fortune to take four classes with the indomitable Emory Estes, who re-ignited my love of classical American literature and who also, from the ground up, helped me to re-construct myself as an academic writer.. Also as an undergraduate, I was re-introduced to Homer and Shakespeare by Nancy Price and Dallas Lacey, and under their tutelage my re-discovery of these masters was to have upon me a profound effect.

I was to continue my association with two of my undergraduate professors, Kevin Gustafson and Ken Roemer, while a graduate student. Each of these men are task masters—first rate writing coaches—who held me to high composition standards and demonstrated patiently when I failed to meet them. The graduate level argument class that I took with Nancy Wood was particularly eye-opening because for the first time I was able to perceive the novel as persuasive argument, which is a perspective that I will retain in my future work.

The mention of persuasion brings me finally to my thesis adviser and rhetoric professor, Kevin Porter, to whom I am utterly grateful not only for his fine instruction and dialogic assistance in the shaping of this thesis, but also for the patience he has exhibited with the middle-aged skepticism I brought so often to his illuminating classes.

Finally, to the Department of English and all its hardworking staff I wish to extend my humble thanks.

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ABSTRACT

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A State-mandated assessment of high school English composition skills can be a trying experience for sophomore basic writers. Because students must construct a text-supported argument around the State's choice of theme, it is of the utmost importance that the assessors present for thematic considerations a properly identified subject that is universally accessible to all sophomores. Through the analysis of an essay prompt used in a benchmark exam from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills—a sentence in which I discern both ambiguity and inaccessibility—this thesis hopefully sheds light on considerations that should be made in the construction of an effective writing prompt. The TAKS paradigm is examined as argument, speech act, and utterance—each of which coalesces around and is completed by a performative prompting sentence—in an effort to make a contribution to the rhetorical content validity of the testing procedures that give shape to State-mandated English composition assessments.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I taught high school English in Uvalde, a small southwest Texas town of fifteen thousand people that lies approximately seventy miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. I taught sophomores my first year, 2005-2006, and then seniors from 2006-2008. Uvalde High School has an alarmingly high dropout rate among their student body, which is eighty-two percent Hispanic (Balfanz 26). In 2007, we—my high school, my teaching colleagues, and myself—were included in an ignominious listing, again reported by Balfanz, of two thousand American high schools that are considered “dropout factories” (26). But I did not need a Johns Hopkins University study to remind me of the absences I noticed each day—the students I taught as sophomores who did not stay until their senior year. My thesis, which asserts the inadequacy of a seemingly insignificant essay prompt, has much to do with effectively communicating with just such boys and girls in the minuscule ways that leads to rapprochement. Why bother with rapprochement in a prompt? Because if a basic writer has a sense that he has agreed upon a certain subject, he will respond more creatively than if he feels he is being commanded. And an effective speech act (or argument, or utterance) that evokes a creative response has benefits for the best of student writers, as well as for the hesitant ones.

The essay prompt in question—nine simple words—is part of a practice test released to my school in 2005 by representatives of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, our State-authorized testing authority, hereafter referred to by its acronym, TAKS. The benchmark test in question employs a composite text of three parts (known as the *triplet*):

1. A three-page first person narrative, entitled “The Quality of Mercy,” written from the perspective of an adult who is reminiscing about a childhood adventure during

which he and another boy rescued a carp that was stranded in the shallow water of a creek bed.

2. A five-page expository article, entitled “A ‘Real School’ Is Born,” about a Harlem intermediate school, threatened with closure, that comes under the management of a principal who is determined to re-establish the school’s academic excellence.
3. A one-page graphic representation—an advertisement promoted by the American Association of Professional Nurses—with a simple statement that one million new nurses will be needed by the year 2010, and three inset pictures depicting nurses as they tend to patients. Its intent is to recruit potential nursing candidates.

The actual assessment involving the triplet consists of numerous multiple choice questions, two box responses of five lines and a box response of eight lines, and the essay prompt itself. The box responses might be thought of as micro-arguments. There are actual graphic boxes of five and eight lines, with the following questions for the five line responses:

1. In “The Quality of Mercy”, what do the boys learn from their experience at the creek? Support your answer with evidence from the selection; and,
2. Based on your reading of “A ‘Real School’ Is Born”, do you think Monroe made the right decision for the school? Explain you answer and support it with evidence from the selection.

The eight-line box response is referred to as the “crossover” because it requires students to compare two aspects of the triplet. The question is: How is the fish in “The Quality of Mercy” similar to Robinson Cuevas in “A ‘Real School’ Is Born”? Support your answer with evidence from both selections.

I approve of this format because in the answering of the multiple choice questions, and in the construction of the micro-arguments, the student has an opportunity to gather facts and assemble assertions that will aid her as she composes the essay, in regards to which, beneath

the prompt in question, there is a simple box of instructions—six bullets reminding the student to keep on topic, be thoughtful and interesting, proof read, and so on.

During the spring of 2006, as I was casting about for a thesis subject, I noticed the annoyance some of my students expressed about the wording of the essay prompt in this practice test, which my department had used as a benchmark. Rather pointedly, some of my most imaginative students remarked in similar ways that they “didn’t get” what the prompt was asking. Frankly, at the time—filled with six decades of data about the intended theme—I didn’t get their confusion. The prompt seemed a straightforward enough sentence: *write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility*. Coming back to it months later, however, I by chance noticed that two distinct subjects are raised, one embedded within the other. Based on the three texts the students must read as part of the test, are they supposed to develop a theme about “accepting responsibility”, or are they to develop as a theme the significance of the act? The first allows a rather broad range of response, the second does not, and I will challenge its narrowness. What occurred to me immediately about this ambiguity, though, was the weakness of the prompt as a referring statement. It does not clearly identify the topic.

After this problem of reference was isolated, I began to sense a slogan-like quality to the prompt that led to a second area of investigation—its assertion of a class-based validity claim that discourages dissent. To illustrate how this may prove disabling to some of my sophomores, I have novelized the “life-world” of students I have come to know well. There will be thumbnail sketches throughout this thesis. For the most part, my mainstream students were smart and clever. Easily half of them could have qualified for advanced placement, but had chosen not to. Education is not a high priority in Uvalde. Only half of the adult population of Uvalde County has graduated from high school. As an indication of their socio-economic standing, sixty-five percent of the children enrolled in the high school qualify for free lunches (Balfanz 26). Despite the righteous demand that their children learn to properly read and write, Standard English is spoken in only a minority of homes. This lack, compounded by years of

scarce funding for public schools, has produced a generation of secondary students with poor command of standard English usage. Too many of Uvalde's children lack adeptness at punctuation and spelling. They block write, rarely paragraphing; and they have scant knowledge of the six major verb tenses. The compound/complex sentences they should have learned as sophomores prove still daunting as seniors. But they can draw solid conclusions based on evidence, which is one of the TAKS requirements in the English Language Arts. Essays are scored on a range of one to four, with a "1" failing and a "4" being exemplary. Despite my students' intelligence and imagination, many were writing only "2"s, and doing so solely on their ability to make and support assertions. Because their written command of language is poor, having an expressive opinion is their main strength. What I hope to demonstrate is that allowing a range of argument that enables a student's main strengths is a consideration that an essay prompt should and can make. The narrower the range of argument, the greater the number of struggling writers who will fall from passing scores to failing ones. Realizing that "dropping out of high school is not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement," experience accordingly has shown me that failure to master the TAKS essay is sometimes a sophomore's final disengaging act, hence the sense of urgency I have cast around my modest prompt proposals, because "nationally, much of the dropping out of school has shifted from the last two years of high school (typical three decades ago) to between the 9th and 10th grades today" (*Silent* 8).

That so many of my perceptive and talented students have been disadvantaged from birth is the *pathos* of my argument. My students will become evidence and the *pathos* they evoke will "endow [them] with a *presence*, which is an essential factor in argumentation" (Perelman 116). The empathetic manner in which I orchestrate this endowment will define my own *ethos* as a caring teacher who is dismayed by the too frequent loss of such remarkable talent. Aristotle will not figure prominently in this thesis until chapter four, but the conscious use of his classical techniques can be considered a construction suggestively parallel to the

approach that the TAKS assessors should be using. I will contend that not only the *pisteis* of Aristotle should be studied in essay prompt construction, but also Socratic *anacrisis*. The means to elicit a dialogic response go back thousands of years, and even the most profound of our modern rhetoricians seem at times to be re-inventing the Classical Greeks. Surely the theme of “responsibility” was a matter of concern to them as well, and any responses generated by the TAKS along those lines are continuations of dialogues long embedded in Western thought. This still living discourse is a testament to open dialogue, diachronically irrepressible, and it is in this spirit that the TAKS essay prompt should define an open-ended argument.

The open-ended argument of my own thesis might be outlined, chapter by chapter, as follows:

I. Criticisms of State-Mandated Assessments.

- A. Teaching to the test.
- B. Answerability.
 - 1. Socratic *anacrisis*.
 - 2. *Anacrisis* in the English classroom.
- C. Superaddressivity.
- D. An alternative essay prompt.

II. The Prompt as Referring Expression.

- E. Performative and constative sentences.
 - 1. Reference and identification.
 - 2. Predication
- F. Freire’s limit situation.
 - 1. “Novelized” sophomore voices.
 - 2. Mimicry.
 - 3. The prompt as existential proposition.
- G. Austin’s paradigm of a performative statement.

III. An Intoned Prompt as Illocutionary Force.

- A. The TEKS-Teacher-TAKS cycle.
- B. Truth-conditional assumptions.
- C. A Bakhtinian perspective of intonation.
- D. Locution, illocution, and perlocution.
- E. The inference of a promise of reasonableness.

IV. The Prompt as Conciliatory Argument.

- A. TAKS as eristic argument.
- B. Toulmin's warrants of persuasion and backing.
- C. Rogerian argument
 - 1. Aristotle's *pisteis*.
 - 2. Habermas' speech act agreement.

V. Conclusion: TAKS as Class Slogan.

- A. Bentham: TAKS as eulogistic covering of limit situations.
- B. Burke: mystification
 - 1. Merger terms
 - 2. Division terms
- C. The need for inclusive, accessible evaluative language.

CHAPTER 2

CRITICISMS OF STATE-MANDATED ASSESSMENTS

Overview: The basis for this beginning chapter can be found in my own experience as an English teacher/TAKS proctor in a low performing high school that finds itself in the unenviable position of having to raise its TAKS scores. We teachers in the front lines bemoan this teach to the test syndrome primarily because it takes precious time away from instruction in what we feel are more important topics and subjects. Rhetorically, topics and subjects are the partial stuff of genres, and it is the addition of time-consuming TAKS mastery genres into the already crowded curriculum of established genres that inhibits the significant deductive/inductive learning we want from our children. The danger that “assessment itself produces its own discourse” (Huot, *New Discourse* 165) becomes everyday more evident in Texas public schools.

Brian Huot’s is one of the supporting voices harmonizing my own professional perspective of the TAKS as a sometimes procedurally flawed foundational utterance. I try to show that part of what scholars such as Huot are calling for is a sense of *answerability* on the part of State assessment authorities. Bakhtin’s answerable act, as well as his construct of the *superaddressee*, will hopefully illuminate where as interlocutor in the discourse stands the TAKS “voice”. Mostly hidden is what it is, in a rhetorical moment when it should be utterly visible.

Bakhtin proves useful also as an interpreter of Socratic *anacrisis*, which describes the very real collectively nourishing yet adversarial environment of an English language arts classroom, as opposed to the sterile test day context of the TAKS. In addition to Bakhtin and Huot, I rely on Volosinov, Kay Halasek, and Frank Farmer to converse with me through this chapter.

Complementing their function as a test of student abilities, state-mandated assessments such as the TAKS are also used either “to reward or sanction schools for their academic performance” (Greene 3). Since they desire the rewards but tremble at the thought of the sanctions, what is to prevent schools from “developing ways to improve results...without actually improving real learning” (4)? This seems to be the most often voiced criticism of the “teach to the test” atmosphere that has been cultivated by high stakes testing. The response to this fear of falsification has been the adoption of accountability measures by various states. An effective precaution is to consistently compare the high stakes results to the more frequently administered low stakes tests to determine if claims of score improvements match.

But such speculations lie outside the scope of this paper. At Uvalde High School, it is fear of a testing impropriety that drives the administering of the TAKS. Teachers are drilled and re-drilled about proper procedure, and we are repeatedly reminded that a mistake could cost us our certification. In this regard, we teachers who administer the TAKS are counterpoised in the same agonistic stance as are the students who must take the test. That the TAKS might inspire a cooking of results is merely symptomatic of the intimidation that it generates. It is this climate of intimidation that is the major drawback of state-mandated assessments; and an example of this too easily assumed posture of authority on the part of the assessors is an essay prompt such as the one in question. The TAKS authority is utterly comfortable with the issuance of a validity claim that makes of the test the sort of “ideological discourse” that Bakhtin would refer to as “unitary language” or “correct language[...]. A unitary language is not something given [*dan*] but is always in essence posited [*zadan*]—and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia” (*DI* 270), just as, for example, *the importance of accepting responsibility* is opposed to a dissenting opinion. Much more will be written to this point but for now, regarding my own high school, it must be admitted that fear of TAKS failure does indeed drive us to “teach to the test”.

In the spring of 2006, perhaps two weeks before my sophomores were due to take the TAKS in the English Language Arts, I was told rather abruptly to cease my current lesson plans and to begin instruction on how to compose five-line and eight-line box responses. The box responses are designed as a sort of short-hand argument in which students are given a limited space in which to state an opinion and support it with a textual quote. At the time, I was in the midst of teaching how to compose an essay with documentation, an endeavor I considered more important than box responses, but I did as I was told. As one might guess, when the scores were finally tabulated my students did quite well on the box responses but did not fare as well on the essay. Due to the tight schedule and curriculum demands, I was never able to return to the teaching of essays that are documented with the emphasis I had intended. I would notice that lack two years later when some of those sophomores were seniors, and I had to drill essay documentation once again. Situations like this bring to mind the old adage about robbing Peter to pay Paul. Essential instructive time is high jacked because “grading and testing are associated with assessments as an activity with no value for teaching or learning. This kind of assessment, existing outside of a context in which a student might improve his or her work, can be labeled summative, whereas those judgments that allow the student to improve are called formative” (Huot, *New Discourse* 167).

Even as I was writing this draft, my administrators were pulling from my class for extra tutoring all seniors who did not pass the exit level math TAKS . Perhaps a dozen of them missed three hours of instruction and collaborative drill on how to read a poem, a rather necessary adjunct to Shakespeare, seeing as how in that unit I introduced the iambic foot. These sorts of debilitating administrative responses become routine when passing the TAKS is the first priority of a school that has reason to fear being sanctioned.

“Teaching to the test” violates any number of tenets held by a teacher such as myself who feels aligned with Bakhtin’s belief in the significance of genres. For instance, teaching to the test (as will again be remarked upon) is in fact an emphasis on the very limited genres of

assessment mastery, which impoverishes the mastery of others. "The better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them...in a word, the more perfectly we implement our free speech plan" (80). And as regards composition, by over emphasizing the mastery of testing genres, we run the risk of making composite texts such as the triplet appear "as finished products", that is, dialogically closed. And in this fashion, "it is also possible to reify attitudes toward texts...that is, we can make into products the very attitudes we invite our students to take toward models that we present to them" (Farmer 88). The danger here, of course, is that writing is a process not a product, and "developing a position toward another's words is as much a process as writing a paper in one's own words" (89). This trumping of process-positioning by product is echoed when Huot writes, "Assessment practices that use grades and teachers' written comments as ways to 'sort' students or demand mastery of certain 'skills' outside the context of a specific piece of writing remain at odds with a pedagogy that recognizes students' socially positioned nature as language users" (New Discourse 164).

Choosing to emphasize the mastery of testing genres gets in the way of more important language instruction by limiting student contact with the myriad genres that comprise language, and by doing so impedes a student's ability to answer.

An answerable act or deed is precisely that act which is performed on the basis of an acknowledgement of my obligative (ought-to-be) uniqueness. It is this affirmation of my non-alibi in Being that constitutes the basis of my life being actually and competently given as well as its being actually and competently as something yet-to-be achieved (Bakhtin, Toward 42).

When scholars such as Halasek tell us that "pedagogy entails answerability", she is demarcating a pedagogy that is "addressed and answerable to an audience" in recognition that "speakers and writers must be 'answerable', or individually accountable, for composing their

discursive acts” (179). These “speakers” who construct discourses must surely include those who devise high school curriculums that carelessly curtail the study of literary genres in favor of the “teaching to the test” assessment mastery genres which serve only a summative purpose. As a challenge to “central authority or standards”, Brian Huot posits those who investigate alternative evaluation in hopes that they will “open up the possibility of seeing assessment as something that can be shared, as a group of involved people search for values and meaning through group interpretation” (176). Perhaps a State mandated assessment procedure that is shared in such a way would be an assessing authority’s “affirmation of [their] non-alibi in Being.”

On a satirical note, it is tempting to think of the TAKS test day setting as the scene of the crime for the systematic way in which students testing in the English Language Arts are robbed of their choral support. Essay writing in the English classroom is an ongoing dialogue, with the teacher, writing partner, or collaborative group acting as interlocutors. But there is nothing dialogic about the TAKS setting, in which students are tightly controlled, cannot talk, and cannot even glance around. Adept writers, the kids who will achieve scores of three and four on the assessment, need little prompting to slide into the writing process and get the job done. But the less confident writers need to be induced. Their English class choral support, their sustaining dialogue, has been hushed and they have been left on their own to write in a void of silence to an audience they can barely conceive. Bakhtin believed that “truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Problems 110). He saw this as readily apparent in the early Socratic dialogues, and Bakhtin reminds us that Socrates saw himself as a “midwife”, “since he assisted at the birth” of truth (110). In his explication of Socratic dialogue, Bakhtin addresses the classical Greek rhetorical devices of syncrisis and anacrisis; and though his interpretation of anacrisis has been challenged (Farmer 138), it stands nevertheless as suitable for my argument. “Anacrisis was understood as a means for eliciting and provoking the words of one’s interlocutor, forcing him to express his opinion and express it

thoroughly” (Problems 110). An English teacher is almost always postured in anacrisis, “the provocation of the word by the word,” and our success or failure depends much on how well we pitch to what the student already knows: her prior knowledge and her current context, where lies speculatively grounded a discursive collective consciousness referred to as her superaddressee. “But in addition to this addressee (the second party), the author of the utterance, with a greater or lesser awareness, presupposes a higher superaddressee (third), whose absolutely just responsive understanding is presumed, either in some metaphysical distance or in distant historical time (the loophole addressee)” (SG 126).

English teachers recognize instinctively, without graduate rhetorical training, that students’ opinions are anchored in a superstructure of values that in turn help to shape their self esteem. We display a great deal of sensitivity to their opinions, and the better we are at making our students feel unique, the more success we have at provoking Bakhtin’s “going truths out into the light of day” (Problems 110). These truths are not owned by any one person, as Volosinov reminds us when he writes that “the individual speech act (in the strict sense of the word ‘individual’) is contradictio in adjecto” (Marxism 98). Still, in the English classroom, we can encourage a uniqueness, it seems, that “derives from a steadfast and confident social orientation” (89).

The phrase going truths implies the word in motion, “half owned” and anticipating the response of another. But in this argument about certain qualities of responsibility which the TAKS authorities wish to initiate, where do they stand as interlocutors? Because few if any students presume of TAKS an absolutely just responsive understanding, and because TAKS stands neither in some metaphysical distance nor in distant historical time, the assessors cannot expect to take the place of one’s superaddressee (although, as will be later noted, they do threaten to eclipse this invaluable entity). If anything, the collective authority of TAKS in its construction of a foundational doctrine, has presumed the presence its own superaddressee, around which are positioned the values necessary to respond to the conclusion it has

presented. But as the prompt is worded, the assessors are a veiled and vague audience at best: write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility. Where are they? They are standing behind the command, write. Could they be more visible? Could they intone in a less commanding fashion, and be more explicit? The answer to all of these questions is “yes”, and the justification for the relevance of these questions lies in the assertions I have made in this thesis. My various premises are embodied in the construction that I have proposed as an alternative to the TAKS prompt: Write for us an essay, one that is based on your own life’s experience, and in this essay explain what might be important about those familiar kinds of responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read. This deliberately propitiatory sentence is an attempt to counter the intimidation that is historically intrinsic in high stakes tests. My justification of these assertions begins now.

CHAPTER 3

THE PROMPT AS A REFERRING EXPRESSION

Overview: The prompt as a performative sentence, the discursive forces at work within it, and how it refers and predicates become the grounding for a broader examination of how testing authorities might misappropriate language when trying to evoke from students an engaged response. Paolo Friere's understanding how a "limit situation" of poverty might hide or obscure a theme can hinder the speech act consummation which John Searle warns can be too easily overlooked. If the act is not consummated, or understood, then there is no "uptake" in the sense that J.L. Austin defines. Austin's explanations of "performatives"; and his six-step procedural definition of a performative speech act becomes a template for the TAKS testing procedure. Because the obfuscation of language vis a vis authority is also of concern to Volosinov and Bakhtin, it seemed apt to conjoin all their voices as I introduce the "novelized" voices of some of my students, many of whom spring from the limiting circumstances of the working poor.

How might the extant TAKS essay prompt procedurally fail to identify the theme to these students in a way that "is true of only one object" (Searle 84)? In answer to that, besides the prompt's ambiguity, I hope to demonstrate its subtle restrictiveness, and how such restrictions might tend to encourage mimicry, or close the dialogue. I object to what I construe as the staging of a guessing game, in that the singular natures of "responsibility" and "the importance" deny accessibility to what are obviously multidimensional themes present in the triplet. As a remedy to these weaknesses, the alternative prompt is defended. The auxiliary voices of Kenneth Burke, Peter Elbow, and Patricia Bizzell help to bind this chapter's

assertions, while Brian Huot lends an insight to the kind of validity challenge my thesis makes to the TAKS test.

When testing authorities require that a student respond in writing to a theme, the burden of reference falls upon them. The student cannot be expected to guess. "Identification...rests squarely on the speaker's ability to supply an expression...which is satisfied uniquely by the object to which he intends to refer" (Searle 86). Searle's "axiom of identification...is a corollary to the axiom of existence," (89); i.e. the student must be confident that what is referred to actually exists. For example, if a response was required to the statement, "The King's responsibility is to defend his people," then the student must be certain that there is indeed a king who presides over a people to whom he owes the duty of defense. "Before attempting to understand the theme in its richness...we would first have to verify whether or not it is an objective fact" (Freire 97).

Yet, what seems to be so obviously a fact to one set of people in a society might nevertheless not be as obvious to another set of people within the same society if their context limits their ability to answer. "When the themes are concealed by the limit situations and thus are not clearly perceived, the corresponding tasks [to respond] can be neither authentically nor critically fulfilled" (Freire 102). Regarding the prompt, "Write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility," hindrance of its critical fulfillment might well be the case, according to Volosinov, because "the situation enters into the utterance as an essential constitutive part of the structure of its import" (Freudianism 100). In this case, the "situation" is that children of the working class sometimes observe their parents paying only lip service to such thematic utterances as, for example, when they fall behind on rent or car payments, or when there is abuse in the family. And if their parents sidestep, minimize, or otherwise ignore maxims concerning responsibility, at what level of situation does the maxim actually exist for their children? Because having already described "accepting responsibility" as important, the TAKS

authorities have made “an assertion of an existential proposition” (Searle 116) that might well run counter to the context of many students’ lives. Deeply rooted in this context, very often, is the working poor attitude toward middle classed maxims in the guise of just such existential propositions. “A social relation is established between the individual and external things or other people, since the individual learns to anticipate their attitudes toward him. He thus, to a degree, becomes aware of himself in terms of them...and his attitudes, being shaped by their attitudes as reflected in him, modify his ways of action” (Burke, Grammar 237). For an adolescent poor enough to qualify for a free lunch program, such modifications can lead to a denial of even such basic tenets as assuming responsibility, if that student feels he is being preached to.

Once again, regarding the prompt, write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility, what, it must be asked, is the intended theme: accepting responsibility, or the importance of accepting it? Distinctly different questions are posed.

It is not my intention to equivocate about the active verb, though it should be noted that some adolescents might never have seen themselves in the role of accepting a duty when they are told, for example, to care for their younger siblings on a Saturday afternoon. They either comply or they do not, the consequences in either case being what they may. More to the point however, regarding the three texts the students are to read for the test, in the case of the young boys who saved the fish, the responsibility was freely assumed rather than strictly speaking accepted. The boys were being pro-active. No one offered them a choice. They came upon the carp stranded in a pool and decided to engineer some channels so the fish could escape downstream. Likewise, regarding the principal and the career choice of becoming a nurse-- both involving professionals who are paid to do important jobs-- verbs more suitable than “to accept” (such as assume or take on) might have been chosen.

Be that as it may, if the theme is “accepting responsibility”, one might ask why the TAKS assessors have minimized the particular by hiding it in a prepositional phrase rather than building the noun phrase around it? And one might also inquire into the monolithic construct of

the singular “responsibility”, when in fact numerous kinds of responsibilities are illustrated in the triplet? If, on the other hand, the theme is “the importance of accepting responsibility”, the question becomes less one of syntax and semantics, and more a question of the assertion of an assumed universal (the importance) that might well be mismatched to the situational context of many tenth graders.

Central to either theme is the critical aspect of referring. Although later in this enquiry I will attempt to define the TAKS paradigm as causal argument and Bakhtinian utterance, in order to discuss the essay prompt as a referring statement, it will help to establish that the TAKS argument is also a performative utterance, “the issuing [of which] is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something” (Austin 6-7). And further, I should define any such performative as a speech act. The essay prompt is issued by a speaker (albeit a collective), and is addressed not just to an audience but to a respondent, thereby revealing the speaker’s intent that the student “write an essay explaining” something about a topic that has accordingly been referred to and predicated. Using this as a guideline, there can be no doubt that, write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility is a performative sentence. I will repeatedly challenge the effectiveness and exactness of this sentence, but my argument necessarily extends to the greater TAKS intention of initiating a creative dialogue: “the total speech act [...] and how [it] can go wrong,” (52).

For such academic evaluations as the TAKS, when might this total speech act be considered to begin? It is tempting to fit “the total situation in which the utterance is issued” (52) onto a sort of Bakhtinian template. I suspect that the imposed (zadan) nature of the TAKS paradigm would make Bakhtin and Volosinov a bit wary, and that they would insist that in order to consider the paradigm as a legitimate utterance, the dialogue would have to embrace all the academic instruction the student has taken part in, as well as his sense of answerability to it. And this sense of answerability would no doubt entail the definition of values as held by the student’s language pool. I indeed make this claim: that the total speech act as conceived by J.

L. Austin is for all practical purposes identical to the utterance as conceived by the Bakhtinian circle. But when the TAKS authorities choose a topic that does not take into account the limit situations of various communities, they for their part do not seem interested in taking into consideration the student language pool. In fact, by phrasing the existential proposition as they have, they risk placing themselves at odds with south Texas border town language pools. So while for Austin and Bakhtin, the boundaries of the speech act to be evaluated would commence when and where and with whom the child begins to learn language, for the TAKS authorities the total speech act to be evaluated would begin rather rigidly in the first grade (though testing does not begin that soon).

Having given thought to a beginning, what might be the end point beyond which no further evaluation might be required by a State? Considering how important to society the question of “responsibility” truly is, both Bakhtin and Austin might think that the evaluation of the speech act would have no end—that the answerable and responsible citizen would continue throughout life to reflect on where lies his duty in the overall scheme. I would venture to say that this opinion jibes with the Mission Statements of virtually every public school district in America when they address the sort of citizens they hope to turn out. But whereas good citizenship might be seen to lie discursively in a continuum with no exits, for the TAKS there is a revolving door. TAKS begins in junior high school and it ends in the twelfth grade. It is a test track, not a highway through life. And it is in this disconnect between assessment and the “lifeworld”, in fact, where so many criticisms of state mandated testing originate.

It was to this lifeworld of real speech that J. L. Austin was referring when he wrote, in 1955, that he decided to “step out into the desert of comparative precision” (55). In speech there are, for example, statements of fact or description intended “to indicate...the circumstances in which the statement is made or reservations to which it is subject or the way in which it is to be taken and the like” (3). Grammatical structures such as these have been defined as constative (3) because they are intended solely “to record or impart straightforward

information about the facts” (2). Indeed, the existential proposition, the importance of accepting responsibility—which can be reworded as “accepting responsibility is important”—might be taken as just such a constative. Or it might not. When a child hears from his parents what philosophers or skeptics could take for a true or false proposition—namely, that accepting responsibility is important—the child could model his life after that maxim because for him the statement was not true or false, but was instead the communication of a value, which would make the statement a performative. But cannot that statement also be considered to “impart straightforward information” in the same sense as “Lord Raglan won the battle of Alma” (143)? Indeed, Austin says that it can (111). Obviously, the TAKS assessors are assuming that the value of “accepting responsibility” has been equally assimilated by all sophomores. But this is an assumption I am challenging when I maintain that accepting responsibility is important is by some sophomores viewed skeptically as take it or leave it, true or false, and thus for them a constative statement.

Austin’s lectures, from which *How To Do Things With Words* was compiled, can be viewed as a Socratic progression throughout which he is guiding his audience toward a “‘performative-constative’ distinction” (47). He tells us quite pointedly (52) that in order to perceive the correlation between performatives and constatives “the total speech act in the total speech situation” must be considered. I am proposing that for many of my working poor sophomores, the total speech situation is also a limit situation. And for them—lacking confidence, perhaps, and mimicking what they think their assessors want to hear-- accepting responsibility is important might be further categorized as a verdictive pronouncement with “an obvious slide toward truth or falsity” (141).

Austin also tells us that “when a constative is confronted with the facts, we in fact appraise it in ways involving the employment of a vast array of terms” (142), and it is my contention that most of these terms on test day are rooted in a student’s “own life’s experience”. Perhaps it is time to point out that many middle and senior level English teachers in Texas

receive training in how a TAKS essay is to be evaluated. In this way, we are qualified to assess our own students' classroom essays, whenever necessary, in TAKS terms. When we teach to the test, we are armed with a specific list of goals. According to my own training as an essay evaluator, we are told to grade along the lines of expressive/descriptive composition, properly spelled and in good grammatical form, that gives voice to a reasonable argument based on evidence. There is no rule that a student cannot dissent, even to the point of making a nihilistic denial to the proposition in the prompt, as long as the essay stays on topic. For example, a student might reply that existential propositions such as the importance of accepting responsibility are one of the means by which an oligarchy such as ours maintains control over the poor. Citing as evidence historical examples of the fiscal irresponsibility and excesses of the rich, a student might claim that not until the working poor reject all such class-imposed maxims will a redistribution of wealth ever take place. If such a paper were to be written and met the accepted criteria, there is no reason to expect (other than bias on the part of an evaluator) that the essay could not receive the highest score. But a point that will be made again is that to gainsay the authoritative voice of the State of Texas might be a very great risk for a young student writer.

That there is a risk leads to this first mention of the force of illocution embedded within all performative utterances, which in simplistic terms are utterances that perform an action when spoken or written. "The uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even the, leading incidence in the performance of the act" (8). But to return to illocution for the moment, Austin makes distinctions between "the senses in which to say something is to do something" (121). These distinctive acts will again be discussed in chapter three of this thesis, but for now I offer some of Austin's simpler definitions. "Thus we distinguished the locutionary act...which has a meaning; the illocutionary act which has a certain force in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is the achieving of certain effects by saying something" (121). Austin goes on to state that "whenever I 'say' anything (except perhaps a mere exclamation like 'damn' or 'ouch') I shall be

performing both locutionary and illocutionary acts” (133). For instance, the prompt sentence, write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility, is a locutionary act because it has meaning, i.e., “sense and reference”; and it is an illocutionary act because, as an explicit command, it has “a certain (conventional) force”. If, in fact, a student writer obeys the explicit command, then the prompt sentence will have been a perlocutionary act as well because “by saying something” it has brought about a written response (109).

Now, returning to the TAKS construction (triplet + prompt) as a performative utterance, Austin goes on to elicit six rules that must be fulfilled in order for a performative statement to function as intended.

(A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,

(A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.

(B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

(B.2) completely.

(Gamma.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further

(Gamma.2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently” (14-15).

Viewing the TAKS in such a procedural fashion allows me to further define the sort of challenge my thesis is mounting. Huot gives me the clue that I might be challenging both the content validity and the construct validity of the TAKS when he writes, “content validity assumes that the assessment instrument contains the necessary procedures to truly measure for its intended

purpose...construct validity insures the theoretical soundness of an assessment procedure” (Reliability 206).

Regarding A.1, it is obvious that the State has developed in its mandatory assessments an “accepted procedure having a certain conventional effect...in certain circumstances”. And in the case of A-2, the appropriateness of “persons and circumstances” is met if the students are in fact in the required grade level, have been properly instructed in the subjects to be tested, and so forth. Rules B.1 and B.2 address the rigidly controlled TAKS environment, its administration, and the stringent regulations that govern both students and teachers/proctors. About the Gamma rules there is a quality that one might almost call, in light of TAKS, personally contractual because they involve intent (insincerities and infractions or breaches, 39). The TAKS authorities intend, for example, to invoke an essay subject that is universally accessible and understood. Their “thoughts and feelings” about the subject are to be somewhat synchronous with those of the students, who must “conduct themselves subsequently” by following the guidelines and by not cheating (Gamma.2). But if the authorities have invented an essay subject that is not universally understood or accessible, might they not be in violation of at least Gamma.1?

To go on in this vein, Austin is careful to make further distinctions: “if we sin against any one (or more) of these six rules, our performative utterance will be...unhappy...if we offend against any of the former rules (A’s or B’s)...then the act in question...is not successfully performed at all, does not come off, is not achieved” (15-16). Such failures are referred to as “infelicities”, which are further divided into “misfires” and “abuses” (16). There is a different shading, however, to the infelicities that result when Gamma.1 and Gamma.2 are violated. “In [those] cases, we speak of our infelicitous act as ‘professed’ or ‘hollow’...and as not implemented, or not consummated, rather than as void or without effect” (16). One can imagine, for the sake of argument, that a student has successfully managed to cheat on the test, and the result may indeed be a consummated speech act, but not in the answerable manner of a

genuine utterance. “I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced or understood in art, so that everything that I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life” (Bakhtin, AA 1-2). Or again, if TAKS does not offer a truly accessible subject around which to build a theme, but the student has been able to mimic a disingenuous but passing response, the infelicities in each case would amount to being hollow or professed, and not answered in a Bakhtinian sense.

Using Austin’s colorful metaphors, it is my intention to prove that TAKS has “sinned” (Austin 15) against certain of these rules in its careless construction of the prompt, which has resulted in an “unhappy” performative. For example, there is the nagging uncertainty expressed by my students when they would tell me that the prompt “confused” them, or they “didn’t know what it was asking”—what Austin refers to as “uptake” (117). A contributing factor might be because the expectations expressed in those nine words embody a moving target. The prompt is a sentence in transition, not at all stable but masquerading as such while it makes what is similar to “a shift from descriptive to performative utterance and [wavers] between them” (48).

The mood of the performative prompt is imperative, and ambiguously enough, this is a mood with many shades: “an ‘imperative’ may be an order, a permission, a demand, a request, an entreaty, a suggestion, a recommendation, a warning (go and you will see), or may express a condition or concession or a definition” (77). The prompt is also an explicit command—write an essay that explains—and when this explicitness is linked with the emphatic definite article, the tone becomes emphatic. These two qualities of tone might come across as rigid because “the explicit performative rules out equivocation and keeps the performance [response] fixed, relatively” (76). And in this case, based on the existential proposition within those nine words, the performance becomes emphatically “fixed” upon the universal descriptor—the phrase “the importance”—instead of upon “accepting responsibility”, which turns back upon my assertion that the prompt presents a moving target.

This shift within a referring expression from an explicit and emphatic command to a descriptive sentence stating a universal (before the theme is even referenced), and described quaintly by Austin as “irritating” (86), will do nicely as an example of an utterance that has been “[exposed] as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language” (Bakhtin, D I 272). Those two tendencies, monoglossia (closed) and heteroglossia (open), might for purposes of argument be named the absolute and the relative. Having deliberately constructed a paradigm designed to point the student at a particular horizon of values, while hoping for a diversity of response, the TAKS assessors have impeded that very diversity by creating a foundational absolute; the importance, when asserted by a State authority, might as well be written in stone and it makes for a stone cold response. Such a monoglossic assertion tends to close a dialogue. Our sixteen-year-old writer is being hemmed in. She will write about “accepting responsibility” in the expected way, which is to say that it is important, or she runs the risk of failing. And if she happens to be sprung from a limit-situation of poverty, a context in which “accepting responsibility” might not carry such heavy moral overtones, our young writer is doubly handicapped. Even if she is the most imaginative of children, she will be reaching outside her own context, and will have little choice but to mimic.

Many of my most imaginative and expressive writers were producing on their essays only scores of “2”, a marginal “C”, precariously close to failing. As did many of their higher scoring peers, these marginally performing sophomores demonstrated the lack of basic skills that has become endemic in the English Language Arts in Texas. But they are, for the most part, personally expressive writers who can make assertions based on textual evidence. If these marginal writers compose an essay of, say, two hundred words freely peppered with compositional errors—one that is nevertheless expressive and defends an assertive point of view—then they can pass the essay with a “2”. But take away the confidence of their argument, and blunt their expressiveness with the expectations generated by an absolute, and the scales might well be tipped toward failure, because the discourse has been too strictly confined.

We are, of course, examining the paradigm of TAKS by using another less-bounded paradigm that encompasses what modern rhetoric refers to as the speech act, the precise definition of which has been of some concern to philosophers, who know full well that often what is considered an exemplary act of speech nevertheless remains misunderstood by the intended audience. “An effect must be achieved on the audience if the illocutionary act is to be carried out...so the performance of an illocutionary act involves the securing of uptake” (Austin 116-117). Another voice in this interlocking paradigm is that of John Searle, who speaks of the consummation necessary in order for a referring expression (itself a speech act) to be successful. He informs us that:

In some sense, a referring expression must have a ‘meaning’, a descriptive context in order for a speaker to succeed in referring when he utters it; for unless its utterance succeeds in communicating a fact, a true proposition, from the speaker to the hearer, the reference is not fully consummated (92).

In this light, let us reexamine the sentence, write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility, already criticized for both its linguistic instability and its emphasis of a foundational absolute, by establishing a connection between the latter emphasis and the prompt’s capability to effectively identify the theme “apart from other objects” (28).

The TAKS prompt asserts that accepting responsibility is important, and by doing so, the TAKS speakers have committed themselves to a propositional statement. This simple assertion comprises an act that is defined by Searle as one of predication (97), the grammatical part of a clause or sentence that says things about the subject. On the surface this seems simple enough, but Searle goes to some lengths to make clear that predicate phrases do not refer. “The properties of an object are not essentially predicative: they can be referred to by singular noun phrases as well as ascribed to an object in the utterance of predicate expressions” (101). In the constative statement for which I previously argued, “accepting

responsibility is important”, is important is the expression that predicates what TAKS has to say about the subject “accepting responsibility”. Acceptance of a singular “responsibility”, in turn, is what is referred to. And while predication is merely a form of subject qualification, reference can be a speech act if it indeed “succeeds in communicating a fact”. But in the extant prompt—write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility--which fact is communicated ? Accepting responsibility is important enough to be written about in whatever on-topic fashion a student might choose? Or is the fact communicated that only the importance of accepting responsibility can be the topic? Depending on how this prompt is interpreted, distinctly different topics emerge. One is open, but the other is fairly closed and might be stifling to an inexperienced writer who feels she is being required to confirm the truth of a proposition.

Returning to this ambiguity, when Searle asserts that “a referring expression characteristically serves to pick out or identify a particular object [topic] apart from other objects [topics]” (28), it becomes clear that the ambiguity might be likened to one of Austin’s infelicities—perhaps relating to A.2, appropriate for the invocation, or perhaps to Gamma.1, certain thoughts or feelings. Something about the ambiguity makes the referring expression “unhappy”. Indeed, many sophomore writers might be just that if they are confused as to what exactly is the topic. “It is a necessary condition of a fully consummated definite reference that the speaker provide an unambiguous answer to these questions...who? what? which?” (86). Searle does distinguish between consummated and successful speech acts: “a reference may be successful—in the sense that we could not accuse the speaker of having failed to refer—even if he does not identify the object unambiguously for the hearer, provided only that the speaker could do so on demand” (82). But this is a problem for the TAKS “conventional procedure”, in which students are forbidden to ask, and proctors are forbidden to respond to, any question of subject content.

TAKS procedure isolates the student writer far from her collective and answerable classroom setting, in which a question of content that clarifies uptake can always be asked. This

sterile discursive “position” occupied by both the student writer and the TAKS “speaker” on test day is a breakdown point-- and upon examination, might beg the question, cannot something discursive be done? When Huot calls for “a reflective inquiry to examine the problem with the practices we now use in assessment and to suggest practices that are more consonant with our theories” (New Discourse 166), surely some of those practices entail test day discourse.

But it is a point of break down for only some, because there are essentially two kinds of topic-receptive audiences here: those who can respond to the prompt without confusion, and those who cannot. But to jump to an obvious conclusion that this thesis is directed only toward those who cannot respond without confusion is to overlook that an eagerly engaged word will spark a more creative one. A more effective writing prompt might well be of benefit to both kinds of topic-receptive audiences.

At this point, having subjected the TAKS to a set of identification criteria, it might do well to scrutinize my own proposed alternative using the same tools. I’ve chosen a compound-complex sentence because of its characteristic completeness of thought. This is not to say that an utterance that juggles three complete thoughts is not dynamically in motion, because indeed it is, yet the dynamics are not disorienting. Look again at what the existing prompt attempts to do. In only nine short words, the explicit beginning, leaning more toward command than toward entreaty, makes a transition from a performative to a descriptive utterance that predicates by way of the definite article a universal quality that entails an existential proposition expressed as an absolute. Humorously perhaps, it seems a sentence in a hurry to go it knows not where. By contrast, the compound-complex sentence that I propose is itself an unfolding linear process, as all such sentences are, and though the reader is set in motion between complete thoughts, each “platform” is stable. There is no rush to cram descriptives, predicates, and explicit performatives together into a referring phrase. Write for us an essay, one that is based on your own life’s experience, and in the essay explain what might be important about accepting those familiar kinds of responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read.

To begin with, we now have a more advanced example of writing. This particular TAKS, after all, is an English test. We also have a compound-complex model that might serve as a reminder to students that they, as well, can begin their essays in such good fashion. The initial five words, as an explicit command, comprise a simple sentence. The prepositional phrase adds to the sentence a dynamic that will be re-discussed throughout this thesis, but for now it will do to say that the inclusive familiarity of *for us* tilts the imperative mood away from command and more toward the quality of an entreaty requested by a situated audience. I am making no great claim, only that the familiar *for us* might be considered a minuscule part of the flavorful array of expressions envisioned by Bakhtin when he wrote: “All words have the “taste” of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour” (DI 293). The “tendency” in this case is to seem less commanding.

In the TAKS prompt, there is no phrase or expression equivalent to the subordinate clause, one that is based on your life’s experience. A more detailed analysis of the clause will follow later but a telling clue lies in the license that the clause lends when English teachers hope that their students will “interact with the text.” Perhaps it is stating the obvious in that we could not possibly write from a framework outside of our own experiences, bringing as Bakhtin says, “my valuative attitude toward the object, toward what is desirable or undesirable in it” (Toward 32). Hopefully, the subordinate clause will remind the student that her experiences are valuable, and available to be scaffold-ed back to the triplet or any other pertinent reading.

Left alone, this partial construction that we have begun with—that of a simple sentence plus the subordinate clause—forms a complete compound thought. One might just as well place a period after “experience”, drop the coordinating conjunction, and make two sentences of the structure. There is no rule that says a prompt must comprise one sentence. My suggestion is that we stay with the compound-complex sentence, based for the moment solely on its utility as a model of good writing. Composition is a macro-process that might be thought of as analogous to the micro-process of building a compound-complex sentence. One builds meaning upon

meaning in either case; and of both it might be said that in the construction of each, one argues with oneself. “The process of inner speech is just as material as is outward speech” (Volosinov, *Freudianism* 21). If a compound-complex sentence can serve as a compositional device that models and displays the linking of multiple meanings, then perhaps at some subtle level it can set a tone for response. After all,

When we select a particular type of sentence, we do so not for the sentence itself, but out of consideration for what we wish to express...we select the type of sentence from the standpoint of the whole utterance...the idea of the form of the whole utterance, that is, of a particular speech genre, guides us in the process (Bakhtin, *S. G.* 81).

Is there something stifling or “un-cool” about the academic genre that we dare not display it to sophomores? More pointedly, should the TAKS evaluators expect from students a stylistic response to a mixed-signal and assertively predicated nine-word command? Because “there can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance,” we expect and rely on an “evaluative attitude” from the speaker by which to gauge our response (84). When the evaluative attitude is an emphatic assertion of a foundational absolute—instinctively feeling our way for a genre in which to reply in kind—we yield and mimic rather than opt for independent expression. The commonness of assumed basic value judgments constitutes the canvas upon which living human speech embroiders the designs of intonation. Lacking such commonness, “the voice falters” (Volosinov, *Freudianism* 103).

Having returned yet again to the restrictive nature of that “existential proposition”, please note that the assertion is absent from the alternative prompt, which is a much more flexible structure that presents real options to fledgling writers who are tense, tired, and perhaps fearing failure. The sophomores are now told, write for us an essay, an explicit command from an implied audience, and they have been assured by the subordinate clause that they can

improvise. The final sentence is essentially a re-statement, a miniature re-teaching of what is expected from which emerges a range of meaning for the predicate and subject that has been considerably expanded: and in this essay explain what might be important about accepting those familiar kinds of responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read.

What might be important is conditionally conversant. It does not pronounce that the subject has a singular significance. Students often fear there is a secret they have missed, but the passive conditional tense invites imagination. The theme, stripped of its singular significance, is much more approachable as a multi-faceted subject quickly reconnected to the triplet by the final clause, as well as those shown in the texts you have read. This newly expanded range of the theme, those familiar kinds of responsibilities, highlights yet another observation about the TAKS prompt and the speech act of reference. When a multi-faceted theme (i.e., the triplet) is presented to elicit a written response, but the invitation to respond refers to a singular subject, the writer wonders if she must discover one truth to the exclusion of others. Is the prize behind door number one or number three? Reference again becomes a guessing game. First the student must guess, which of two choices is the actual theme, only to come upon another game of chance in which three meanings are displayed but only one can be the winner. But, if only one choice wins, then: "a necessary condition of a speaker's intending to refer to a particular object in the utterance of an expression is the speaker's ability to provide an identifying description of that object" (Searle 87). In other words, having implied that there is a singular responsibility to be hunted down, the TAKS assessors must describe it, as in "the importance of the way in which the boys who rescued the stranded fish accepted responsibility." This obviously is not the intent of the testing authorities. The newly modified theme presented in the alternative prompt refers successfully to the multi-layered implications of "accepting responsibility", and in a sense removes the "blindness" that might restrict a student's view.

While discussing the possibilities of a conversant essay prompt that opens a dialogue by encouraging diversity, I will naturally enough employ advocates of a consummated

heteroglossic speech act. As first conceived, chapter two was to be focused through the lens of identification and referral provided by Austin, Searle, et al. But the moment the possibility of two themes was revealed—one of which sounded suspiciously like a white, middle-classed slogan—the critical pedagogy of Freire entered the argument. So what was intended as a fourth chapter became embedded in my assertions of how a prompt should refer. When Freire speaks of “themes [that] are concealed by the limit situations and thus are not clearly perceived” (102), he is defining precisely a condition of ineffective identification and reference, but in the context of inter-class distortion.

One should use caution when applying Freire’s critical pedagogy to modern American secondary education, because we reject out of principle the “banking” systems of education that Freire so righteously opposed in Brazil; and we strive to be what he referred to as “problem-posing” collective. “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (84). Despite our status as a first-world nation, we are far from a classless society, and the growing disparity between rich and poor is everywhere evident when one resides in a southwest border town such as Uvalde. Patricia Bizzell has written critically of Freire’s literacy methods by way of rejecting his inseparability from his “Brazilian Roman Catholic society.” And without “acknowledgement of his Christianity” Freire’s theories “cannot be naively imported into American discussions of education” (Bizzell 21). Peter Elbow, equally as admiring of Freire as is Bizzell, also expresses reservations about Freire’s applicability to pedagogy in the United States. “Freire’s way of talking about education serves to reinforce only one model of teaching and learning...though perhaps Freire is right to advocate only the autonomy-centered learning for adults in South America, we are crazy if we do the same with middle-class adolescents in this country” (95-97). Elbow’s exclusion here of working class students proves convenient to this thesis, most of the focus of which is on the struggling writers who are emerging from among the working poor. Regarding this struggle to write, Bizzell does freely admit that “basic writers are

very much like Freire's peasants. The basic writers cling to a personal perspective because "they feel more part of [their] world than transformers of the world" (133).

The by now vilified phrase "the importance of accepting responsibility" begs Freire's rhetorical question, how can I dialogue if I start from the premise that naming the world is the task of an elite (Freire 90)? When the State insinuates that accepting responsibility is important, it sounds suspiciously like an elite naming, and how many basic writers will attempt to "transform" such an assertion? In the case of the extant TAKS prompt, this reluctance to name the world might have something to do with the "bamboozlement" a student might experience when she is told by an existential proposition how she should feel about a subject. Because the issue presented "may not really represent the students lives accurately...the student is liable to be bamboozled into thinking he doesn't even feel his own feelings right" (Elbow 89-90). My contention remains that the intended theme is merely "accepting responsibility", and that the powerful predicate expression impedes an effective reference. But the possibility that the intended theme is the importance of accepting responsibility will again be discussed in ensuing chapters.

CHAPTER 4

AN INTONED PROMPT AS ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE

Overview: In order to establish where the TAKS interlocutors are positioned in the assessment dialogue, I begin this chapter with a reminder that what is being evaluated are the essential knowledge and skills (TEKS) which the State requires of its curricula. This TEKS-teacher-TAKS cycle is intended to be dialogic, yet TAKS has never been viewed as “we” or “us”, but always instead as “it” or “they”. This referential reality leads to a discussion of the alternative prompt’s prepositional phrase, for us, and its attempt to posit the TAKS voice into the dialogue as “familiar”. Familiarity, in turn, is sought as a means to spark an internal persuasion that might otherwise be thwarted by the authoritarian nature of the TAKS discourse. My point is that the prompt is positioned in a discursive place where the resulting dialogue could tumble into either a closed or open direction, and efforts should be made to encourage the openness of a student response.

The “truth-conditional” paradigms of Strawson and Habermas give clues as to how such encouragement can be built into a statement by inferring a promise of reasonableness. This inference can be realized, for instance, by the use of the modal “might be” in my proposed alternative prompt. Might be, with its “quasi-inferential character” can be likened to an “if..then” proposition, which Strawson tells us makes the speaker (TAKS) “committed” to admitting the basic truth of the response that the speaker has elicited, at least, within the parameters of the established TAKS procedure. This commitment, or promise, is carried as well by a certain intonation, and during the Bakhtinian discussion of intonation I make the comparison for which this chapter is named: “An Intoned Prompt As Illocutionary Force”. To support my claim I call upon the philosophers who have defined two interlocking paradigms: the utterance and the

speech act. Volosinov and Bakhtin, Habermas, Strawson, and Searle can be harnessed in unison to define a prompt that explains how the basic writer can make use of his own values in order to reach an understanding' with his TAKS assessors about various kinds of responsibilities.”

Surrounding every state-mandated assessment—because of the collective opinions embodied in its construction—there is a hierarchy of dialogue that stretches from governors-at-their-desks to sixteen year olds seated at theirs. The TAKS, for example, has a cadre of professionals who speak for it at various levels, and they are backed in turn by cadres who defend with their reputations the importance and effectiveness of their product, namely, the packet of test materials placed before our children in their classrooms. These professionals embody the “voice” of the TAKS which, in this hierarchy of discourse has assumed the role of “they” (collective authority) and “it”, as addressed by one frustrated sophomore who once said to me of the English TAKS, “Mr. Glick, it’s kicking my butt.” But the intent of the TAKS is to be more familiar. It is designed to be thought of as “we” and “us”.

Please recall that the assessment is inextricably linked to what the State of Texas has mandated as the guidelines for instruction in the English Language Arts, and those guidelines are written down in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills handbook, known as the TEKS. Every public high school teacher in Texas—at the beginning of every new class—is supposed to have posted the goal for the day, and accompanying that target the teacher is strongly encouraged to post the TEKS objective that the day’s lesson is supposed to satisfy: for example, TEKS 11A, students will compare and contrast varying aspects of texts such as themes, conflicts, and allusions. And what this immediately allows is that an assessor can verify that the teacher is “aligned”, that is, teaching what he said he was going to teach.

As a professional, I do not perceive this as a restrictive regimen. Though the TEKS handbook is a humorless expository listing, its scope is wide ranging and for virtually any

imaginative ELA lesson plan there is a TEKS objective that it satisfies. My teaching colleagues appreciate these guidelines, which act as an important benchmark. Teachers have access to past writing samples and scores, and we are expected to modify each lesson plan to meet the specific needs of any of our kids who have failed the TAKS in our content area. This collective decision making is easily given voice:

We, the people of the State of Texas through our elected leaders and the professionals who have been designated to oversee the quality of our education system, have established certain standards by which we will both teach and assess all subjects to be offered in Texas public schools. Furthermore, our assessment shall be used as a tool so that our teachers can target areas of weakness in our students so that these deficiencies can be corrected.

It is an interlocking cycle that might one day be elegant as more teachers come to view the TAKS as a useful tool. But the TAKS has an image problem that colors how just about everyone short of the executive level perceives it. Regardless of what might be drawbacks, the TEKS---Teacher---TAKS cycle is clearly a collective paradigm intended to embrace the children and parents of every school district in the State. TAKS is designed to be thought of as “we”, “us”, and “ours”, yet it remains in the remote third person. “First and second persons are of a different order of reality than third person. Whereas I and you are existential, unabstracted persons, he or it has merely referential or symbolic reality” (Moffett 11).

In an essay prompt such as the one suggested, write for us becomes the first command perceived, if only subconsciously, by the student. The prepositional phrase is deliberately placed to deflect, if you will, the explicit demand write before it arrives at its target subject, an essay. This perhaps clumsy tactic immediately situates the TAKS assessors in the dialogue as a “familiar” audience. My contention, as previously told, is that this deflection tilts the tone of the explicit imperative away from command and toward entreaty. This situates the TAKS “voice”

into the range of the “possibly sympathetic” because the collective us implies a sharing or common ground. “Individual emotions can come into play only as overtones accompanying the basic tone of social evaluation. ‘I’ can realize itself verbally only on the basis of ‘we’” (Volosinov, *Freudianism* 100).

When considering this completed explicit imperative, write for us an essay, it might do well at this point to ask exactly what it is that we are asking of our students. We expect them to read and internalize some possible meanings implicit in the triptych they have been given, and to construct in words a creative response. In short, we expect them to novelize—to take the transmitted discourse and affirm it “through assimilation” so that it is “tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word’” (Bakhtin, *DI* 345). This interweaving of an alien discourse with one’s own word, this process of new becoming, embodies the concept of internal persuasion. An internally persuasive discourse “awakens new and independent words”, a dynamic that is opposed by a discourse that is externally authoritative (345). “The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it” (342). And irregardless of how persuasively voiced an essay prompt may be written, the high stakes risk of this state-mandated super test cannot be disguised. Students will pass or fail, and in their own minds they will be smart or stupid, based on how well they “acknowledge”. Here, the prompt plays a key role.

What the sophomore “basic writer” must do is comprehend a meaning in this externally authoritative text. These “instances of powerful influence exercised by another’s discourse on a given author” are specifically designed to stimulate “the embryonic beginnings of what is required for an artistic representation” (347). Still, to realize the stimulant intent behind the paradigm, the TAKS must somehow modulate the authority in its “voice”. “Both the authority of discourse and its internal persuasiveness may be united in a single word—one that is simultaneously authoritative and internally persuasive...but such a unity is rarely a given” (342).

As between all dualities—right and wrong, black and white—there are qualifying degrees, for example, of rightness or wrongness. At some point there is the determination that something is, say, more wrong than right, almost as if a physical boundary had been crossed. In discourse, there is a line where the external authoritative word “remains sharply demarcated” (343) from its potential to also be internally persuasive. In terms of the TAKS, it is precisely at this point, I argue, where stands the humble prompt. “In such forms [successful ‘instances of powerful influence exercised by another’s discourse’] there can always be found the embryonic beginnings of what is required for an artistic representation” (347). In the case of an external authoritative discourse that has been internalized, all that the “embryonic beginnings” will require will be “a few changes in orientation and the internally persuasive word easily becomes an object of representation” (347).

Two key phrases might now be added to the qualities that are needed in an effective essay prompt: embryonic beginnings and orientation. It seems that we now require an explicit but friendly imperative that, as a consummated act of reference, also serves as a model of good writing that predicates with carefully considered social values while it opens a range of possibilities to the young writer as it simultaneously re-establishes her place in the discourse. An effective prompt might accomplish all of that precisely because of its unique placement at the line of demarcation between two conflicting discourses: the external authoritative dialogue that is intimidating and boring (i.e., not of their choosing) versus an internal spark of discursive interest that resists being kindled because, among other reasons, the basic writer lacks confidence and feels confined. That this line of demarcation serves as a point of balance at which the discourse can tumble in either a closed or an open direction lends the prompt a certain urgency. It can situate a student into the discourse replete with familiar values, and it can open the range of response. The essay prompt defines, after all, the final rhetorical situation in which the TAKS voice might be creatively useful.

When Moffett writes that “reading and writing have an oral base, which is another way of saying that monologue emerges from dialogue [because] we abstract for as well as from...the referential relation of I-it must be crossed with the rhetorical relation of I-you, in order to produce a whole, authentic discourse” (31), he provides evidence for the significance of the middle term of my proposed prompt. When the subordinate clause, one that is based on your own life’s experience, situates the student on intimate ground, the referential relation leans also toward the rhetorical by virtue of the I-you familiarity of the simple sentence to which it is linked. The two word clusters mutually reinforce one another. When the basic writer encounters a possibly sympathetic “us” that allows her to respond with her own values and experiences intact, it is no great reach to declare that she will feel less restricted. Our sophomores have no clues as to the discursive forces at work on them. They don’t know the dynamics of dialogue—that they are joined to a word “half-owned”—and that they are owed by their interlocutor a word to work with. There is a hope embodied in a word they don’t even know that they require, and a hopeful word is what they should have. “The whole route between inner experience (the ‘expressible’) and its outward objectification (the ‘utterance’) lies entirely across social territory” (Volosinov, *Marxism* 90). “What usually is called ‘creative individuality’ is nothing but the expression of a particular person’s basic, firmly grounded, and consistent line of social orientation” (93).

It is on this familiar ground of “life’s experience” sympathetically linked to an entreating “us” that the internalization of the TAKS utterance takes root. Until that hypothetical moment the triplet might be seen as a vaguely joined assembly of possible meanings that have no theme. Nor can it be expected to have. “The thematic unity of the work is not the combinations of the meanings of its words and individual sentences...it is formed with their help, but they only help to the same extent as all the other semantic elements” (Bakhtin *Formal* 132). The TAKS authorities should be cautious of how they try to orient the student toward thematic considerations because the triplet is a pseudo-text not rooted in literary genre and with no unity of style. This requires a shift of perspective from students who have been systematically

instructed using singly authored texts embodying both. "It becomes clear that the forms of the whole, i.e., the genre forms, essentially determine the theme. It is not the sentence, the period, or their aggregate that implement the theme, but the novella, the novel, the lyric, the fairy tale--" (132). This fact is implicitly recognized by every Texas public high school, such as mine, that elects to set aside class time for the specific instruction of how to take a TAKS test. This is exactly about becoming familiar with a new genre of text. I shudder that this should be taken to a panicked extreme that emphasizes the TAKS genre at the expense of the far more important literary genres we should be teaching. But it is important that educators realize the implications of genre-learning in regards to state-mandated assessments whose textual constructions comprise un-styled aggregates.

Here again, the significance of the clause, one that is based on your own life's experience, comes into play, because one's own life experience is as important a "semantic element" as any of the unformed meanings in the triplet. It is what the basic writer brings to the argument that jells the elements into a theme, and to not situate the writer among her own values is a mistake.

In the prompt that I have proposed, the final grammatical structure is the conjunctively linked simple sentence, in this essay explain what might be important about those familiar kinds of responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read. The prepositional phrase, in this essay, serves simply enough to re-orient the basic writer, while the explicit imperative mood of explain is retained from the original prompt. It is the significance of the noun phrase, what might be important, that resonates throughout the rest of the sentence, and makes of its internalization an instance of "powerful influence exercised by another's discourse on a given author". The engine that drives this resonance is the conditional modal "might be". Strawson speaks of "the quasi-inferential character of the conditional" (15), and I must point out that when he does so he is referring to an "if...then" proposition. However, a re-engineering might be accomplished by using Searle's technique: "in accordance with a version of the axiom of

identity...whenever two expressions refer to the same object [or action] one can be substituted for the other...without changing the truth value of the corresponding statement" (97). This is apparently a restatement of Leibniz's law that will hopefully qualify the "might be" modal as an "if...then" proposition. Modifying a sentence example of Strawson's gives: if I could catch that bus then I won't have to walk. This can be re-written as: I might catch that bus and not have to walk, which has virtually the same meaning. So it is based on this virtual equality that the following assertion is meant to refer to what might be important (if it is important, then...). "Anyone who confirms a natural indicative conditional is thereby committed, on the view of the conventional meaning of "if...then", to accepting the truth of the corresponding material or truth-functional conditional" (Strawson 13). Regarding truth conditions, Habermas adds: "Speakers and hearers...understand the meaning of a word when they know what contribution that word makes to the capacity for truth of a sentence formed with its help. Thus, truth-conditional semantics developed the thesis that the meaning of a sentence is determined by its truth conditions" (109).

Tying together the implications of these last three scholarly opinions leads me to the following rationale. First, if the phrase what might be important has indeed a "quasi-inferential character" then what might be inferred? To the basic writer the inference is that her interlocutor is willing to consider a great range of possible responses. Again we have a mutually reinforced dynamic, this time where an open ended proposition becomes grounded in the student's entire body of evidence, i.e., the accumulated knowledge and experiences of her life, which the student knows to be true. And since the student knows the "contribution" of her own life to be true, then the "capacity for truth" generated from her own evidential contribution and oriented by the essay prompt becomes a saturation of "truth conditions", or the beginning of internal persuasion. The "creativity and productiveness [of internally persuasive discourse] consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words [and] that it organizes masses of our words from within" (Bakhtin, D.I. 345).

But there is more to the conditional “might be” than inference. There is also the “[commitment] to accepting the truth of the corresponding material or truth-functional conditional.” A commitment is a promise. When the TAKS voice indicates that “we” are committed to keeping an open mind, many basic writers will sense that promise without ever having to articulate the reassurance that it entails, because

We understand a speech act when we know the kinds of reasons that a speaker could provide in order to convince a hearer that she is entitled in the given circumstances to claim validity for her utterance...To understand an expression is to know how one can make use of it in order to reach understanding with somebody about something (Habermas 297-298).

This is exactly what my proposed essay prompt explains: how the basic writer can make use of his own values “in order to reach an understanding” with his TAKS assessors about various kinds of responsibilities, the plurality of which we will now consider.

The prepositional phrase in which the theme of responsibility is identified will act very much like a mathematical multiplier of the possibilities implied by the conditional modal what might be important. To refer as does the TAKS prompt to a singular possibility for the theme is effectively to gag the subject by denying its rightful multidimensionality. Rightful in the sense that themes are socially construed phenomena: “theme is a complex, dynamic system of signs that attempts to be adequate to a given instant of generative process” (Volosinov, *Marxism* 100). The more about the subject that is known by the speaker and the listener—or the more that is allowed (to paraphrase Volosinov)—the richer will be the emerging discourse. The phrase, about accepting those familiar kinds of responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read, allows the sophomore basic writer a wide range of choices under the umbrella of “responsibility”, and does not imply that the student must provide evidence for one unique conclusion.

This ever increasing range of response first generated by the modal conditional, might be, and compounded by a multidimensional theme, complements the intonation already embedded in the prompt by the prepositional phrase for us. If, in fact, there is in intonation an “inherent tendency toward personification” (Volosinov, *Freudianism* 103), then this deliberate addition of the prepositional phrase is intended to anchor a “set toward possible sympathy” that hints of conspiracy, or at least of “an active attitude toward the referent, toward the object of the utterance...while the listener—the second participant—is, as it were, called in as witness and ally” (103).

Volosinov again provides support when he asserts that, intonation always lies on the border of the verbal and the nonverbal, the said and the unsaid (102). In the case of the proposed essay prompt, intonation lies on the border of what is stated (responsibility) and its unstated possibilities. For the basic writer, monolithic “responsibility” is approachable only in a sort of discursive lockstep of affirmation. He will parrot what he thinks the grown-ups want to hear. When this implied exclusiveness is eliminated, intonation allows the theme to become more approachable: “every instance of intonation is oriented in two directions: with respect to the listener as ally or witness and with respect to the object of the utterance as the third, living participant whom the intonation scolds or caresses, denigrates or magnifies” (104-05). When asking the basic writer what might be important about a multifaceted theme, as the subject is fleshed out dimensionally it loses its astral distance and becomes much more a matter of the student’s real life knowledge. It seems

[...] only in turning back to the context-forming horizon of the lifeworld, from within which participants in communication come to an understanding with one another about something, that our field of vision changes in such a way that we can see the points of connection between the theory of action and social theory (Habermas 174).

Social theory in this case being the collective opinions about “accepting responsibility” of which the student might be aware, while theory of action is how the student writer implements those opinions into response.

It is perhaps by now apparent that in the continued use of scholars such as Searle and Habermas to support the arguments of the Bakhtinian Circle, or vice-versa, that I am gathering around the essay prompt the philosophies of two distinct language encampments: the speech act camp and the utterance camp. One might imagine a chalkboard Venn diagram where the two trains of thought overlap. If what falls from the utterance camp into the common intersection is intonation, then what might fall into play from the other side? Austin and Searle, Habermas and Strawson each speak of a speech act’s force of illocution in much the same way as the Marxist philosophers speak of the act of intoning. Might intonation, with its “inherent tendency toward personification,” be considered as a force of illocution that has “a built-in orientation toward reaching understanding” (Habermas 298)? And if so, how might that impact the construction of an effective essay prompt?

To answer, we should recall Chapter Two’s distinction of the prompt as a performative sentence that is intended to refer, direct, and either command or entreat. Performatives, as previously mentioned, are further subdivided into the categories of locution, illocution, and perlocution. A verbal act of locution is a basic statement that has meaning, that is “sense and reference together” (Strawson 198); or “through locutionary acts, the speaker expresses states of affairs” (Habermas 122). An illocutionary act is a statement that is intended to invoke a response: “stating, questioning, commanding, promising, etc. [are] performing illocutionary acts” (Searle 24); or “the speaker performs an action by saying something” (Habermas 122). And in the perlocutionary act, “the speaker produces an effect upon the hearer” (122); or it is “the consequences or effects such acts have on the actions, thoughts, or beliefs, etc. of hearers” (Searle 25). These are artificial distinctions made for purposes of analysis. Recall if you will

Austin's remark that in saying just about anything, a locutionary act with illocutionary force is committed (133). In real speech, locution and illocution cannot be separated. But because "the illocutionary success of [an] assertion [may not be] a sufficient condition for achieving a perlocutionary effect", if indeed such effect is achieved, it is because there has been in response a "teleological action that goes beyond the speech act... [therefore] perlocutionary effects remain external to the meaning of what is said" (Habermas 125).

Clearly, the TAKS paradigm aspires to all three conditions: in its triplet it makes statements to which the essay prompt (and various questions) command or entreat a response. And if in fact the student does respond, then the TAKS has achieved its desired perlocutionary intent. But because there is disagreement among the speech act camp about the boundaries of these categories—in particular, about the boundaries between illocution and perlocution as raised by Strawson's interpretation of Austin that is disputed by Habermas (125-27)--it will be best for the purposes of this paper to pick selectively among the competing points of view. Doing so, it should be possible to shape an illocutionary consensus regarding the proposed essay prompt. For example, all the speech act scholars would agree that the statement, you must go, is an illocutionary act because it is uttered with an intent that some one respond, yet it has a locutionary meaning. If the intended some one replies "I will go" and indeed departs, then the statement will have had a perlocutionary effect. However, if we examine the intent behind the intent to achieve a response, we approach what is meant by the illocutionary force of an utterance. In what sense is the statement made? You must go because I command it? You must go because it is the right thing to do? You must, because you have no alternative—or because it is the rule? The illocutionary force of an utterance is what the hearer (or reader) takes as the extra-literal motive behind the statement, one that can "prompt" the hearer (or reader) to "accept the offer...and thereby enter into a rationally motivated binding and bonding relationship" (110).

Using the same statement, you must go, let us return for the moment to the utterance camp and imagine the many ways in which those three words might be intoned. It should be obvious that any of the aforementioned illocutionary modes (or moods) can be duplicated with intonation. When Volosinov writes about intonation, it is obvious that he is describing a compelling discursive phenomenon. Embedded in intonation is “a living, forceful relation with the external world” (Freudianism 104); and intonation “is the verbal factor of greatest sensitivity, elasticity, and freedom” (105). And while constructing a hierarchy of intonations, Bakhtin adds:

—the intonation of finalization, explanatory, distributive, enumerative intonations, and so forth. Storytelling, interrogatory, explanatory, and imperative intonations occupy a special position. It is as though grammatical intonation crosses with generic intonation here (but not with expressive intonation in the precise sense of the word). The sentence acquires expressive intonation only in the whole utterance. When giving an example of a sentence for analysis, we usually supply it with a particular typical intonation, thereby transforming it into a completed utterance (Speech 90).

This is a remarkable clue to, not what an utterance is, rather to what quality it must have. An utterance must be intoned, and I have attempted to do so with the construction of a new sentence. But allow me to mark a cautious distinction. I am not claiming that because I have embedded in my alternative prompt a few verbal devices that I have in fact fashioned an utterance. What I hope to have fashioned is a suitable device to properly orient the basic writer as he sorts out the three utterances that comprise the triplet. My intoned sentence relies on the consummation of input and response, its own context, to in fact be part of the completed utterance that the basic writer must achieve. She has no active interlocutors at her desk in the closed and silent testing room. The “dialogue” is what she can pull from the texts and intermix with her own experience. Her response will be a completely unique utterance and upon its success will rest the effectiveness of the TAKS paradigm for her as a targeted test subject.

Effectiveness must be measured on an individual basis—an aspect that is only implied in the utterance camp—but one that is clearly articulated in the rules of what comprises a speech act.

Here is an example of what is meant by implied, in a previous quote of Volosinov's: "When a person anticipates the disagreement of his interlocutor or, at any rate, is uncertain or doubtful of his agreement, he intones his words differently." Why does he intone his words differently? Because he wants his speech act to succeed. Success is implied by Volosinov when he writes: "The concrete utterance...is born, lives, and dies in the process of social interaction" (Freudianism 105). Success is implied by Bakhtin when he states: "Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an active understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support" (DI 280-81). But success becomes a more quantifiable factor in the modern analytical approach of a speech act scholar, such as Habermas, who tells us that:

A successful utterance must satisfy three additional validity claims [besides comprehensibility]: it must count as true for the participants insofar as it represents something in the world; it must count as truthful insofar as it expresses something intended by the speaker; and it must count as right insofar as it conforms to socially recognized expectations (49).

Once again making the point that an essay prompt is positioned in the final rhetorical situation that orients the sophomore basic writer as to how she is to respond, let us re-discuss both prompts for intonation and illocutionary force as possible indicators of success. First we shall examine the extant prompt, write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility. The imperative, write, is purely one of command and there is no attempt to intone the mood differently. The predicate expression is ambiguous: where does it start and where does it end? Is the predicate expression explaining the importance, or is it explaining the importance of accepting? Might the entire sentence, as a truth-proposition, be a modifier that

both qualifies and reveals the theme? Likewise, the subject expression is clouded. Is the subject accepting responsibility, or is it solely responsibility? Might the subject be the entire noun phrase beginning with “the importance”? Since “predication never comes neutrally but always in one illocutionary mode or another,” (Searle 123) what force might the basic writer be confronting? If the basic writer takes the subject as responsibility, well and good-- though she may find herself restricted by the command to define the subject in terms of its importance, the illocutionary force to do so is nevertheless distinct. If she discerns the subject expression to be, accepting responsibility, the illocutionary force is again distinct. But if she does not grasp the subject, then the illocutionary force is one of uncertainty. More dangerous though, is the propositional content of the prompt if it makes the validity claim that accepting responsibility is important while commanding a concurring response. Habermas cautions that:

Illocutionary acts owe their motivating force to the validity claims they carry, since these claims—like truth claims—are capable of being intersubjectively recognized to the extent that they are based on reasons that count as reasons for all parties involved. Naked imperatives and threats are deprived of this illocutionary force; there is no claim to validity associated with them but rather a power claim; they are oriented not toward the possibility of common agreement but toward the causal effect of the speaker’s influence on the hearer (266-67).

Hence the hazard of prompts that read like class slogans because they are based on reasons that might not “count as reasons for all parties involved.” A sixteen-year-old student who is observing his single parent fall behind on her car payments may not be of a mind to describe the importance of accepting responsibility. Perhaps his view of responsibility is that it is a quality which must be gradually acquired, as circumstances allow. But the extant prompt does not encourage that alternate view. “Naked imperatives and threats are examples of perlocutionary acts [that] have lost their illocutionary force...such speech acts...are not oriented toward the

rationality motivated attitude of an addressee" (275). How are such speech acts oriented? They are oriented toward submission, which will generate a mimicked response.

In the alternative prompt, there are two independent clauses and one dependent clause to consider. Write for us an essay, as previously considered in terms of tone, is deliberately constructed so that the prepositional phrase comes between the predicate and the subject in an attempt to shift the illocutionary force away from command and toward entreaty. Standing alone, a dependent clause can have no force of illocution, but as one that is based on your own life's experience does its job of modification it enhances the sense of "entreaty" by allowing into the discourse familiar circumstances that might put the basic writer more at ease. We are not commanded on familiar ground. We are asked to comply, and a request for compliance is much more along the lines of an open dialogue. As the basic writer continues to read and absorb the locutionary meaning of the alternative prompt, its potential force of illocution continues to build. If the compound sentence, write for us an essay, one that is based on your own life's experience, has suggested that the dialogue might indeed be open, then the final independent clause elicits both the dimension and the promise of its openness. In this promise lies the expression's illocutionary force: and in this essay explain what might be important about those kinds of familiar responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read. Again, it is Strawson who assures us that a promise has been made: "Anyone who confirms a natural indicative conditional is thereby committed...to accepting the truth of the corresponding material or truth-functional conditional." By using a construction such as the alternative prompt, a testing authority can position itself in the dialogue as a sympathetic interlocutor who makes a promise of reasonableness. As Searle tells us, "'I promise' and 'I hereby promise' are among the strongest illocutionary force indicating devices for commitment provided by the English language" (58).

Such a promise of reasonableness might do much to illuminate the grounding of a superaddressee threatened with eclipse as it is supplanted by the authority of the TAKS, an

assessment that offers little hope of appeal. Yet appeal lies at the heart of addressivity, which Bakhtin defines as “the quality of turning to some one” (Speech 99). It is true that the urge to direct speech to another is not necessarily to make an appeal, yet “each dialogue takes place as if against the background of a responsive understanding of an invisibly present third party [that can assume] various ideological expressions (God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, the court of history, science, and so forth)” (126). The possibility of such an invisibly present third party, or superaddressee, arises because the words we utter are meant to be heard and responded to. They are “a two-sided act” (Volosinov, Marxism 86) that resist being unheard, misunderstood, ignored, or repressed. We reside among our most meaningful utterances, constructing ourselves from their content, and continually reinforcing our very being with the logic they represent. To deny any human being the rationale with which he interconnects to others is to effectively deny his right to communicate. Unconsciously, we erect a defense against any such possibility, and this defensive entity stands astride our values wherever they might be positioned.

Such positioned values, virtually always shared with our social group and expressed in a certain fashion by our peers, are often perceived by state assessors as being testable by virtue of their suitability as themes for essay response. “Pro-active solutions” is testable, “mercy” is testable—either of which might have been chosen as themes for the triplet of the TAKS test currently in question. At the moment “responsibility”, or the importance of accepting such, was chosen as the theme, there moved unconsciously into position around that set of values a basic writer’s ultimate ideological mechanism of justification—Husserl’s “lifeworld” perhaps, described by Habermas as providing “risk-absorbing coverage in the form of a massive background consensus...of agreed-upon interpretive patterns, loyalties, and proficiencies” (237). A sixteen-year-old, however, might not have accumulated enough evidence-based conclusions to resist a validity claim made by the State of Texas that goes against the grain of his basic beliefs. His ultimate belief that, say, accepting responsibility is not as important as day-to-day survival will

wilt under pressure from the State if the “keeper” of his core values is trumped by an authoritarian word. A promise of reasonableness, however—a commitment from one’s assessors that they will accept the truth of your conditional response—does not undermine “the superaddressee [that] negates the prospect that what I utter may be meaningless” (Farmer 22). The basic writer’s values are left intact and unchallenged, and he is free to explore what he thinks might be important about the theme.

We began chapter three by noting that the TAKS assessors, who embody the “voice” of the test, are not situated in the dialogue despite the intent that TAKS be an organizing principle around which is made a collective, state-wide effort toward assessment success. To abet this success came the suggestion that a familiar “for us”, strategically placed in the prompt’s beginning—besides situating the TAKS assessors into the dialogue—might tilt the tone of the imperative away from command and toward entreaty. This shift in mood toward the “possibly sympathetic” is a germinal movement leading to an “embryonic beginning” of internal persuasion.

The prompt is situated at a line of “demarcation” between this internal embryonic beginning and an external state-mandated discourse--at a point of balance, so to speak, where the dialogue can swing in either a closed or open direction. At this critical juncture also occurs between the student and her assessors the final rhetorical situation, during which an orientation is required for the internalization of the TAKS utterance. A rhetorical situation must contain the five basic elements of a text, a reader and an author, constraints, and an exigency, or urgent real world situation (Bitzer 1-14), and the TAKS paradigm is indeed all of that. The alternative prompt that I have proposed offers an open-ended proposition that is grounded in the student’s entire body of evidence, her life’s experience, allowing her an immense field to sow and reap in response. The “quasi-inferential” character of the modal conditional might be makes a commitment to the student writer, a promise of reasonableness, that whatever response is within the granted range (and not off-topic) will be openly considered without bias. A “set

toward possible sympathy” and “an active attitude toward the referent” that includes the basic writer “as witness and ally” is the hopeful result of the prompt’s intoned construction; while the promise of reasonableness comprises the illocutionary force that persuades a reluctant sophomore that her response will be fairly considered.

In fact, this would not be the only promise made by the TAKS to the student. As remarked upon in chapter one, built into the structure of any successful performative there must be: “an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect [by and for] the participants [who] must actually so conduct themselves accordingly,” which is by way of saying that the TAKS assessors are bound by convention to pass with at least a score of “2” all responses that meet established criteria. So there is a procedural precedent that the students already have a sense of for the making and keeping of promises. The promise of reasonableness is a re-commitment to fairness, really, that every student has a right to expect but of which they are often doubtful because of the assessment’s authoritarian nature. Reasonableness, as well, should be a matter of concern in the following chapter, which deals with the TAKS paradigm as argument.

CHAPTER 5

THE PROMPT AS CONCILIATORY ARGUMENT

Overview: This chapter is concerned with trying to define just what kind of argument the TAKS assessors are making in terms of the existential proposition, the importance of accepting responsibility, which can be expressed as the constative, accepting responsibility is important. I claim the TAKS argument is eristic, and offer the proposed essay prompt as a “Rogerian” alternative.

Perelman helps to explain how a noun phrase such as “the importance” can have both a connotation and a “self-evidential” nature that discourages dissent. In terms of student response, that the TAKS assessors may not be requiring much of an argument at all comes to light while examining Toulmin’s “warrants” of persuasion. Perhaps what the TAKS voice is really asking is for the student to write a mere warrant of persuasion in support of the foregone conclusion that accepting responsibility is important. Might they be “question-begging” in the Benthamite fashion that Burke interprets as having “the force of an assumption”? To counter such a force of assumption, or illocution, I suggest that what might actually coalesce around the alternative TAKS prompt can be perceived as a conciliatory argument. In a rubric created by Nancy Wood, Young, Becker, and Pike’s conception of Rogerian argument is compared to traditional argument, and both modes are viewed in light of Aristotle’s *pisteis*. I speculate that this rubric might be further extended to demonstrate how the alternative prompt meets both the Rogerian and the Aristotelian criteria. For good measure, I suggest that the rubric be extended again to embrace Habermas’ very Aristotelian notion of what constitutes a speech act agreement—criteria which once more are met by my proposed alternative prompt.

Early in the chapter, two of my Uvalde High School sophomores are novelized as examples of student writers who are inclined and disinclined to agree with the existential proposition, the importance of accepting responsibility. Later, it is shown how each might benefit from the TAKS as Rogerian argument.

One way to interpret the TAKS prompt, write an essay explaining the importance of accepting responsibility, is that the assessors (interlocutors) have drawn the conclusion that accepting responsibility is in some way urgently important. Urgently, because the definite article modifies what appears to be the auxiliary noun “importance” rather than the somewhat diminished theme. “...certain grammatical constructions, such as noun-phrases, can be utilized to convey factual status...noun-phrases are, rather, an effort to make a statement timeless and, in consequence, beyond the limits of subjectivity and bias” (Perelman 182). The assessing authority is, after all, the State of Texas, and if they have predicated their validity claim in such an emphatic fashion, an urgent tone might indeed be communicated. About this particular significance, the assessors want our sophomores to write what Stephen Toulmin might describe as a warrant of persuasion that connects just such a conclusion back to the data presented in the triplet. Warrants might be described as “inference-licences...to show that, taking these data as a starting point, the step to the original claim or conclusion is an appropriate and legitimate one...[warrants] act as bridges and authorise the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us” (Toulmin 91).

Using this interpretation, it could be said that the assessors are not requiring that the student writers make any assertions of their own at all—merely that they support the TAKS assertion with a series of micro-arguments. If that is indeed the case, however sadly, is not the State of Texas assuming that the significance of accepting responsibility is so self-evident to the basic writers—who have come to the table pre-persuaded, we must suppose, about the truth of the validity claim-- that they can construct these micro-arguments using the evidence in the

triplet? “That which is self-evident is simultaneously effective and valid and convinces because it bears conviction in it. The self-evident, as the criterion of validity, is the authority for totally discrediting all argumentation” (Perelman 464). Any argument that the basic writer might have that contradicts the validity claim is threatened with being discredited by the self-evidential assumptions built into the claim.

Students who have backing for such a claim have no problem accepting its validity, and they can begin to compose their warrants. “Standing behind our warrants ...will normally be other assurances, without which the warrants themselves would possess neither authority nor currency...these other things we may refer to as backing” (Toulmin 96). Very often, though, these deeply embedded micro-arguments that ultimately comprise one’s sense of validation are culturally determined; and the poverty language/culture of a southwest border town is a long way removed from the middle-classed language/cultures of the TAKS constructors, whatever their skin color might be. Freire warns that:

Manipulation, sloganizing, ‘depositing’, regimentation, and prescription cannot be components of revolutionary praxis, precisely because they are components of the praxis of domination. In order to dominate, the dominator has no choice but to deny true praxis to the people, deny them the right to say their own word and think their own thoughts (126).

Do I suspect that the TAKS assessors want to deny to the basic writer the right to say their own word? Certainly not. But before dismissing talk of “revolutionary praxis” as too extreme, one should come to a town like Uvalde and witness how five generations of welfare can wound a community. One should come and witness the conditions in which some of my students must live. Those children do not conceptualize a theme such as responsibility in the often prescriptive and dogmatic ways such themes are conceptualized by a dominant middle-class. “The fact that individuals in a certain area do not perceive a generative theme, or

perceive it in a distorted way, may only reveal a limit-situation of oppression in which people are still submerged” (103). To what Freire expresses in terms of dominant versus oppressed communities, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca express additionally in terms of language:

All language is the language of a community...the terms used, their meaning, their definition, can only be understood in the context of the habits, ways of thought, methods, external circumstances, and traditions known to the users of those terms [which are] linked to a social and historical situation which fundamentally conditions any distinction that one might wish to draw between judgments of reality and value judgments (513).

It might be said that this weighted foundational prompt, this loaded noun phrase, would posit some students at an ethical crossroads where their “judgment of reality” contradicts the “value judgments” they sense they are expected to mimic. Sense, because as Kenneth Burke reminds us, spoken and written conclusions carry a certain tone. I would not go so far as to say that the importance of accepting responsibility is an example of what Jeremy Bentham might have called a “single appellative”, which is a “censorial term” (94) or biasing label, but Burke’s use of Benthamite interpretations makes it clear that the TAKS prompt is a “ ‘question-begging’ term[s] in that [it is] suggestive...having, without the form, the force of an assumption” (98). The force of this assumption would be transmitted, as Volosinov might suggest, by intonation—or as Habermas et al. might say, what is transmitted is the validity statement’s force of illocution.

In any event—admitting that the language pool of my community is not nearly all poverty line working class—in the language community of my kids who are affected by such limit-situations, what is often valued is the ability to gauge and manipulate “reality” so that it will be “judged” in favor of their survival. In fact, the “story lines” or data of the triplet under examination—the fish that was saved, the school that was saved, and the people being saved by nurses—could easily be argued as a theme such as explain the importance of enhancing

and assisting in survival, or explain the importance of showing mercy. That the theme of responsibility was chosen, I grant, is perfectly valid. Nevertheless, the noun phrase in the essay prompt is so full of implication that some kids might only hesitantly take a swing at it for fear of phrasing a disloyalty to family or community. In order to empower students such as mine on themes such as responsibility, we might have more success if we unload the writing prompts of such class-conscious implications. "It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them [because] their view...reflects their situation in the world" (Freire 96). In other words, before constructing a super-test argument, be careful to ask for assertions about a topic that does not leave a significant number of students in the awkward position of having to mimic a response.

Let me try to simplify the TAKS argument under consideration. The State assessors are assuming that the acceptance of responsibility is a fundamental tenet of a civilized society. They believe that educated sophomores should recognize that accepting responsibility is crucial to the American way of life. Therefore, they expect and require that an educated sophomore can explain in an essay why accepting responsibility is important.

This is, of course, an ideal argumentation scenario but I believe it represents the basic intent of the TAKS constructors, who have supplied combinations of evidence throughout the triplet to assist the student in drawing such a conclusion. Now might come the questions that Toulmin introduced to modern argument theory: if this is the case you are making, "what have you got to go on?" and "how do you get there" (100)? But it is not asked, as it would be under standard eristic circumstances, of those who constructed the argument. On the contrary, the argument makers are imposing the questions upon the unfortunate student captive who must sift through the evidence, select data appropriate to the meanings she is shaping, and with those meanings hopefully construct a warrant supportive of the foregone conclusion—of which, remember, she is supposed to be persuaded because the theme is self-evident.

Fair enough. Let us say that the importance of accepting responsibility is self-evident to her because, since she has been nine-years-old, she has been a second mother to her three younger siblings. Her hard-working single mother relies on her, but this young sophomore has grown weary of the extra duty, which has been thrust on her and in no sense has she ever considered that she has “received [responsibility] with consent” (Webster’s 5). Her most urgent wish is to graduate, move out, and escape what she sees as the drudgery of duty. She is told to turn what might be her artistic sense of expression about the theme—perhaps her comic frustration about accepting responsibility—into a response that emphasizes the significance of the theme vis a vis the assessing authorities of the State of Texas. Dare she think that her slant of comic frustration might be considered significant by these authorities? She might. We hope she does. But she might not, and then the dutifully written response entailing in what ways she knows her help has been important to her mother might well be scored a “3” or “4” but it won’t have that uniquely true word that the rhetorical situation might have generated had the argument not been constructed with its previously mentioned force of assumption. Nevertheless, she can respond with some confidence to the prompt.

Another example of sophomore students who live in my neighborhood, however, could not respond as confidently to the assertion as posed. He lives with his grandmother, who owns a dog, a handsome, black, full-sized Chihuahua that is aggressive to strange passers-by (including me, for a time). One day the little beast nipped the ankle of a cyclist riding by, and the police were called, but suddenly in supportive conspiracy no one knew who owned the dog (which had disappeared). It roamed between various houses, so the neighbors said, and no one knew where the Chihuahua had come from. It had just shown up, and folks fed it to be kind. How much effort can a short-handed police department devote to such complaints? A few weeks later, the dog was back in the ‘hood, on la abuela’s front porch, and my young student’s rationale: the guy wasn’t hurt, he was just looking to sue some one. When confronted with a value laden noun phrase in an essay prompt, this student will instinctively hedge and remain

loyal to those he loves--namely his grandmother—to whom it was important not to accept responsibility for the actions of the dog for fear of litigation. These two examples entail different definitions of what it means to be responsible, and definition has much to do with argument. According to Perelman:

One of the essential techniques of quasi-logical argumentation is the identifying of various elements which are the object of the discourse. Any use of concepts, any application of a classification, any recourse to induction involves a reduction of certain elements to what they have in them that is identical or interchangeable...the most characteristic method of complete identification consists in using definitions (210).

The TAKS assessors realize that each student will bring to the table his own definition of what it means to be responsible—for purposes of precision, dictionaries and thesauri are made available—but under consideration here are the deeply embedded contextual meanings of words. Each of the students just mentioned understands responsibility in that the assumption of such makes them liable and accountable. They understand that when some one is responsible for an unsuccessful action they get the blame, likewise they get credit when the action succeeds. These two students—as do virtually all of my sophomores—have a sense that when some one is responsible they are also considered trustworthy, though why and how these meanings slide into each other may elude them. But the connotative association of “responsible” and “trustworthy” will be an impediment to the boy who might want to argue in essay form that it was okay for his beloved abuela to not accept responsibility for the actions of the Chihuahua, because to even bring it up implies that the good woman is not trustworthy.

If, however, the argument is constructed on a conditional basis—if the assessors had prompted, write an essay explaining what might be important about accepting responsibility—then the promise of reasonableness might induce this student to utter a true word. “In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be

understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions” (Bakhtin, D I 282). The actions of a specific dog and the expression of emotion toward his grandmother, as defined by his conceptual system, has the makings of a very fine written response, even from a student of limited composition skills, if thought is given to the beckoning forth of such an effort.

But it is not only the range of values that are restricted by an argument that closes about itself. Evidence also becomes restricted. In support of the TAKS syllogistic premises, evidence might be drawn from the two most obviously connected of the triplet texts: the expository piece about the school principal, and the visual argument for becoming a nurse. It would be fortuitous for a student writer to hit upon this combination of data because, as narrow as this noun-phrase-dominated argument is—gravid with the implication of only one acceptable answer—the third piece in the triplet becomes virtually excluded as evidence. “—in the practice of argumentation, data constitute elements on which there seems to be an agreement that is, at least provisionally or conventionally, considered to be univocal and undisputed” (Perelman 121). There is a certain univocal nature, a unity of meaning, between the two former texts, but despite the suggestiveness of its title, the third text doesn’t fit so well. “The Quality of Mercy” is not about paid professionals with demanding careers, but about two boys who, gamboling along a sometimes dry creek bed, come across a stranded carp and pro-actively re-channel the water until the fish can make its way safely downstream. The moral of this tale ties nicely into micro-themes present in the other two texts—themes about survival, mercy, and helpfulness, for example—but it does not fit so well into a theme generated by the importance of accepting responsibility because it requires such a reach to define these boys’ actions as such. They did not “receive with consent” nor was the action thrust upon them. Not to beat the reader over the head with the poverty status of many of my kids, but when the boy so cavalierly soils his jacket hood while scooping up the fish—making more work for his mother-- some of my sophomores who don’t have winter coats, but do have more consideration for their mothers, might consider

the action quite irresponsible and contrary to the claim. By de-restricting the argument, though—by lifting the implication that only certain conclusions can be drawn—the thematic base is broadened. Prompted with a minimal write an essay explaining what might be important about accepting responsibility, teenagers who live on the edge of a desert as do mine can readily stake claims in a seasonally dry creek.

Is it enough though to broaden the scope of how and what they can argue without at the same time broadening their evidential base? Argumentation relies on data. If the range of what a person might argue is expanded, it makes sense to also allow a database that complements those points that are newly asserted. “—the actual sort of facts in virtue of which any warrant will have currency and authority will vary according to the field of argument within which the warrant operates; so, when we expand [the claim]...the expansion we must make will also depend upon the field with which we are concerned” (Toulmin 104). What my proposed alternative prompt does in this case is to expand the evidential base into “the field[s] with which [the basic writers] are concerned”, those fields that in the students’ minds “might be important about accepting the kinds of responsibilities” they have experienced or read about. There is little chance here that the interlocutors will be in opposition, as they well might be if an eristic intonation is sensed by a student who disagrees somewhat with the validity claim. For all its old fashioned earnestness, the sense of entreaty that I have urged be imbedded in an essay prompt will now define the sort of argument I feel should be made. Recalling indeed that no speech act, utterance, or argument is made at all until the essay prompt finalizes the discourse, I must ask why the provoking word needs to be an eristic one? Might not a conciliatory word—a Rogerian gesture—be more appropriate for sophomores who are facing a high-stakes rhetorical moment? Let us have a glance at what sort of Rogerian argument my proposed prompt might make of the triplet.

Rogerian argument is a rhetorical strategy based on the psychological counseling techniques of Carl Rogers, a renowned psycho-therapist. Unlike syllogistic arguments which

say essentially that one's conclusion is thusly proven by one's premises, Rogerian argument does not seek to win a point, rather it hopes to acquire a point through making a concession so that both sides in a dialogue are satisfied. One stepping stone along a Rogerian path to compromise in a dispute would be that one side or the other show faith that they truly understand their opponent's position, and how that position is "valid in certain contexts and under certain conditions" (Wood 249).

The originators of the Rogerian argument concept—Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike—developed a set of guidelines for written argument whereby antagonism can be deflected so that agreement can be reached. In Nancy Wood's graduate level textbook, *Perspectives on Argument*, these guidelines are part of a rubric that compares Rogerian argument with its traditional agonistic counterpart, and also casts each as analogous to Aristotle's: "Pisteis, or the Means of Persuasion in Public Address...[which are essentially] in the character (ethos) of the speaker...in the argument (logos) itself...[and] through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion (pathos) by the speech" (Aristotle 37-38). Concerning the writing of a Rogerian argument, under the rubric category of ethos, Wood's paraphrase of Young, et al states: "the writer [i.e. an irenic TAKS] builds opponent's and enhances own character through empathy." Under the category of logos, a propitiatory TAKS tactic would be to proceed "in an explanatory fashion to analyze the conditions under which the position of either side is valid." Regarding Aristotle's instruction that what also kindles persuasion is the spark of emotion felt by the listener, the pathos tactic that a Rogerian TAKS might employ would be to use "descriptive, dispassionate language to cool emotions on both sides" (Wood 251). Ethos, logos, and pathos were considered "entechnic ['embodied in art, artistic']", as opposed to methods or devices of persuasion that were "atechnic ['nonartistic']". Atechnic devices of persuasion, such as physical evidence, must be used, while entechnic means must be invented (Aristotle 37). Hence my own humble invention, the alternative prompt, which might also be aligned in Wood's rubric for comparison.

Of ethos, Aristotle writes: “[there is persuasion] through character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way as to make the speaker worthy of credence; for we believe fair-minded people to a greater extent and more quickly [than we do others]” (38). If my premise is that an effectively constructed essay prompt should make to the student a promise of reasonableness that is accepted, then I would be adhering to Aristotle’s observation that any evaluative voice such as TAKS should be sensed as “worthy of credence”. The TAKS voice should assure, intone, or illocute an ethos of fair-mindedness. “The most important feature of Rogerian argument is listening empathetically and nonjudgmentally” (Wood 249).

In the TAKS test under consideration, the body of logos and the data upon which it depends lie largely in the triplet and in the student’s own context. But the assumed position and even the particularization of the potential argument are prompt-dependent. I have contended that the horizon of the current prompt, the importance of accepting responsibility, is restrictively particularized, and that the assumed position urged upon the student writer might encourage an affected response. But these objections would not apply to the horizon of the proposed alternative, what might be important about those familiar kinds of responsibilities, which is grounded in both the triplet (or any text) and the student’s own experiences. “Persuasion occurs through the arguments [logoi] when we show the truth or the apparent truth from what is persuasive in each case” (Aristotle 39). In terms of Rogerian written argument, where a friendly TAKS voice would be called upon to “analyze the conditions under which the position of either side is valid”, the alternative prompt would do the job nicely, intoned as it is with a promise of reasonableness, and allowing as it does a myriad of Aristotle’s “apparent truth[s]”. Write for us an essay, one that is based on your own life’s experience, and in this essay explain what might be important about those familiar kinds of responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read. The emotion of the appeal, as well, is inferred by this prompt, just as surely as there is pathos in every life experience that the student might recall. The requirement that the position writer use “descriptive, dispassionate language to cool [the student’s] emotions,” is

fulfilled by a compound/complex sentence devised to make the basic writer feel included in the decisions to be made.

There is also a third set of guidelines that might be added to a comparison rubric such as that designed by Nancy Wood, and those are conditions that Habermas states must be met in order for an agreement to be reached. Here it becomes obvious that Jurgen Habermas, J. L. Austin, et al have also read Aristotle.

When a hearer accepts a speech-act offer, an agreement...comes about...at three levels...It belongs to the communicative intent of the speaker (a) that she perform a speech act that is right in respect to the given normative context, so that an intersubjective relation that is recognized as legitimate may come about between her and the hearer; (b) that she express truthfully her beliefs, intentions, feeling, wishes, and the like, so that the hearer will give credence to what is said; and (c) that she make a true statement (or correct existential presuppositions), so that the hearer may accept and share the knowledge of the speaker (Habermas 142).

Note the piteis that are embedded in this quote: ethos is inferred by the phrase “give credence”, logos by “correct existential presuppositions”, and pathos by “accept and share”. Each of these phrases should define areas of concern for the TAKS assessors, who would communicate more effectively with students who feel they have made an agreement, than they would with those who feel commanded to respond.

To sum up chapter four, I first took note of the “loaded” nature of noun phrases such as the importance of accepting responsibility, and how these sorts of phrases can be used to move an assertion “beyond the limits of subjectivity and bias”, particularly if the authority behind the statement is as intimidating as the State of Texas might be. Then I challenged that as the prompt is worded, the TAKS assessors are not asking that the students draw genuine conclusions about responsibility, only to support with micro-arguments the TAKS validity claim.

They are asking the basic writer to produce warrants, and any student wanting to disclaim would be discouraged by the self-evidential assumptions built into the assertion. I contend that students who come from the limit-situation of poverty can understand a concept such as “responsibility” only in terms of “the language of [their] community”, and that E.L.A. assessors should be careful not to invent “question-begging [validity statements that have]...the force of an assumption”, which besides assessing a student’s English composition skills, might require her to substantiate a value she does not share.

Nevertheless, I have conceded that many students from financially struggling families do indeed have in their limit-situation the argumentative backing to support the claim, the importance of accepting responsibility. And in preparation to introduce just such a student (as well as another), I found it useful to first reduce the TAKS triplet to a possible syllogistic argument. This syllogism allowed me to simplify the sort of premise extraction to which a student might resort after reading the TAKS text and writing to their conclusion that accepting responsibility is important. Then I introduced a facsimile based on a sophomore student whose family life I know something about, and who meets the TAKS assumption—that is, she is predisposed to accept as true the assertion about accepting responsibility. I pointed out, however, that this student could have a from-the-heart response about the subject—perhaps to express comic frustration—that she might fear is not significant enough to meet the claim’s criteria. If instead, she merely validates the claim by writing in a mechanical way to satisfy the assessor she could well compose a “4”. But think of the true word that might be lost. Is it worth nothing? I do not mean to project the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills beyond what it is intended to be. But after the writing scores have been tabulated there remains the vestige of a rhetorical situation from which a young writer might retain a sliver of meaning. By implication, anytime an assessor can avoid a verbal construction that discourages the true word, they should.

It is in the introduction (and novelization) of a second student whence comes the objection that there may not always be a pre-disposition to validate the TAKS claim. This boy (as known first-hand by me) has experienced a situation in which “accepting responsibility” might have resulted in a difficult hardship for some one he loves. That his grandmother did not indebt herself by “accepting responsibility” meets with approval on the ‘hood, that is, in the “social and historical situation” of her community. Is this the same as saying that, in her denial, she did accept responsibility in recognizable community terms? Probably not, because the ‘hood is a discursive undercurrent of dissent. As I have come to know my neighborhood on the west side of Uvalde, the appearance of propriety is important, and many of the residents would probably mimic the conclusion for which the TAKS prompt is fishing. So, confronted with a State of Texas assertion implying that his loved ones are “untrustworthy”, this boy too will hedge. He will draw back and mimic a response because TAKS has made an argument of values that potentially excludes his community. Peter Elbow might say that our basic writer will have been “bamboozled”. The point is made here that when an argument closes about itself, not only the range of values are restricted—the evidential field is also diminished. The theory is then offered that my proposed alternative prompt, as it widens the thematic range, also increases the database upon which a student might rely.

Using the alternative, non-assertive prompt there is little chance that the interlocutors will be in opposition, as they could be if an agonistic intonation is sensed by a student who is hesitant to agree with the validity claim. Asking the question, why must the invoking word be an eristic one, I then turn my thesis toward the sort of argument that I think a state authority should make. The TAKS in the English Language Arts should offer a conciliatory word, an entreaty along the lines of written Rogerian argument. Describing Rogerian argument as a discursive process of acquisition through concession might be analogous to the TAKS relinquishing their validity claim in order to attain more creative responses. This change in character on the part of the situated TAKS voice—expressed in the previous chapter as an alternate intonation or

illocutionary force—invites a comparison to the time tested classical pisteis of Aristotle: ethos, logos, and pathos. Using an instructive rubric generated by Dr. Nancy Wood, one which compares these pisteis to both agonistic and Rogerian argument, I extend the concept to include the ethos, logos, and pathos elements of the alternative prompt, stressing the ethos that is present in its promise of reasonableness. The rubric is extended one final time to embrace what Habermas considers as the three essential elements that must be present before an agreement can be reached. Embedded in his argument, as well, are elements of Aristotle's pisteis. I conclude the chapter with the suggestion that the TAKS assessors could communicate more effectively with students who feel they have made an agreement, than they would with those who feel commanded to respond.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis came about because I had a dialogue with some of my students. I heard not only what they said but also what they could not say because at the age of fifteen they did not have the sophistication of language to express a frustration about language. On the one hand, they understood that they did not understand. The prompt did not convey to them a clear notion of what to write about. A noun phrase, explicit in meaning to the initiators of the dialogue, was misinterpreted by the listeners who were required to respond, and the importance of accepting responsibility was lost in translation. The phrase took on new meaning that one sophomore called “obscure”. This girl is still with me as a senior. She is a “Goth”, a poor punctuator, a phonetic speller, and smart as a whip (I’m helping to edit her novel). I remember what her frustration was that day as a sophomore. The idea was too big. How was she supposed to get a hold on it...the importance? Her fluid and inquisitive mind had just run into a monolithic validity claim, and she was struggling against or confused by the absolute, but I could not see it at the time.

We must be careful when we initiate a speech act that will end up as an assessment of a teenager’s composition skills. We should take care that meanings are not scrambled, that values are not slighted, and that creative avenues are not denied. My students can be thought of as an exigency, the real life urgency to this rhetorical situation—i.e. the presentation of my thesis—that is complementary to the exigency of my attaining a master’s degree. They are the exigency of my argument, without which there would be no rhetorical situation. I have used my students as evidence, I have invented them as pathos, and all along they have been the foundation of the relevance of this thesis—which might be summed as follows:

I began with the importance of precise identification of an intended theme, inferring that imprecision very easily becomes exclusion and exclusion too easily becomes cultural. “Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character” (Freire 107). Perhaps, in light of what is at stake for the student, the construction of an essay prompt that allows a wide range of argument can be considered a cultural action of a liberating character, if only in the minuscule way that it encourages an open dialogue. It is to this end that virtually every assertion I have made is directed. A careless referral makes for an ineffective speech act that may well become an open dialogue, but not the one intended. An imperious intonation or illocutionary force, an authoritarian utterance or agonistic argument each serves as constraints upon students who are just learning to express themselves. An interlocutor’s assumption that he has effectively identified and referred to the object of his discourse might sometimes be tied to a false confidence that he knows (disdains?) his audience. In this examination of the TAKS prompt as a sentence that ineffectively elicits utterances, speech acts, and arguments, the disconnection between reference and the limiting situations of culture is the most recurrent theme. This dysfunction impedes an argumentative response by, among other hindrances, assuming the respondent agrees with the basic premise. “Language possibilities themselves find their origin and development within the sphere of evaluations which necessarily form within a given social group” (Bakhtin, *Formal Method* 124). Viewed as a speech act, the blithe assumption of audience acceptance of the validity claim evokes a hesitant and, if you will, politically correct reply. “...a barely detectable inflection, which you must strain to catch, but which unmistakably implies, ‘this is the slant you have too, if you have the proper slant’” (Burke 98). In terms of utterance, when a State authority assesses competence using such claims, the unitary language is enough to squelch or close the dialogue, eliciting only mimicry. “Language should be viewed as an active force in the way we constitute—not simply copy –reality [otherwise]

language becomes a partial representation, a reproduction or copy, a second class citizen in some one else's country" (LeFevre 96-98).

These are hopefully not the intentions of the TAKS assessors, whom we might naively hope are democratic to the core. They mean to elicit as many creative responses to the theme of "accepting responsibility" as they can garner. So their own use of language must play "an active role in how [the basic writer might] perceive and think and invent" (LeFevre 96). This is a simple enough suggestion that seems firmly grounded in modern language theory: democratic discourse is necessarily open. Yet here lies a distinction that perhaps should be explored—the possibility that the importance of accepting responsibility is not democratic because it does not encourage the kind of critical thinking upon which the foundations of modern Western democracies are built, and in which we pride ourselves. When dwelled upon, does not the noun phrase sound a bit presumptive, even imperious? I must confess that the thrust of this treatise might well have begun with a personal quirk, because all too well I recall another phrase that still rings in history for its charge to an entire generation about accepting responsibility, and that phrase is: ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country. Embedded herein is a prime example of what Burke refers to as a god-term, and what Marx and Engels would denote as mystified language (Burke 299). The eloquent power of this one phrase was enough to subdue any thinking "outside the box" that I and thousands of my comrades-in-arms might have done before we volunteered to fight in Vietnam. Since the war, I have learned the power of language, and I am compelled now in conclusion to analyze the TAKS prompt for traces of mystification, and to consider how such phenomena might color or otherwise affect a speech act or an argument. If it appears that this academic treatise is suddenly turned in the direction of a political statement, I would hasten to point out the socio-political context in which "the importance of accepting responsibility" is presented as an assessment fact. "If an interlocutor wishes to combat...what has been admitted as a fact...he will endeavor to justify his attitude...by showing the incompatibility of the statement in question with other facts and

attacking it for its inconsistency with the coherence of reality” (Perelman 68). What is the socio-political reality for a working family in a southwest Texas border town when the jobs are gone? Who is “accepting responsibility” for the outsourcing that has taken away those jobs when, for example, Williamson-Dickie closes their cover-all manufacturing plants and moves their operations to China (Whitely, Dallas Business Journal)? When the reality of the price of groceries rises beyond the limited budgets of the working poor, who is “accepting responsibility” for the havoc caused by the speculative manipulation in the corn-to-ethanol market that caused the increase (Chakraborty, The Guardian)? My high school students are not naive. They see, even if they may not yet be able to express, how they are victimized by a class-based hierarchy that sidesteps everyday “accepting responsibility” for the injustices done to the poor. The use of the importance of accepting responsibility for assessment purposes might be another of those injustices. Keeping in mind that “we do not have to believe the Marxist promises to apply the Marxist diagnosis for rhetorical purposes” (Burke 109), let us glance yet again at the TAKS prompt to see if it fits a mystified prototype.

I rely here on Kenneth Burke’s interpretation of Marx and Engel’s, *The German Ideology*. Accordingly, we are advised “to look for ‘mystification’ at any point where the social divisiveness caused by property and the division of labor is obscured by unitary terms (as with terms whereby a state, designed to protect a certain structure of ownership, is made to seem equally representative of both propertied and propertyless classes).” Also, “it is enough for our purposes to note the value of the admonition that private property makes for a rhetoric of mystification, as the “ideological” approach to social relations sets up a fog of merger-terms where the clarity of division-terms is needed” (108-109). Using this parameter, the noun phrase beginning with “the importance” might be viewed as a merger-term for its presumption that all students will equally understand the underlying collection of meanings and intentions that go into it. This TAKS assessment is approved by the State of Texas, which in turn represents the citizens of the State, who in turn concur that the phrase bears a special significance “already

acknowledged in the past” because of a socially binding “prior discourse” (Bakhtin, D. I. 342). This makes the merger-term an authoritative discourse, which Halasek defines as “a discourse so powerful, so commanding, that it inspires only adoration and respect, and thereby functions as a centripetal force that maintains the status quo...When a reader reads a text authoritatively, that reader’s voice, authority, and subjectivity are undermined” (122).

Again, the TAKS assessors are presuming that the connotation of the term “the importance” will mean approximately the same for all students. But might not this presumption be a sort of Benthamite “eulogistic covering” (Burke 108) of one reality in favor of another, seeing as how the connotation of the noun phrase might vary to a great degree when internalized by students from communities as economically disparate as Uvalde is from white suburban Colleyville? To say that a student --who has her own bedroom in a spacious, comfortable home that is securely owned by her college-educated parents (who have duly fulfilled all the “responsibility” criteria), and who can anticipate being given as a reward for “accepting responsibility” when she turns sixteen a car that she might drive on her way to a college that she can afford to attend-- will not be better primed to agree with the validity statement in question than will be her working class and essentially “propertyless” counterpart from Uvalde, is to eulogistically cover reality. And are we not denying reality if we do not agree that in this nation there is indeed a “social divisiveness caused by property and the division of labor?” So, in the case of the TAKS prompt and mystification, we have the use of a term “whereby a state, designed to protect [or promote or eulogize] a certain structure [of social order sprung from] ownership, is made to seem equally representative [in its assessment] of both propertied and propertyless classes.” Burke refers to this as “a principle of merger” (108), and would suggest that what is needed instead is “the clarity of division-terms” (109). I submit at this point that the proposed alternative prompt is precisely that: a division-term that clarifies the State’s assessment intentions while also providing a less ideological and more realistic field of response without the mystification (“timeless”-ness) implicit in the noun phrase, The alternative

prompt's dependent clause, one that is based on your own life's experience, levels the connotative inequality that might otherwise come into play as one social class discourses with another.

As antagonism deepens between themes which are the expression of reality, there is a tendency for the themes and for reality itself to be mythicized, establishing a climate of irrationality and sectarianism. This climate threatens to drain the themes of their deeper significance and to deprive them of their characteristically dynamic aspect" (Freire 101-102).

An effective speech act expressing theme, after all, is often a matter of an equitable contract between interlocutors: "a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves."

Recalling Patricia Bizzell's belief that "students must be convinced that they will gain from their education" (142), should we not, as educators, beware of the danger that imprecise language in assessment might discourage students from furthering their educational goals? And if the constructors of high stakes tests consider themselves educators, as surely they must, should not their summative assessment intentions always keep in mind this formative assessment goal (Huot 167): that inclusive, accessible evaluative language—rather than exclusive—might encourage basic writers to stay in school? Huot tells us that "assessment itself produces its own discourse" (165), and that "what we assess, grade, or test ultimately determines what we value" (179). If what we value, ultimately, is to train students to critically discern, then the object of the "academic community...is not to get people to think alike, but rather to get them to think together about a challenge that has emerged in interaction with the world" (Bizzell 144). Educators and students thinking together should include a re-thinking about assessment, whereby: "they also open up the possibility of seeing assessment as something

that can be shared, as a group of involved people search for values and meaning through group interpretation” (Huot 176). An open-ended essay prompt—such as, write for us an essay, one that is based on your own life’s experience, and in this essay explain what might be important about accepting those familiar kinds of responsibilities as well as those shown in the texts you have read—is an attempt to enhance just such interaction.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

A native Texan, Mr. Glick graduated from Eastern Hills High School in 1964. His four years in the United States Marine Corps included two tours of duty in Vietnam, after which he was honorably discharged as a sergeant. His published novel, *Winter's Coming, Winters Gone*, is based upon his experiences there. First enrolled in the University of Texas at Arlington in 1968, but attending for only two years, Mr. Glick was finally able to complete his undergraduate degree in 2003. After two years of graduate course work, he accepted a job as an high school English teacher in Uvalde, Texas, where he remained until 2008. With Janet Price Glick, his wife of thirty years, Allen Glick currently lives in Suzhou, China, where they both work as teachers.