I was drawn to The Languages of Edison’s Light, not through an interest in Thomas Alva Edison, but instead through my research interest in the languages of women’s social movements of this period (see Lander, 2001). In terms of scope, Bazerman’s research methodology for studying the languages of both a historical figure (Edison) and a social movement (industrialization) is exemplary. The communicative action that Bazerman traces is largely paper-based and concentrates on the material related to the introduction of light in the period 1878-82. The Thomas A. Edison Papers (housed at the Edison Historical Site in West Orange, New Jersey) are Bazerman’s primary source; from these papers, he extrapolates the kind of talk that went on in the laboratory and the legal system around patents, noting that talk was the major medium for communication, even more so than today. Bazerman chooses representative texts from this period and reproduces such graphics as the collaborative drawings from the Menlo Park Notebooks and featured items from newspapers and magazines. Bazerman cumulatively assembles these texts for the reader to build his argument that Edison’s light, like all technologies, could come into being only through rhetorical activity.

In this review, I hope to support my own research into the languages of women’s social movements by tracing the languages of Charles Bazerman for representing nineteenth-century history and archival documents. Feminist historians challenge us to be attentive to gender as a category of historical analysis (see Scott, 1996) and especially when real men and real women in relationship and in conversation do not appear in a given history. Real women are for the most part invisible and inaudible in Bazerman’s story and in his visual representations of the complex social and political apparatuses of technological change. Is the subject (and are the languages) of science sexed (Irigaray, 1985)? Bazerman’s references to “his colleagues” on page 1 and “the support and the force of the legal, financial, corporate, technological, public, and civic systems” on page 2 were an early signal that I would learn of “The Public and Masculine Languages of Edison’s Light.”

My book review will take up layers of languages beyond the nineteenth-century languages of Edison’s light. It is my language choice to attend primarily to Bazerman’s languages that reach out to readers who are interested in the communication practices in Edison’s work as they relate to today’s cultural systems of meaning. It strikes me that the exemplary archival research may engage readers in following the power of persuasion as it mediates the shift to electric power and disappoint readers expecting an elaboration of social power—including gendered power relations—embedded in Edison’s languages.

Like Bazerman, I am a language user who brings my research interests and my own positions—fixed, subjective, and textual (Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 1997)—to construct the “rhetorical product” or “text,” which in my case is this book review. My languages and language choices converge with my identity as a white woman (fixed sex and race) and as a feminist researcher who favours autobiographical methods (subjective). I choose to write in the first person (textual) and to make explicit that as a researcher and book reviewer, I am committed to denaturalizing the gendering of languages in public and private spheres.

On the first page of the text, Bazerman carves out his rhetorical niche: “I will tell a different kind of story” signals that his own languages will stand in juxtaposition to the “countless biographies, memoirs, and Edisonia.” He names this difference as his focus on “the languages in which Edison and his colleagues spoke to us, giving electric light and power meaning and value and incorporating it into our existing cultural systems of meaning” (pp. 1-2; emphasis mine). Who is this “us”? I felt that Bazerman was addressing “us” as if Edison of the late nineteenth century was a presence who could speak to us in the twenty-first century. And indeed, as Bazerman deftly guided “me” through the complexity...
of the heterogeneous languages of Edison’s light and power, I was struck with the parallels to contemporary languages of technological change, say the masculine and public languages of Bill Gates’ Microsoft. Addressing “us” as readers creates a rhetorical effect, which I associate with the feminist rhetoric of “invitation” rather than the rhetoric of dominance and patriarchy that relies on persuasion and argument (see Foss & Griffin, 1995). Bazerman himself equates rhetoric with economist Adam Smith’s “principle to persuade” but with a difference when it comes to technological change (p. 141). Bazerman argues that value in the case of Edison developing a system of centralized power distribution was not driven by rational economic calculation and market forces but rather by perceived desire and perceived benefit that are perceptively elicited and directed. Edison “had to persuade many people attending to various discourses to place value in his projected vision, so that they would risk investments, commitments, and purchases of various sorts” (p. 143, emphasis mine). Bazerman’s representations of the rhetoric of persuasion as “influence on consequent actions” effectively break down the opposition of patriarchal rhetoric to invitation rhetoric: “Although in some discourses influence may be exercised through confrontation, contention, and competition, in others cooperation, recognition, assent, accretion, or digression may be effective” (p. 341).

Bazerman’s chapter 6 unfolds an inviting and persuasive story of Edison’s professional presence and the influence that the disparate languages of electrical engineering and of invention had on consequent actions. The languages of the popular press legitimated Edison as an American industrialist and a man of science but not so the technical press or professional organizations. Bazerman does indeed tell a different story of the scientific community than does Thomas Kuhn (1962); natural scientists—not inventors—get to participate in Kuhn’s paradigm shift. When I revisited Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, it occurred to me that Bazerman could have usefully referenced Kuhn to make his case. Kuhn’s elaboration of the paradigm shift in the history of electrical research does not warrant a mention of Edison. Could it be that Bazerman did not reference Kuhn because the parallels in the languages of persuasion might undermine his claim that he is telling a different story? “If a paradigm is ever to triumph it must gain some first supporters, men [sic] who will develop it to the point where hardheaded arguments can be produced and multiplied. … There is no single argument that can or should persuade them all” (Kuhn, 1962, p. 157). In his concluding chapter, Bazerman asserts that “the success of representations that are necessary for the social embedding of a new technology involves … the enlistment of allies” (p. 343).

Bazerman does not include Edison’s home life in the larger communication systems that he participated in nor does he speculate on the influence on consequent actions emerging conjointly from Edison’s private and public languages. I found myself speculating that Edison’s hope to bring the electric motor into the home through the sewing machine (p. 286) was not just an emulation of Singer’s attempt to make his product attractive to middle-class housewives. What if this line of thinking emerged in conversations with the women in Edison’s life, perhaps with his own wife? We do not meet Mrs. Edison (as Bazerman names her) in the main text until chapter 15, page 323. Why does Bazerman tell us that the one time Edison referred to his wife in one of his business stories was in reference to the woman’s touch in floral design of lighting fixtures? Bazerman’s note (in parentheses) that Edison’s first wife, Mary, was to die of illness the next summer mirrors the parenthetical nature of Edison’s private life throughout this book. The second Mrs. Edison (she is not identified by her first name) appears only as an endnote to chapter 4, page 72, on the basis of her 1947 interview with the Sunday Star, published in Washington, DC. Here she provides support for Bazerman’s textual and visual re-presentations of the collaborative nature of the Unbound Notebooks and the Menlo Park Notebooks. In parentheses, Bazerman tells us that “they had married in 1886, after the Menlo Park days” (p.
Reviews 299

Mrs. Edison is brought into play to buttress Bazerman’s re-presentation of Edison’s use of drawings to mediate work that was largely carried out by others: “Several hands [men’s hands] collaborate on a single page … as though several people were standing around a workbench, discussing alternatives” (p. 72). The newspaper headline for the 1947 interview gives expression in this book review to the rhetoric of irony: “Mrs. Edison Says Inventor Put Home First.” You would never know it from the languages of Bazerman’s text.

Shortly before I read this book, I chanced on an entry on Edison in The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia (I was seeking Edison’s middle name for a four-letter word in a crossword puzzle) and learned that Thomas Alva Edison was “one of the most productive inventors of his time—despite … increasing deafness throughout most of his life” (p. 243). Oddly, this biographical detail does not appear in Bazerman’s story of Edison and I could not help but wonder how increasing deafness shaped Edison’s language choices as well as the language choices of his colleagues. Did Edison’s increasing deafness contribute to his management style? Bazerman describes Edison as “always at the center …. His oversight seemed to inspire the work of all … Edison was micro-involved but not micro-managing” (p. 266). When I returned to the encyclopedia entry, I noted the chronology of Edison’s inventions from audio to visual: the microphone in 1877, the record player in 1878, the incandescent lamp in 1879, the electrical distribution system for light and power in 1881, and the Kinetoscope for peep-show viewing in 1889. In chapter 10, Bazerman casts Edison’s display of electrical products at industrial exhibitions as a visual argument for the value of electricity in the future. Bazerman claims that “of course,” the display would have made the “Edison system the unquestioned centerpiece of the [Paris] exhibition” (p. 202). Edison’s closest Menlo Park colleagues were his advance men for the European exhibitions. Otto Moses wrote Edison from Paris in 1881, outlining plans for “lights from every position … as one walked up the grand stairway. A strategically placed illuminated E would open onto an illuminated ‘Edison’ at the top of the steps” (p. 202). Was the Edison system or Edison the visual centerpiece? I am reminded of the rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke (1969), who names “identification” rather than persuasion as the key term in rhetoric: “You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (pp. 55-56).

When I began to write this book review, I planned to say that Bazerman might have extended the invitation to readers who had a primary interest in languages, to read his last chapter first in order to avail themselves of his various rhetorical and analytical frameworks. These include Vygotsky’s activity theory (1978), mutual scaffolding of the discursive landscape, heterogeneous symbolic engineering, and Latour’s enlistment process (1987). Bazerman tells us in the Introduction that he has not put the theories in the foreground and that he will try to make these visible in the concluding chapter but he does not explicitly tell us his thinking behind this language choice. I am glad that I did not read the concluding chapter first. If Bazerman’s theoretical languages had shaped my reading from the outset, would I have so readily interpreted his “different story” through my favoured languages that take up the gendering of language, language as identification, and the spatial ordering of knowledge, power, and discourse in public and private spheres?

References

*Dorothy Lander*

*St. Francis Xavier University*