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The concept of *linguistic practices* and its relevance in contemporary language studies

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on linguistic practices as the new paradigm in language studies. First, the author discusses how the concept of *practice* was first brought into sociolinguistics and then in language studies in general. Then, the author argues that the term is useful when discussing speakers' practices as it applies to all registers, even the standard, on equal footing without dwelling on languages as countable and concrete systems that should be separated.

El concepto de prácticas lingüísticas y su importancia en los estudios de lengua contemporáneos

RESUMEN

Este artículo se enfoca en las prácticas lingüísticas como el nuevo paradigma en los estudios de la lengua. Para empezar, el autor expone cómo llegó el concepto de *práctica*, primero a la sociolingüística, y después a los estudios de la lengua en general. Posteriormente, el autor argumenta que el término resulta útil para describir las prácticas lingüísticas de los hablantes dado que se usa para todos los registros, incluida la norma culta, en forma equitativa sin tratar a las lenguas como sistemas concretos que se enumeran en forma separada.

The notion of *linguistic practices* as choices made consciously or unconsciously by speakers has gained currency in the past two decades. One of the reasons is that the concept lends itself to describe and explain language processes in a detached way unlike terms that follow normativity and tend to label everything but the standard as deviations from the norm as would be the case of border Spanish, code-switching or Spanglish. Echoing Eckert and Wenger (2005) practices can be defined as ways of doing things, of talking and even thinking, grounded in and shared by a community structured around power relations (Eckert & Wenger, 2005, p. 464). More specifically, according to Schatzki (2002), social life involves a range of practices such as negotiation practices, political practices, cooking practices, banking practices, recreation practices, religious practices, educational practices, trading practices, medical practices, and so on (Schatzki, 2002, p. 70-71). Furthermore, Schatzki affirms that practice is an integral “bundle” of activities (an idea he shares with other theorists of practice, including Giddens, Taylor, Bourdieu, and Rouse), i.e., an organized nexus of actions that embraces two overall dimensions: activity and organization (Schatzki, 2002, p. 71). Taking this into account, we would think of humans engaged and organized in an activity, much like in the communities of practice that Lave and Wenger (1991[2003]) discuss.

Goffman (1981 [1995]) takes one step further when he mentions that because of the “number of constraints and ends governing each of an individual's acts on every occasion and moment of execution, it becomes natural to shift from considering social practices to considering social competencies” (Goffman, 1981 [1995], p. 198). He then defines a ‘competency’ as the capacity to routinely accomplish a given complicated end (1981 [1995], p. 198), and so individuals have capacities for interaction; for example, capacity as interactants “regardless of what is owed them in whatever other capacities they participate”: regardless of whatever social role individuals play during a conversational encounter, they will in addition have to fill the role of interactants (Goffman, 1967, p. 116). Back in the 70s, Hymes (1972 [1976]) framed competence as the most general term for the capabilities of a person”, and dependent upon both (tacit) knowledge and (ability) for use. More recently, Canagarajah (2013b) warns that competence “is not an arithmetical addition of the resources of different languages, but the transformative capacity to mesh their resources for creative new forms and meanings” (2013b, p. 2). Given this perspective, we could apply such examples to bilinguals or multilinguals putting their entire

repertoires into use to achieve an end, to communicate, to create and negotiate meaning, and to construct identities in accordance with their context and interlocutors.

Considering practice, competence and performance as key terms in communication takes us away from looking at language as a linguistic system into a social realm. In Bourdieu's terms, linguists "merely incorporate into their theory a pre-constructed object, ignoring its social laws of construction and masking its social genesis" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 44; original emphasis). Similarly, Dreyfus states that words as used in everyday talking do not get their meaning from anywhere: once individuals have been socialized into a community's practices, as long as they dwell in those practices rather than taking a detached point of view, words are simply heard and seen as meaningful: "only dwelling in our linguistic practices reveals their sense" (Dreyfus, 1991 [1995], p. 219). If we look up an entry in a dictionary, for instance, the entry means nothing (it is printed paper after all) or close to nothing unless we use it in our discourse, be it in writing or in speaking, ergo, we create a contextualized meaning. Heidegger introduced the idea that "the shared everyday skills, discriminations, and practices into which we are socialized provide the conditions necessary for people to pick out objects, to understand themselves as subjects, and, generally, to make sense of the world and of their lives" (Dreyfus, 1991 [1995], p. 4); we can infer from that, that his ideas touch on issues of identity, of belonging and being part of a group, and that discriminating is equal to recognizing differences. We can also theorize for a moment, and picture Dreyfus' statement as apt to be applied to a group where language has not been invented: simply by coming together to achieve an end they would come up with ways to name what they are doing, the objects and environment in their vicinity. García and Wei (2014) remark that "with the rise of post-structuralism in the post-modern era, language has begun to be conceptualized as a series of social practices and actions by speakers that are embedded in a web of social and cognitive relations" (García & Wei, 2014, p. 9).

Sharing the same idea, Pennycook observes that practices constitute "the key way in which every day social activity is organized" (Pennycook, 2010, p. 2), and language practices is just a set of practices among so many. In his words, language as a practice is tantamount to language as an activity rather than a structure, as seen in linguistics. It is more about what we do "rather than a system we draw on, as a material part of social and cultural life rather than an abstract entity" (Pennycook, 2010, p. 2). For his part, Duranti

(2003) reminds us that “while linguists in the first half of the 20th century could already claim to have established the legitimacy of the scientific study of language as an independent and sui generis system, linguistic anthropologists working in the second half of the century could just as easily claim to have brought language back where it belonged, namely, among human beings concerned with their daily affairs” (Duranti, 2003, p. 333) so that instead of viewing language as a rule-governed system, language came to be viewed as a social process whose study belonged to anthropology as much as to linguistics: documenting and analyzing actual language usage became the new paradigm (Duranti, 2003, p. 333). Hanks (1996) points out how difficult it is to think of language in Saussurean terms, i.e, as an arbitrary formal system: “far from appearing to us as a system unto itself, language ordinarily seems to be the means towards other ends (Hanks, 1996, p. 21): it is more about practices. He elaborates:

Although linguistic systems are governed in part [sic] by principles unique to language, grammar is neither self-contained nor entirely independent from the social worlds in which individual languages exist [...] for people to communicate at whatever level of effectiveness, “it is neither sufficient nor necessary that they “share” the same grammar...what they must share, to a variable degree, is the ability to orient themselves verbally, perceptually, and physically to each other and to their social world” (Hanks, 1996, p. 229).

Hanks also states that “one of the key differences between grammar and practice is that the latter interpenetrates language and other modes of human engagement with the world” (Hanks, 1996, pp. 229-230), and by “grammar” he most likely refers to linguistics as opposed to language in use (Duranti, 2003, p. 333). Moreover, he insists that from formalist and pure relational approaches the individual speaker is the unit of speech production in frank opposition to a practice approach where the “socially defined relation between agents and the field [...] ‘produces’ speech forms” (Hanks, 1996, p. 230).

We know that linguistic practices refer to what people do with their language, i.e., they “make up the actual exercise of language use in a society” (Puzey, 2011, p. 128) and we also know that these practices are indeed enmeshed in relations of power (hegemony and subordination), that ideology and identity play a central part regardless of whether or not speakers are aware of it or if it is unclear to them (Bourdieu, 1977[1995], p. 79; Goffman, 1981 [1995]; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258), and though the term may be en vogue, it

has been around for quite some time as some early references to it indicate (e.g., Shenton, 1933, p. 247). In Urciuoli's words, "linguistic practices and elements operate as a cultural and symbolic capital in Bourdieu's sense" (Urciuoli, 1995, p. 526), e.g., speaking a prestige variety opens up doors, be it academically or socially while code-switching may index membership in a group, or a stigmatized accent or a register deemed inappropriate might subject its speakers to exclusion in a given context.

Some authors utilize other synonymous terms such as 'language practices' (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013a; García, 2009; García and Wei, 2014; Hanks, 1995; Kramsch, 2002 [2004]; McCarty, 2014; Musk, 2006; Shenton, 1933; Spolsky, 2004, 2012; Veltman, 1981, 1983b), 'speech practices' (e.g., Toribio, 2004) or 'discursive practices' instead (Martín-Rojo, 2011 [2013]) probably because discourse, defined as language use in speech and writing, is seen as a form of 'social practice' from a critical discourse analysis perspective (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). In addition, Hanks (1996) uses 'communicative practices' and Canagarajah (2013a) asserts that "all that we have in communication are practices" (Canagarajah, 2013a, p. 16); these words echo Heritage's words that the social world is a pervasively conversational one as we interact mostly through the medium of spoken interaction (Heritage, 1984, p. 239). Language practices are defined in similar ways by various authors, either as "the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up a linguistic repertoire" (Spolsky, 2004, p. 5) or as "the decisions made by speakers in terms of language use" (Blackwood & Tufi, 2011, p. 110) and as such are acquired in constant constructive interaction (Spolsky, 2004, p. 7). Spolsky also posits that they are "the sum of the sound, word and grammatical choices that an individual speaker makes (see also Puzey, 2011, p. 128), sometimes consciously and sometimes less consciously, that makes up the conventional unmarked pattern of a variety of a language;" but linguistic practices also encompass conventional differences between registers and other agreed rules as to what variety is appropriate in different situations, including which language to use in multilingual societies (Spolsky, 2012, p. 5), rules for speech and silence, for dealing with common topics, and for expressing or concealing identity (Spolsky, 2012, p. 5).

Linguistic practices are pragmatic phenomena, patterns of language use (Gal, 2006, p. 17); and refer to language use in all walks of human life including using language to shape and reshape the meaning, truth, knowledge, and value of human activities (Sun, 2015, p. 77); they are situated (both in time and space), interactional, and communicatively

motivated (Bauman, 2000, p. 1), and may include linguistic usages, perception and attitudes, the use made by speakers of their repertoires and their linguistic resources, also very personal or situated (Bigelow, 2011, p. 28). Jørgensen and Juffermans (2011) illustrate this when describing how “linguaging is individual and unique in the sense that every single person possesses her or his own combination of competences and knowledge with respect to language” (Jørgensen & Juffermans, 2011, p. 1). Gal argues that register, accent, voicing, and variety designate linguistic practices that index (point to, co-occur with) through interaction some set of social relations, social identities, situations, and values, and are necessarily interpreted by speakers and listeners through language ideologies that are about pragmatics (Gal, 2006, p. 17).

For instance, *register* is defined as a linguistic repertoire that is associated with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices: using a register conveys to a member of the culture that some typifiable social practice is linked indexically to the current occasion of language use, as part of its context (Agha, 2000, p. 216; Agha, 2004, p. 24). Similarly, Shohamy mentions that “language is personal and unique and varies from one person to another” while arguing that “dictating to people how to use language in terms of accent, grammar, lexicon” and the like, can be seen as a form of personal intrusion and manipulation: indoctrination, ideology and hegemony are, consequently, at play (Shohamy, 2006, pp. 1-2). This is further illustrated by Bourdieu regarding the *standard*, defined as the official language of a political unit existing within the unit’s territorial limits, imposed on the whole population as the only legitimate language; it is produced by authors who have the authority to write, fixed and codified by grammarians and teachers who are also charged with the task of inculcating its mastery; the official language is thus a code not only in its linguistic sense but “also in the sense of a system of norms regulating linguistic practices” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 45). The definitions of the *standard* (‘norma culta’) presented below in Portuguese and in Spanish are also similarly phrased: “A set of linguistic practices belonging to the place or to the social class that enjoys the highest prestige in a given country” (Mattoso-Câmara Jr., 1978, p. 177; my translation). The Royal Academy of the Spanish Language puts the term in in such a way that hegemony is concealed but still deems other registers as incorrect:

‘Norma culta’ equals Standard Spanish: the tongue we all use, or aspire to use when we need to speak correctly; the language taught in schools; the tongue we use with varying degree of correctness in public speaking, the one employed by the media, the language of essays and technical and scientific books. It is definitely the one that sets the standard, the shared code that allows Spanish-speaking people of diverse background to understand each other easily, and to recognize themselves as members of the same linguistic community (Real Academia Española, 2005; my translation).

The reality is that the standard is just one register among many that in a common ideological view is just “the language” (sic), the baseline against which all other facts of register differentiation are measured. The major difference is that the standard is promoted by institutions of such widespread hegemony (such as the Real Academia Española, and the Cervantes Institute in the case of Spanish) that it is not ordinarily recognized as a distinct register at all. Yet from the standpoint of usage a standard language is just one register among many, highly appropriate to certain public/official settings, but employed by many speakers in alternation with other varieties – such as registers of business and bureaucracy, journalism and advertising, technical and scientific registers, varieties of slang, criminal argots– in distinct venues of social life (Agha, 2004, p.24).

To sum up this text, the reconceptualization of conventional views of language centered on practices allows us to analyze the way speakers create and negotiate meaning in social interaction (Rubdy & Alsagoff, 2014, p. 7) in this era of globalization and complexity where languages, cultures, the local and the global intertwine.

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