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Language Socialization and the Linguistic Anthropology of Education

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LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION AND THE LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY OF EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

Language Socialization is generally conceived as the socialization through language to use language in socially appropriate ways (see Ochs and Schieffelin, *Language Socialization: An Historical Overview*, Volume 8). Thus Language Socialization (LS) processes can be seen as a subset of the research purview of linguistic anthropology, characterized more broadly as an investigation of how language “both presupposes and creates anew, social relations in cultural context” (see Wortham, *Linguistic Anthropology of Education*, Volume 3). As individuals are socialized through language to use language, they draw on “presupposed” aspects of language, but also, inevitably, “create anew” aspects of language in order to use it for particular concerns that arise in each individually unique interaction. Despite this point of connection, LS research and more broadly conceived linguistic anthropological research have followed different paths into educational contexts.

Like any productive development within science and social science, the development of LS and its relationship both to the field of linguistic anthropology and to broader issues of education, language, and human development has proceeded through a give and take not unlike that characterized by LS studies themselves: Forays into new territory, creative conceptualizations, and departures from canonical concerns in linguistic anthropology are matched and fueled by a periodic reconvergence of paths, when one or another view of the endeavor runs up against its own limitations. By tracing these points of fissure and rapprochement, this entry illustrates how LS has not only grown by incorporating and selecting from multiple theoretical and methodological tools within linguistic anthropology and education (and other fields), but also contributed significantly to the educationally focused domain of *The Linguistic Anthropology of Education*.

To understand how the field of LS has developed with respect to the *Linguistic Anthropology of Education*, this entry traces the connections between these categorizations of research from their current coinage to their roots in linguistic anthropology as a whole. The taxonomy below represents the intellectual arena within which LS is situated relative to

Figure 1 Language Socialization's Relationship to the Linguistic Anthropology of Education.

the linguistic anthropology of education and will be the foundation for the review that follows (see Figure 1).

EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

The pathways delineated in Figure 1 articulate two initial strands of linguistic anthropology that have developed relatively distinctly (though not necessarily in opposition to each other) since the 1960s: One strand

(Roman Numeral I in Figure 1), while attuned to language and communication, developed a relatively greater emphasis on the ethnographic aspects of language use, and another strand (Roman Numeral II in Figure 1) has focused on semiotic processes and their effects both historically and in single instances of language use. While each of these strands theoretically recognizes the mutual influence of ethnographic context and semiotic (including linguistic) processes on events of speaking, work within these sub-fields differs distinctly in their relative emphasis on ethnographic characterizations versus semiotic processes.

On the ethnographic side, Dell Hymes (1972) used a linguistic anthropological approach to articulate problems with Noam Chomsky's (1965) decontextualized concept of "ideal speaker" which was based solely on "grammatical competence." In pointed contrast to Chomsky's phrase, Hymes coined the term "communicative competence" to emphasize the socially situated elements integral to each event of communication that a more culturally nuanced "ideal speaker" must master in addition to grammar to become competent within a community. Perhaps in part because Hymes' theory of "communicative competence" had its genesis in opposition to Chomsky's privileging of "grammar," studies in this tradition do not have a systematically articulated or unified set of methods for studying signs and linguistic form, but do document in detail, and often over the course of multiple years of experience within a community, ethnographic elements of communicative practice, focusing their analysis on recurring speech events like recurrent caretaker-child events (Ochs, 1988; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984), story-telling (Goodwin, 1990), or literacy events (Duranti and Ochs, 1988). These analyses are concerned with broad event structures primarily, and secondarily, with how these events and the way language functions within them are linked to the role of grammatical categories or other linguistic features.

In contrast to Hymes' (1972) focused opposition to Chomsky's (1965) accounts of "grammatical competence," semiotically focused linguistic anthropology since the 1970s largely ignored Chomsky's claims, and instead developed semiotic accounts of context and language use by building on a tradition of Western philosophy of language and, in large part, on the work of the American pragmatist and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–1958) and the linguistic anthropology of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). Whereas studies of LS emerge from a background rooted in communicative competence and the cross-cultural comparison of norms of communication, semiotic anthropology and analysis in this tradition centers on how sign systems, including grammar, classify human experience as culturally relevant and how such forms are deployed flexibly in interaction to create new forms of culturally relevant action (Baumann and Briggs, 1990; Silverstein, 1976).

Instead of moving from an ethnography of communicative events to explanations about how language functions in those events, a semiotically motivated linguistic anthropology builds on the ways that the indexical—or context-dependent—features of language point to certain presupposed meanings, but also have the potential for creative use that can reconstitute normative expectations (Silverstein, 1976).

For example, third person pronouns in English (e.g., he or she) normatively pick out (or index) parties who are not present in an ongoing interaction. As such, the use of “he” *indexes* a person not present, presupposing a participation framework that excludes the person indexed by “he.” However, indexical value of words can be also used non-normatively to achieve highly creative and infinitely variable effects. Imagine, for example a speaker turning to a third participant and saying about the second participant, “He’s such a charmer isn’t he?” In this case, by referring to a present participant in the third person, the first speaker might intentionally exclude that person by indexically performing his absence from the participation framework—by talking *about* him in his presence. (Morgan (2002) identifies this practice as an emergent norm in some African American communities and calls it “pointed indirectness”).

This foundational concern for investigating both normative features of language use and their creative deployment, while rooted in the semiotic tradition, has also permeated later LS work (see the dashed line in Figure 1), and this is a point of connection that has fruitfully been carried forward into recent research on LS in educational settings (e.g., Wortham, 2005).

MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS

These early differences have ramifications for research in educational settings. Ethnographically focused approaches to linguistic anthropology that built on Hymes’ early work have moved into educational realms along (at least) two broad, but distinct pathways—one (Box A in Figure 1), taken via LS, and another (Box B) in which Hymes’ work was directly brought to bear on educational contexts. The work that builds directly on Hymes’ model for “communicative competence” (Box B) has fallen primarily under the category of “Ethnography of Communication” and the early contributions to this field are compiled in Cazden, John, and Hymes’ anthology, *Functions of language in the classroom* (1972). (See Hornberger (2003) for a further distillation of the distinct forms Hymes’ work has taken in educational contexts.)

In contrast to ethnography of communication studies in classrooms, which more or less directly applied Hymes’ model to classroom contexts, LS research initially developed largely outside of formal

educational contexts, instead studying human development in multiple societies to counter universal claims about processes of language acquisition (Kulick and Schieffelin, 2004). Just as Hymes coined the term “communicative competence” to counter Chomsky’s notion of a universal linguistic competence, in a similar critique of posited universals, “Three Developmental Stories,” (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1988) countered canonical psycholinguistic research by illustrating that characteristically Western middle class language acquisition routines between caregivers and babies (e.g., “baby talk” or “motherese”) are not developmental universals. Ochs and Schieffelin’s research presented cases in which parental discourse patterns are shown to be culturally specific activities that not only foster language development, but also maintain certain normative dimensions of social life. In many Westernized households, for example, ways of speaking sustain family systems in which a mother is the primary and nearly exclusive caregiver. In contrast, ways of speaking in Western Samoa and Papua New Guinea socialize children into family systems in which care-giving is a distributed responsibility, largely in the hands of older siblings and relatives other than the biological mother (see Ochs and Schieffelin, *Language Socialization: An Historical Overview*, Volume 8).

LS work in the tradition of “three developmental stories” has become increasingly relevant for understanding language within schools in part because it has reformulated what counts as “competence” (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez, 2002). LS studies have reconceptualized many features of language use within schools that have been considered *deficit* as merely *differences* in how students have been socialized into using language in their homes or distinct communities (Crago, M.B., Annahatak, B., Ninguiuruvik, L., 1993; Heath, 1983; Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1986). Because this perspective has guided research in linguistically diverse communities, it has been able to illuminate kinds of expertise that normative institutions like schools may not recognize, for example, forms of bilingualism and code-switching that maintain community ties (Zentella, 1997; Paugh, 2002) or discourse patterns that sustain particular communities of practice (Jacobs-Huey, 2003).

Educational researchers have used this kind of LS research to understand the mechanisms that produce mass-scale educational phenomena like the “achievement gap” between ethnic groups. Heath’s *Ways with Words* (1983), for example, illustrated that patterns of interaction at home in rural Appalachia had ramifications for how children’s participation is interpreted in classroom settings. Thus, the LS perspective has developed a form of research in education that seeks to understand communicative competence “from the native’s perspective” and how those small scale forms of competence connect to large scale social regularities like the educational performance of particular social groups (Wortham, 2003).

This work, while perhaps initially informed by Hymes, is also enriched by an attention to phenomenology of language, activity theory, practice theory, communities of practice, and ethnomethodology (see Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez (2002) for a detailed account of these influences in the trajectory of LS in anthropology). These philosophical and ethnomethodological influences have fueled LS research that accounts not only for static local accounts of “communicative competence” and norms for behavior, but also brings a closely attuned attention to the flexibility of language use across speech events and individuals. Thus, while LS studies have not offered a systematic set of methods for provided empirical examples that delineate the presupposing and creative aspects of language that contribute to socialization processes. LS in and out of educational settings (see Rymes, 2003 and Ochs, 1992, respectively) has also been permeated with an attention to indexicality, though not to the degree of explicit specification indexical processes have received in semiotic tradition of linguistic anthropology (e.g., Hanks, 1990).

These roots in phenomenology and ethnomethodology also infuse LS studies with a foundational question that turns the quest for linguistic universals to a question about the variation of human subjectivity: “How do different kinds of culturally specific subjectivities come into being?” (Kulick and Schieffelin, 2004, p. 351). How is it that people experience being in the world in culturally distinct ways? Because of LS’s concern with this broad question of human subjectivity, LS research in educational settings has been able to account for lived experience of students in ways that other approaches have not. Baquedano-Lopez’s (2000) study of the social role of narrative within religious education, Gutierrez et al.’s (1999) investigation of hybrid language practices in the classroom, and He’s (2003) and Lo’s (2004) respective explorations of moralizing practices in Chinese and Korean heritage language classrooms all illustrate complex and unique processes of LS in educational settings.

In contrast to the proliferation of work in education that grew out of (if only initially) Hymes’ model, semiotically focused linguistic anthropology has been less directly concerned with educational contexts until recently. Whereas LS studies within schools tend to document forms of cultural expertise and their internal organization, studies rooted in contemporary semiotic anthropology document emergent practices within school settings and analyze both those features of interaction which become sedimented over time and those which may be creatively reconstructed. For example, by tracing semiotic patterns and their transmission through speech chains across a series of classroom interactions spanning months, Wortham (2005) has illustrated a trajectory of socialization unique to a particular individual’s classroom experience and

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not necessarily to a generalizable characteristic “school discourse pattern.” This semiotic approach is able to document how students are socialized not into one unitary set of practices (e.g., “Western schooling” discourses), but many evolving ways of speaking. In this way, linguistic anthropological perspectives on education are able to recognize not only pre-existent forms of expertise, and children’s socialization into those, but also the increasingly fast-paced parade of cultural formations that characterize the lives and interactions of students in schools.

The potential within the semiotic tradition to create detailed and systematic accounts of those aspects of interaction within educational contexts which presuppose certain norms and those which create those norms anew remains largely untapped. However, the few studies in educational contexts which draw on this framework illustrate its promise. The volume *Natural Histories of Discourse* (Silverstein and Urban, 1996) contains two examples of how linguistic anthropology in educational contexts might be carried out and the kinds of findings it generates. In this volume, Jim Collins’ (1996) chapter on reading groups illustrates how *distinctive prosody* of a “low” reading group is both maintained by and reproduces the practices that go into making a “low” reader. While teachers and students are all “experts” at maintaining this norm, Collins does not describe this as a form of “expertise,” but instead, as a serious educational problem. Mehan (1996), likewise, exposes the natural history of discourse forms that render a mother voiceless when her child is being considered for “learning disabled” designation at school. By characterizing both what certain forms of talk index about people and how those forms motivate and/or transform sedimented ways of participating in schools, this research applies the semiotic insights of linguistic anthropology to educational settings.

Wortham (1994) offers the first and most systematic application of a semiotic anthropological perspective to an educational setting by developing a methodology for analyzing participant examples in classrooms over time. His work hinges on the distinction initially put forth by Roman Jakobson (1960) between the event of speaking and the narrated event and indexical values occasioned by these two layers of interpretation. This work has provided an essential bridge between the fields of LS and semiotic anthropology more broadly conceived.

PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Accounts of LS in the classroom and applications of semiotic anthropology to educational settings have not been without problems. (I will not continue here to discuss the problems and promises of “Ethnography

of communication,” the center strand in Figure 1. Readers are directed to the entry on that topic in the *Encyclopedia*). At least four critiques of LS center on the overly normative characterizations that may emerge from this tradition: the tendency to over-generalize; the lack of a critical perspective on such characterizations; the circular characterization of cultural events and the language that is normative within them; and the lack of a systematic methodology to characterize an individual’s unique trajectory of socialization across events, longitudinally. These critiques are detailed below.

Regarding the first critique, Ochs (2000) has noted that many studies claiming to follow a LS tradition do not adequately account for the contingent and layered indexical nature of communication and as such, lead to stereotypical “cameos” of cultures—arbitrary and overly essentialized characterizations of what counts as competence within a certain community. Accompanying this critique about cameos is a related critique about how such generalizations are made sense of in LS research. Simply highlighting multiple forms of “competence” can lead to non-critical relativism (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo, 1986) in which (to state an extreme, hypothetical example) a practice such as “sounding out” like that identified by Collins (1996) among low reading groups, is just seen as another form of competence—not a disturbing pattern that leads to educational failure in the US context.

The third critique of LS studies is methodological: the initial strategy of identifying focal cultural events like “dinner,” “bedtime story,” “prayer,” or “storytelling,” has tended to foster a lack of attention to the emergent quality of speech events within face-to-face interaction (How, for example, does a certain act of speaking become a “prayer” even when not within a canonical prayer context?). This has led to the critique that LS-based characterizations of certain events and the language that constructs them is circular (He, 2003): According to this critique, LS research methods might lead us to initially identify a “prayer” through the language that is used, then call the language within that event, normatively “prayer-like” language.

The fourth critique, also of methodology, arises from LS researchers’ initial and primary concern with documenting alternative cultural norms. Today it is generally accepted that LS research has successfully illustrated that many posited universals are untrue—and that alternative culturally specific subjectivities exist. However, the field has not, as yet, specified a methodology that could account for an individual’s unique trajectory of socialization across multiple events of speaking within a normative social milieu (Wortham, 2005). In other words, no social actor uses language in ways that perfectly match normative characterizations; but the study of LS lacks a methodology for investigating how an individual’s unique, yet systematic, variation from

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the norm is developed and sustained over time. This critique is related to the concern that LS studies need to be imbued with more substantial ethnographic understandings that can account for such nuanced forms of participation and their development over time (Cameron and Kulick, 2004).

These critiques are problematic for LS studies in schools, because, taken together, the logical conclusion of this line of research is a proliferation of studies that identify multiple forms of communicative competence that support the notion of “LS” as a dialectical process of give and take between community norms and individual action, but which have no way of identifying the processes through which norms are taken up or contested. For researchers in education, this is a significant problem. If LS research is to be illuminating, a methodology will need to be specified to (1) avoid essentializing static cultural types and the uncritical relativism that can attend such generalizations; (2) track the emergence of new forms of participation; and (3) document how individuals negotiate or are positioned and repositioned in processes of socialization over time, possibly, in part, through more sustained and detailed ethnographic study.

Critiques of semiotically focused linguistic anthropology of education have not developed this canonical quality, in part because these studies have not had a chance to permeate educational research circles to such an extent. Often, due to a prevailing concern with standardized educational accountability, close attention to the analysis of language and interaction in educational settings (rather than testable educational outcomes) often meets with skepticism. Even in circles in which qualitative and ethnographic approaches to educational research are relevant, attention to “linguistics” is perceived as too “micro.” At worst, the close attention to language is characterized as an epistemologically inappropriate “reading into” the words of others and giving them selfishly advantageous interpretations (Rymes, 2003). All of these critiques are rooted in a larger problem with the application of semiotic anthropological methods to educational settings: Unlike the tradition of Hymesian ethnography of speaking or LS, there simply is not a long history of semiotic anthropology within educational settings (Wortham, 2003).

WORKS IN PROGRESS

Fortunately, many of the methodological, theoretical, and practical problems encountered with linguistic anthropological work in educational settings have been increasingly addressed as scholars across these sub-fields draw on insights from one another, and as educational researchers become more familiar with these approaches. Recently, work that

combines a LS perspective with an attention to semiotic and emergent aspects of discourse was collected in a volume entitled *Linguistic Anthropology of Education* (Wortham and Rymes, 2003) in an attempt to discuss and provide empirical work that counters problems in the field like those discussed above.

The issue of language “cameos” that emerge from a LS perspective was addressed in the 2003 volume and elsewhere through research that combines a more rigorous attention to emergence and indexicality that comes from the semiotic tradition in linguistic anthropology (He, 2003; Rymes, 2003). In addition, a recent focus on language hybridity and intertextuality has illustrated how LS research in educational settings can account for multiple normative practices that co-exist in classrooms and among social categories of people (Duff, 2003; Gutiérrez et al., 2001).

In direct response to the second critique of “circularity” in some accounts of language, He (2003) has described an “enriched language socialization” infused with concepts of presupposing and entailing indexicality developed by Silverstein (1976). By tracking how utterances like a teacher’s, “when you are finished writing, you may erase it,” come to count as “moralizing” directives within Chinese heritage language classrooms, she refrains from pre-identifying certain speech events or behaviors as characteristically “Chinese” but instead illustrates how such an utterance can only count as moralizing when interlocutors recognize and treat it as such. In this example, He (2003) illustrates how “may” becomes the equivalent of “must” over time, and acquiescing to these “may” directives becomes definitional for being a “good” student.

The third critique—that LS is unable to account for trajectories of idiosyncratic individual socialization across multiple events—has also been addressed by merging insights from LS and traditional semiotic anthropology. Wortham (2005) illustrates how LS’s capacity to address the development of culturally specific subjectivities can be systematically studied with an attention to patterns of semiosis (such as the changes in participation engendered by indexical pronoun use) that develop across multiple events.

The primary concern with semiotic anthropology and its role in educational research has simply been that people haven’t been doing much of it. In response to this problem, the 2003 volume, *Linguistic Anthropology of Education*, has smoothed the way for more semiotically motivated educational research by articulating the differences and points of convergence between the fields of LS and the foundational concepts of semiotic anthropology (Wortham, 2003; Hornberger, 2003). On the heels of this volume, more recent work has continued the project of fusing a semiotic approach with LS. In a forthcoming

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volume on *Narrative analysis for teacher education* (Rex, in preparation) for example, contributors explicitly use the combined insights of LS (Capps and Ochs, 1995) and semiotic anthropological accounts (Wortham, 2001) to investigate how novice teachers and their students develop reflexive understanding of themselves and others.

Perhaps the most theoretically promising and recent new direction for LS and The Linguistic Anthropology of Education comes from this turn to reflexive operations—that is, the processes through which people grasp the norms within which they function (Agha, 2007). Both studies in LS and semiotically centered studies of language use and participation have been founded on at least an implicit recognition of reflexive operations in language development and use. However, the import and centrality of these processes in developing models of conduct is only now being fully and systematically articulated. In *Language and social relations*, Agha (2007) details the reflexive operations through which social actors variably recognize, produce, and transform models of conduct. By describing how social actors orient toward infinitely diverse models of conduct, this methodology offers a merger of the best of LS approaches—namely its ability to attend to the development of culturally specific subjectivities through ethnographic study—and the best of semiotic approaches—namely their ability to systematically identify the linguistic component of semiosis and its relationship to ethnographic contexts.

Understanding how people grasp the norms within which they function is neither simply a matter of ascertaining broad social norms related to language use nor simply a process of delineating the possible linguistic forms available to social actors. Instead, understanding reflexive processes necessitates both (1) a linguistically informed understanding of the semiotic processes that contribute to normative behavior; and (2) an ethnographically informed understanding of the social positions generated by choosing or avoiding certain kinds of normative behavior. Becoming competent as a social actor means becoming competent not in pre-existing social norms about what an “appropriate” use of, say, an address term like “Dr. Rymes” is, but in understanding the multiple signs, including forms of participation and likely social actors, that come together around activities in which “Dr. Rymes” is invoked.

By following a trajectory of semiotic signs, we can investigate which models of conduct students and teachers are invoking, producing, aligning with, or rejecting. Students and teachers are not constructed as docile recipients of macro level norms, but social actors with the capacity to choose words carefully, subvert (or conform to) the norms with which they are associated, and to develop reflexive facility with this process.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Up to this point, this entry has characterized two broad strands within linguistic anthropology as distinct primarily in the degree to which they focus more on ethnographic context, or the semiotic processes that imbue such contexts with human relevance. Recent conceptualizations of cross-cultural comparisons have begun to articulate more fully the points of connection between semiotic activity and ethnographic context by focusing on reflexive operations (Agha, 2007).

This focus on reflexive grasp may be a useful new point of departure for educational linguistics more broadly. Language Socialization with an infusion of Semiotic Anthropology can lead to fertile investigation of classroom discourse and curricular effects. This fusion of anthropological approaches presents us with a way to study how language and other semiotic activity provides a medium we use to create and live within new models of conduct—even in the most seemingly rigid institutional contexts (like schools) and even while following rigid curricular mandates.

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