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## Sociolinguistics and language creativity

## A B S T R A C T

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This paper introduces the special issue of *Language Sciences* on Sociolinguistics and Language Creativity. Current interest in language creativity is located within a wider interest in creativity in everyday life, evident across the humanities and social sciences. The paper argues that such vernacular creativity is particularly relevant to the concerns of sociolinguistics. The special issue considers how the adoption of a sociolinguistic lens may contribute to our understanding of creativity; and how the study of creativity in language may itself contribute to sociolinguistic and linguistic theory. Creativity is theorised here in terms of poetics (Jakobson, 1960); performance/critique (Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Hymes, 1981); Bakhtinian dialogics/heteroglossia (Bakhtin [1935] 1981); and aesthetics (e.g. Saito, 2015). We argue that a particular value of sociolinguistic analysis is its ability to reveal micro processes of creativity: for instance aesthetic performance that emerges in the moment, with the potential discursively to transform both language and social relations. Aesthetics, it is argued, 'carries the politics of discourse' and its study may therefore also enrich sociolinguistic theory. More broadly within linguistics, the study of creativity alerts us to the plasticity, or messiness, of language, challenging the concept of 'linguistic rules' that is embedded within linguistic thinking.

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## 1. Introduction

The past 20 years or so have seen increasing, and sustained, academic interest in the concept of creativity. Creativity has been explored across academic disciplines, although there is a particular focus of attention within the humanities and social sciences (see e.g. Boden, 1990/2004; Czikszenmihalyi, 1996; Sternberg, 1999; Craft, 2000; Pope, 2005; Kaufman and Sternberg, 2010; Glăveanu, 2014; Paul and Kaufman, 2014). Such explorations do not restrict themselves to exceptional creativity, of the sort associated with particularly talented individuals. Academic interest in creativity extends to, and sometimes focuses on, a broader conception that incorporates everyday and even routine activity – a focus that is consistent with more widespread social scientific interest in, and re-evaluation of, everyday life. Writing within cultural studies, for instance, Paul Willis and his colleagues (1990: 1–2) have argued that:

In general the arts establishment connives to keep alive the myth of the special, creative individual artist holding out against passive mass consumerism ... Against this we insist that there is a vibrant symbolic life and symbolic creativity current in everyday life, everyday activity and expression – even if it is sometimes invisible, looked down on or spurned. We don't want to invent it or propose it. We want to recognize it ...

Within the study of language, the field of stylistics has a long interest in the analysis of literary texts (for illustrations see Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010). As in other academic areas, however, language studies have seen a growing interest in more everyday forms of creativity. This shift is evident not only within stylistics, but also across fields such as applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and discourse studies. In these areas, the idea of language creativity is extended beyond the realm of literature and high culture to incorporate a wider range of practices: playful and humorous discourse, wit and irony, conversational imagery, linguistic manipulations of form and meaning in conversational joking, artful performance on- and off-line. Such vernacular, demotic creativity is typically collaboratively constructed, adaptive, responsive to previous texts and practices, and embedded in discursive activity around relationships and identities (Tannen, 1989/2007; Carter,

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2004; Swann and Maybin, 2007; Swann et al., 2011; Jones, 2012; Deumert, 2014; Jones, 2016). Of interest in their own terms, such creative practices have been drawn on by scholars to challenge the idea of creativity as timeless and produced by exceptional individuals, invoking instead a democratic, contextualised and dynamic conception of creativity and associated constructs such as literariness, art, and aesthetics.

Vernacular conceptions of creativity seem particularly relevant to sociolinguistics, with its dominant disciplinary preoccupation with vernacular speech and the association of various language practices with the affirmation or disruption of social relations and the social order. Although creativity, in the sense discussed above, is receiving greater attention within the discipline<sup>1</sup>, it cannot, yet, be seen as mainstream. The papers in the special issue seek to build on and further develop this interest, with an explicit focus on how sociolinguistic methods and approaches may advance the study of creativity in language; and, conversely, how contemporary ideas about creativity may articulate with the concerns of sociolinguistics (and linguistics more broadly). Two central questions are addressed:

- *How can the adoption of a sociolinguistic lens contribute to our understanding of creativity?*
- *How can the study of creativity in language contribute to sociolinguistic and linguistic theory?*

The papers presented here are written by scholars from different backgrounds and with research experience in different linguistic and cultural contexts. The selection allows us to explore linguistic creativity across a range of practices (involving combinations of modes and media, and variation within and across languages) within diverse geographical, linguistic and cultural settings. In the words of Anne Storch, the papers explore ‘different creativities and different indexicalities of creatively manipulated [language]’. They have in common a qualitative, broadly ethnographic methodology, allowing a focus on creativity as this emerges in particular settings. The papers are:

*Mimesis and mimicry in language – creativity and aesthetics as the performance of (dis)semblances: Ana Deumert, University of Cape Town, South Africa*

*Aesthetics, politics and sociolinguistic analysis: Mary Louise Pratt, New York University, USA*

*Microgenesis of language creativity: innovation, conformity and incongruence in children’s language play: Asta Cekaite, Linköping University, Sweden*

*Cricket bats, #riotcleanup and rhubarb: everyday creativity in Twitter interactions around Test Match Special: Julia Gillen, Lancaster University, UK*

*At the fringes of language: on the semiotics of noise: Anne Storch, University of Cologne, Germany*

*Linguistic Creativity and the production of cisheteropatriarchy: a comparative analysis of improvised rap battles in Los Angeles and Cape Town: H. Samy Alim, University of California, Los Angeles, USA; Jooyoung Lee, University of Toronto, Canada; Lauren Mason Carris, University of California, Los Angeles, USA; Quentin E. Williams, University of the Western Cape, South Africa*

*‘You don’t have enough letters to make this noise’: Arabic speakers’ creative engagements with the Roman script: Ivan Panović, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*

*Messy creativity (a response to the special issue): Rodney H. Jones, University of Reading, UK*

In these articles creativity is theorised in terms of poetics (Jakobson, 1960); performance/critique (Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Hymes, 1981); Bakhtinian dialogics/heteroglossia (Bakhtin, [1935] 1981); and a politically and culturally motivated conception of everyday aesthetics (Saito, 2015). Overall, the papers open up avenues for transdisciplinary dialogue about the nature of creativity: if creativity is indeed widespread in social life, what contribution can sociolinguists make to larger debates about concepts of creativity and creative practices?

## 2. Sociolinguistics and the study of creativity

In an early handbook of creativity, the psychologists Robert Sternberg and Todd Lubart define creativity as:

The ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e. original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e. useful, adaptive concerning task constraints).

(Sternberg and Lubart, 1999: 3)

<sup>1</sup> Examples of recent interest in sociolinguistics include two colloquia on creativity in language, or discourse, presented at the 2014 Sociolinguistics Symposium (Jyväskylä, Finland).

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