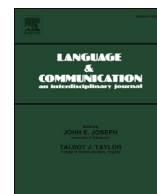


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(Dis)citizenship constructed in same-sex wedding narratives



Serena A. Williams*

University of California, Davis, Department of Linguistics, 1 Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, USA

A B S T R A C T

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Citizenship as institutional participation includes marriage and weddings, and the lack of rights to legal marriage constructs dis-citizenship. Not only are hierarchies reproduced through language, but individuals who are affected by such processes negotiate (dis)citizen-identities through talk. Through sociolinguistic interviews with couples about their weddings, this research examines that negotiation as two same-sex couples construct identities that produce authenticity and legitimacy for their participation in officially recognized couplehood. Mark and Javier (married in 2010) index social, financial, and legal constraints surrounding their legally-recognized wedding, and Barb and Heidi (married in 2000) index tradition, thus constructing legitimacy despite their ceremony that was not legally recognized. Both couples navigate constraints and possibilities in the ways they linguistically construct their coupled identities in these conversations about their weddings, thus producing (dis)citizenship.

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The negotiation of citizenship is a process of exclusion and inclusion, and in the 21st century, the negotiation of citizen rights for same-sex marriage rights/rites is salient in political and social American life. In this study, I focus on the process by which same-sex couples negotiate citizenship in marriage via their wedding narratives. Like citizenship, the performance and construction of identity in general is a process of exclusion and inclusion. Citizenship as a series of participatory acts is also a series of acts out of which identity is created, and both citizenship and identity are closely related to belonging, authenticity and legitimacy. In fact, [Bucholtz and Hall \(2004\)](#) describe identity as a process that is “an outcome of cultural semiotics that is accomplished through the production of contextually relevant sociopolitical relations of similarity and difference, authenticity and inauthenticity, and legitimacy and illegitimacy” (p. 382). Thus identity forms the larger concept that we can conceive of as an umbrella term that includes citizenship.

If we examine citizenship very narrowly, solely on the basis of legal rights, then the report would consist of the rights denied same-sex couples that are extended to mixed-sex couples such as inheritance benefits, insurance benefits, federal tax benefits, death benefits, and protection in the event of divorce. We might also examine the recent timeline of change in the legislative, judicial, and popular initiatives and votes on the issue in the beginning of the 21st century, and the resulting legal recognition of same sex marriage. This is a very interesting historical period from a legal standpoint. However, as [Isin and Turner \(2002\)](#) explain in their volume on citizenship, if we view citizenship status more as a “social process through which individuals and social groups engage in claiming, expanding or losing rights,” we need to view the status with “an emphasis less on legal rules and more on norms, practices, meanings, and identities” (p. 4). This means legitimacy is not the whole story; citizenship for same-sex couples in addition to government-recognized rights is recognition among family and

* Tel.: +1 011 (916) 943 5017.

E-mail address: srawilliams@ucdavis.edu.

friends, and in other social institutions related to the family. This refocuses attention on the processes by which same-sex couples claim citizenship and are excluded from participation in citizenship practices, and this research addresses the ways in which, in their wedding narratives, couples use language to index such processes.

Citizenship is constructed through identity politics that are based on perceived sameness or difference. Ricento (2013) and Heller (2013) point out the diminished value attached to skills and work experience and heightened value attached to linguistic ability in Canada to determine (often arbitrarily) who is similar and who is different resulting in (dis)citizenship. García Sánchez (2013) examines the practices—both of hegemony and resistance—by teachers and students that construct cultural citizenship among Moroccan immigrants in Spain. Wodak (2013) citing others (Bauböck and Joppke, 2010; Michalowski, 2011) explains how 16 European states base citizenship on whether people are “perceived as and acknowledged to be ethnically or linguistically related to the majority population” (Wodak, 2013, p. 174). Tetreault (2013) analyzes the discourse of French youth, who contest concepts of citizenship linking racial and modernizing identities and practices. A similar process of (dis)citizenship occurs in a self-reflexive manner in the narratives of two sets of couples, Mark and Javier, and Barb and Heidi, as they relate the details of their weddings. Though the two couples produce similar discourses, suggesting a shared understanding of the genre of the wedding story, the ways they are affected by policies of exclusion and the ways they claim citizenship, or acknowledge these exclusions are distinct. While Mark and Javier position themselves as excluded in their ceremony narrative and included in their reception narrative, Barb and Heidi largely focus on inclusion, downplaying what governments and individuals had done to exclude them.

In addition to positions of similarity and difference, authenticity and inauthenticity is part of the process of participatory citizenship. Coupland (2001, 2003, 2010) suggests that authenticity “points... to a value system... that ... is able to anchor personal, social and cultural identities” (2010, p. 104). Authenticity is something with which many participants in my study were concerned; participants Cristina and Miguel told me that their families treated them differently once they were married. Alice, another participant, told me she wanted her vows to be “true essences of us” referring to her husband Isaac and herself. Her comment points to an ideology in which the deliberate performances of wedding ceremonies are valuable if they are congruent with the more unconscious day-to-day performances of identity of each person in the couple. Authenticity is especially relevant when we consider the wedding as a planned, deliberate production in which members of a couple represent who they are symbolically while simultaneously claiming membership in a citizenry of the married, an institution that produces authenticity via its historical existence and through group consensus (Coupland, 2010). One couple, Janine and Greg, told me that they decided to have a wedding after fourteen years as a couple because they wanted friends and family to stop asking them when they were going to marry. To illustrate their point, they told me this story about an acquaintance in Mexico who would ask Greg when he was going to marry Janine.

Janine: We lived down in Mexico for a year, and we talked about getting married down there, which is kind of funny because – I think it’s – I mean it’s a strong societal thing here, but it’s really strong in Mexico like the chee- the guy that sold the cheese on the corner? would like get on Greg about not marrying me=

Greg: =I got-he hardly even knew us. I got more flack about us not being married living in Mexico for a year than I ever had fo=

Janine: = they were just like “when are you going to marry her?” as if like – and it wasn’t directed at me at all–it was all directed to Greg like “you’re not doing [what you should]”.

The double voicing in this narrative points to the underlying ideology that marriage is preferable to living together without being married in both Mexico and in the United States. Of course, Janine and Greg, by living together unmarried for 14 years, are an example of resistance to this ideology. This is also true for many couples in the US and in other places are, but the fact that they cite this ideology as part of the reason they have decided to hold a wedding reveals just how prevalent it is.

Janine and Greg *choose*, at various points in their lives, to either resist or reproduce the belief, and this ability to *choose* is what same-sex couples historically lack as they have traditionally been excluded from participating in the very issue, from being able to say *we choose to marry* or *we choose not to marry*. For Mark and Javier, as well as for Barb and Heidi, their desire and claim to participate in the institution authenticates their relationship, and the guests present at the wedding (the reception for Mark and Javier) provide authentication through group consensus. In addition, Barb and Heidi authenticate their married state through language by using the terms *married* and *wife* despite the lack of legal status.

The issue of legal status brings us to legitimacy and illegitimacy, which is tied to both belonging and to authenticity/inauthenticity via power dynamics and negotiations. (Il)legitimacy is perhaps the most salient outcome of participatory citizenship. Legitimacy and illegitimacy play a role in weddings since the ritual provides legitimacy for many people as a couple in the community and state, though the fact that some states recognize some marriages and not others does complicate the issue and underscores the contested nature and localization of legitimacy. A couple who cite legitimacy in marrying was Nate and Mara, who married because they wanted their children from previous relationships and former spouses to be forced to recognize them as a legitimate parental unit. Barb and Heidi told me that they were not legally married, but that they considered themselves married. These examples suggest that for many couples, both mixed-sex and same-sex, legitimizing their relationship in the eyes of others by constructing an official coupled identity is a valuable act with social consequences. Thus far, I have summarized the three themes that Bucholtz and Hall (2004) use to frame the socio-linguistic study of identity: themes of similarity, authenticity, and legitimacy. I have also suggested that citizenship, conceived of as a participatory process, can be examined as an identity construction process.

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