Performativity theory and language learning: Sedimentating, appropriating, and constituting language and subjectivity

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article examines several "language practice" interactions among adult immigrant students in an ESL classroom in the U.S. from the perspective of performativity theory. In drawing on performativity theory, it conceptualizes such classroom interactions, along with the research practices used to investigate them, as constitutive actions. That is, it considers such practices as *producing* the social realities (such as language) and particular subjectivities (such as language learner) which are the concern of second language researchers. Using microethnographic methods, it explores two metaphoric processes at play in the classroom talk, those of sedimentation and appropriation, and analyzes them as performative and ideological activity. It concludes by discussing how performativity theory can enable second language researchers to carefully consider and seek to understand the performative effects of using normative social constructs (such as language and language learner) to explore classroom language learning.

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> Language is a name for our doing: both "what" we do. . .and that which we effect, the act and its consequences. (Butler, 1997, p. 8)

1. Introduction

Drawing on performativity theory, this paper conceptualizes the discursive practices of language classrooms as constitutive sites for some of the taken-for-granted "realities" of second language acquisition (SLA) research. Pennycook (2001, 2004, 2007a,b) has championed Judith Butler's performativity theory within applied linguistics given its potential to open up "new ways of thinking about language, identity and change" (2004, p. 2). He notes that while aspects of language pedagogy and assessment have begun to focus on performance in the still "competence-heavy domain" (2004, p. 7) of applied linguistics, most research to date has failed to "open the pandora's box of performance" (2007b, p. 59). What we need to do, Pennycook says, is treat "performance as primary" (p. 59).

Performativity theory has been invoked in research on gendered identity and language learning (O'Loughlin, 2001; Pavlenko, 2001) and language testing (McNamara, 2006), but there has been little research on the ways mundane language learning practices can mobilize and bring about the normative realities of language, learning and subjectivity. Morgan's (2004) study of the constitution of teacher identity in and through language classroom practices is an exception, and in his article, he contends that "no linguistic 'domains' . . .are unconstituted by discourses", even at the "suprasegmental, phonological level" of second language instruction (p. 183). For that reason, he adds that performative research must be "rooted

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in the field-internal practices that constitute bilingual and second language education" (p. 184). In this article, I treat "language practice" as one type of field-internal practice common to ESL classroom interactions and adopt a microethnographic approach in examining how two adult immigrant students engage in such language practice as they construct questions and responses in English, and struggle to arrive at the correct form for doing so. In investigating their participation in this practice, I consider the performative language and identity effects (Pennycook, 2007a) of two kinds of processes or acts that are mobilized in such interactions, those of sedimentation and appropriation.

2. Performativity theory, language and ideology

Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997) advancement of performativity theory has focused primarily on ways gender identity categories such as "woman" and "man" are constituted through discursive practices, rather than representing or manifesting an original, essential nature. She has famously proposed that gender is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a 'natural' kind of being" (1990, p. 32). She adds that "the action of gender" is necessarily reiterative. That is, a single act is meaningful in constituting one's identity as "female" or "male" only because it reenacts established social meanings by which individuals re-experience conventional identity attributions, and thereby sediment such conventions. And when such social reality (i.e. that one *is* male because of one's objective, essential maleness) comes to be regarded as common sense, natural social reality, it is treated as real and has real material effects on the way people live their lives (see Davies, 1990). But at the same time, Butler emphasizes that these apparent givens of social reality need to be understood as created and reiterated through time and across multiple social practices, and thus sedimented into the familiar regularities of our social worlds. As such, we must recognize that many aspects of "reality" remain fundamentally social.

What might this mean for those of us interested in understanding language learning processes? Even with its reliance on language, performativity, as Kulick (2003) notes, is a philosophical not a linguistic theory. However, as Pennycook (2004) suggests, conceptualizing language learning in terms of performativity allows us to rethink long-standing beliefs about what language is, and as I will explore here, it can also allow us to consider how language learning activity in classroom contexts and the research which foregrounds such activity are powerfully constitutive of particular aspects of SLA "reality". This study builds on previous research which has recognized that interactions in ESL and other language classrooms often adopt and reproduce normative understandings of language and learner identity (see Firth & Wagner, 1997; Leung, Harris, & Rampton,1997; Rampton, 1990; Spack, 1997, among many others). However, performativity theory subtly shifts the focus from representation and/or reproduction of social realities in interaction to a focus on the dynamic *constitution* of social realities in discursive practice. For example, rather than assuming the target language to be an already-there resource which can be drawn upon in different ways, I consider how iterative discursive practices in language classrooms can materialize common sense understandings regarding the perceived reality of English as a unitary, systematic, autonomous entity. And rather than treating particular aspects of individuals' identities as already-there, even when identities are regarded as hybrid, fragmentary, and complex, I consider ESL classroom interactions, and the research processes used to analyze them, as performatively constituting subjectivities such as "language learner" or "(non)native speaker".[1]

Kulick (2003) comments on an important distinction between performance and performativity, noting that "*performance* is something a subject does. *Performativity*, on the other hand, is the process through which the subject emerges" (p. 140). Local performances are necessary for taken-for-granted social realities to be performatively constituted, but such performances do not constitute social reality in a historical vacuum. Rather, they re-sediment conventions of earlier iterations of discursive practices and thus serve as occasions for reconstituting social ideologies about language and learner subjectivity. McIlvenny (2002) emphasizes that such performative power comes not from single acts but from the "(re)citation of a prior chain of acts which are implied in the present act" (p. 116). Such chains of acts are considered here by using the metaphoric construct of sedimentation with respect to language and learning. In the following section, I briefly examine research which treats systematicity in language as developing from the sedimentation of particular usages across a multitude of discursive practices, and language learning as developing from individuals' participation in these iterative and sedimenting acts. I also consider how "common sense" beliefs about what is real and true in our social worlds, which in this case involves our ideologies regarding languages as autonomous, homogeneous systems, are performatively realized in such acts, that is, how they are *produced* in, not merely *represented* in, discursive practices.

3. Sedimenting language in learning

In attending to the understanding that language is emergent from repeated occasions of sedimentation, it is useful to look to Hopper's (1988, 1998) usage-based approach to language. He sees the regularities that we observe and (re)produce in using language as a "by-product" of discourse (Hopper, 1998, p. 156) rather than as manifestations of an internal fixed

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[1] I have chosen to refrain from using quotation marks throughout much of the remaining text for terms which I view as reifications of social constructions rather than objective entities; these include terms such as "second language", "English", "native speaker" and "language learner".