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Language learning motivation as ideological becoming



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ABSTRACT

This article offers a new reading of motivation based on the dialogical theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. I join Hennig (2013) and Clarke and Hennig (2013) in calling for approaches to language learning motivation which take account of the ways in which language learning is meaningful to learners' lives. While Clarke and Hennig's analysis of motivation as a Foucauldian process of ethical self-formation answers this call, it does not theorise the relationship between language learning motivation and general motivation for learning. My analysis offers a theorisation of language which creates this conceptual bridge. Drawing on Bakhtin, I present an account of language learning motivation with theorises language and learning, positing language learning motivation as a holistic process of ideological becoming, inextricably bound to learners' wider life-learning. I illustrate this framework through the story of Dmitry, a Russian learner of English as a second language, demonstrating how his engagement with the language and its speakers contributed to his motivation for learning the language and for a wider process of learning to be in the world. I conclude by positing that by conceptualising the connections between language, learning and motivation, ideological becoming synthesises and theoretically enriches extant psychological approaches to language learning motivation.

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1. Introduction

In a general claim for motivational theory, [Clarke and Hennig \(2013\)](#) offer a reading of motivation as ethical self-formation, which is grounded in motivational theories from language learning (LL). This understanding of motivation 'attempts to recognize motivation as arising from the individuals' socially situated and constrained agency, and ... focuses on how individuals pursue learning as a way of creating a particular desired version of the self' ([Clarke and Hennig \(2013\)](#), p. 77, see also [Hennig, 2013](#)). [Clarke and Hennig \(2013\)](#) point out that the LL motivation field remains broadly moored in a psychological paradigm in which "the ontological basis for conceptualising motivation [is still] to a greater or lesser degree the discrete individual, in whose inner psychology motivation resides, and who is herself located within, but nevertheless distinct from, her context" (p. 78). They are also critical of poststructural approaches to motivation, which cohere around the Bourdieusian concept of investment ([Norton, 2000](#)) and which may risk a limited view of learners as trapped in a power/resistance binary in which they are constantly engaged in struggle. Such a view potentially overlooks the ways in which learning may contribute to learners' personal and social development and expression in ways not necessarily bound up with economic and sociopolitical necessity and survival ([Clarke & Hennig, 2013](#); [Hennig, 2013](#)).

Situating themselves in the expanding socioculturally-informed body of LL motivation research (e.g. [Murray, Gao, & Lamb, 2011](#); [Ushioda, 2009, 2011, 2013](#)), [Clarke and Hennig \(2013, 2013\)](#) offer an important challenge to the psychological and

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poststructural paradigms by presenting a theoretical framework for understanding motivation as a Foucauldian process of ethical self-formation. This dialogical, relational framework “attempts to recognize motivation as arising from the individuals' socially situated and constrained agency, and ... focuses on how individuals pursue learning as a way of creating a particular desired version of the self” (Clarke & Hennig, 2013, p. 77). I welcome Clarke and Hennig's contribution as an important and much-needed theoretical and philosophical expansion of what can be an excessively self-referential field. In this article I wish to present another dialogical, relational framework for understanding (LL) motivation, as a Bakhtinian process of ideological becoming. This is a more expansive framework than Clarke and Hennig's insofar as it conceptualises language as immanent to experience, and thereby offers a conceptual link between LL motivation and motivation generally, which I characterise as motivation for life-learning.

1.1. A person-in-context relational view

Along with Clarke and Hennig (2013), I align my study in the LL motivation field with the work of Ema Ushioda. Ushioda's person-in-context relational view of LL motivation understands the learner as a whole and complex person, a “self-reflective intentional agent, inherently part of and shaping her [sic] own context” (2009, p. 218). A corollary of such an understanding is recognition of the importance of learners' own voices, in both formal and informal learning contexts, in LL motivation research, and as an aspect of the theoretical construct of motivation itself. For researchers, theoretical and methodological engagement with learner voices, and facilitation of the expression of learners' motivations and identities, can provide insights into how LL motivation fits into a broader motivational trajectory. Ushioda (2012) argues strongly for such insights in her call for more holistic analyses of motivation, claiming that if we are to see the learner holistically, it follows that their motivation for language learning is part of a broader motivation to learn and develop:

once we begin to consider motivation from the experiential perspective of the person engaged in the business of L2 [second language] learning, it becomes evident that we need to broaden our theoretical focus beyond features of motivation distinctive to language learning ... Clearly, from the L2 learner's perspective ... the processes of motivation associated with L2 learning are experienced alongside and in interaction with processes of motivation associated with other learning activities and pursuits in life. (pp. 16–17)

Although the person-in-context relational view offers an approach to understanding LL motivation, it is not in itself a theoretical framework. Hennig (2013) and Clarke and Hennig (2013) offer such a framework in their application of a Foucauldian lens to a learner-voice-centred study of language learning (LL) motivation, identifying a gap in the LL motivation field in terms of “approaches to motivation that capture the ways in which learning is perceived as meaningful for learners' lives” (Clarke & Hennig, 2013, p. 79). Their approach, and their exhortation to the field, is to further incorporate “consideration of learners' deliberations and decisions about who they are, who they want to become, how to live their lives, and how to act and behave towards others” (Clarke & Hennig, 2013). Most saliently to my argument, ethical self-formation “provides a means for learners to *transform themselves in multiple domains* - intellectual, emotional and spiritual ... and it provides an avenue for *the pursuit of an ultimate goal for being and becoming in this world*” (p. 88, my emphasis).

The gap that Clarke and Hennig here cite is also that which I wish to address. While poststructural and sociocultural approaches to LL motivation have gone a long way towards acknowledging and understanding the relationship between the individual and the social context, researchers have not yet offered a theoretical framework which integrates these in ways that view learners as whole, complex and relational persons by considering the relationship between their LL motivation and their motivation towards broader personal and social growth and development. Hennig (2013) and Clarke and Hennig (2013) offer one such approach – but one which lacks explicit theorisation of language. Clarke and Hennig (2013) are at some pains to demonstrate the applicability and relevance of their framework beyond only language learning, and may have considered a framework which does not directly theorise language to be more convincing in this regard. However, I posit that theorising language, and its relationship with learning, can itself offer a bridge between LL motivation and broader, life-learning motivation. My analysis, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of ideological becoming, offers a relational account of LL motivation which theorises this relationship, positing LL motivation as holistic and inextricably bound to learners' wider life-learning.

1.2. Bakhtin and ideological becoming: theorising language and learning

Although Bakhtin (1981) was not explicitly concerned with foreign language learning, language was central to his work, as “a living, socio-ideological concrete thing” which “lies on the border between self and other” (p. 293). I now outline his dialogic theory of language and how it can be extended to a language-based theory of learning.

Dialogism is about the relationship between utterances. The utterance is the specific response to a specific moment, produced by a concrete addresser and oriented towards a concrete addressee, both of whom are located in a particular time and space within broader social relationships. Therefore, while “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life”, and is “populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others” (Bakhtin (1981), pp. 293–294), each utterance is also located in a particular time and space, and so represents “a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for social significance” (Bakhtin (1981), p. 333). This means that language is always ideological, and any speaker is automatically an ideolog (Tappan, 2005), seeking to locate themselves within the social relationships of their

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