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National reproduction in national claims: A case study of discursive power in an adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom setting

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ABSTRACT

While the language education scholarship has embraced transnational perspectives, classroom discourse at the practitioner level arguably remains locked within a national paradigm. This study serves to bridge this disconnect between academic and folk perspectives on nationalism by developing an empirical account of how adult participants in a single ESL (English as a Second Language) classroom determine the legitimacy of national claims during instructional talk. Grounded in theories of discursive nationalism, a coding analysis of primary (e.g., classroom discourse) and secondary (e.g., group discussions, interviews, observations, and member checks) data sets identifies the discursive components by which participants collectively (de)legitimize claims about nations. This systematic account can guide transformative discussions of how to reconfigure language classroom discourse according to a transnational framework that empowers learner cultural and linguistic practices.

1. Introduction

The language education scholarship on transnationalism (Duff, 2015) challenges folk views of nationalized social categories (i.e., national identity, national culture, among others) that presuppose nationalized things as coherent objects with rigid external boundaries and an authentic inner core. In contrast, the study of transnationalism recasts nationalized social categories as dynamic, negotiated accomplishments that emerge out of social interactions in settings of unequal power relationships. They detail the discursive pathways individuals follow in everyday encounters to navigate within, across, and between supposedly rigid nationalized boundaries.

Transnationalism is also transformative. When applied to language education, the transnational frame leads program designers, teachers, and students to critically interrogate conventional folk understandings of borders, such as those that delineate authentic from inauthentic and legitimate from illegitimate. Language instruction that is organized around transnational sensibilities is justified in providing learners with knowledge and skills regarding how nationalized boundaries are constructed and deconstructed in everyday talk. Students can then apply this to their social interactions outside of the classroom as one means to advance their legitimate standing in new communities – which are often nationalized. In this sense, a transnational framework holds promise for classroom environments that are empowering for language learners. Language classrooms can become places where nationalized categories are challenged and redefined.

Despite the important theoretical advancements and the potential benefits of transnationalism to language education, folk understandings of nationalism arguably remain entrenched in how teachers and student realize language education in formal classroom contexts, a condition described by Risager (2007) as the *national paradigm*. Under the national paradigm, teachers and students rely exclusively on the national unit to discern legitimate from illegitimate in the language classroom. That is, the national paradigm is reproductive of conventional boundaries of nation and the symbolic power and social privileges associated with those boundary lines. Transnational practices are certainly present in language classrooms (as they are elsewhere), but the national paradigm directs teachers and students away from recognizing social practices that reside between and across nationalized imaginings as legitimate in their own right. While a transnational framework holds potential for transforming social privilege, the national paradigm reproduces and validates existing power relations.

This begs the question: Why do teachers and students continue to rely on the national paradigm in order to organize their language classroom practice? There appears to be a disconnect between academic and folk understandings of what nationalism means for language education. The current study addresses this disconnect by

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examining closely classroom microinteractions in which nationalism is invoked. The reason for doing so is to develop an empirical account of how conventional nationalized borders of legitimacy, and in turn the associated social privileges, are reproduced in classroom settings. The findings of the study are intended to ultimately serve the reimagining of language education according to a transnational framework that empowers the transnational identities of language learners. An important step in reaching that goal is to develop comprehensive understandings of how and why language teachers and students give their classrooms over to national reproduction. What exactly are the discursive mechanisms that classroom participants employ in order to reproduce nationalized social categories as fixed objects, each possessing an authentic, internal truth? Comprehensive understandings of national reproduction in classroom discourse establishes pathways for teachers and students to transform classroom talk in the direction of hybridity and learner agency to (re)define social boundaries of nation and ultimately privilege.

1.1. Theoretical background

Social practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991; Pennycook, 2010; Young, 2009) forms a theoretical grounding for this study. Applied to the study of nationalism, social practice theory provides a valuable guide for explaining how national units, or nations, are reproduced in everyday life and how those findings interface with other aspects of routinized social structure (e.g., gender, social class, ethnicity, among others). To look at nationalism through a lens of social practice requires a few base assumptions. To begin with, nationalism is treated as an ideology that informs the routine practice of categorizing individuals according to national units (Billig, 1995; Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009). Prominent characteristics of this ideology include a preference for discrete, mutually-exclusive national units (i.e., inter-national difference) and homogenization within national units (i.e., intra-national sameness) (Holliday, 2011; Risager, 2007; Wodak et al., 2009).

In short the social practice view is the following. The ideology of nationalism provides the organizational schema, the discourse provides the medium, and individuals enact nationalism as part of routinized practices in specific settings of daily life. The primary mechanism of national reproduction at microinteractional levels is theorized here to be found in national claims, the routine pronouncements people make that implicate nationalized categories of people in organizing one's social landscape (Billig, 1995; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Pennycook, 2010). Simple examples of national claims include straight-forward statements that relate characteristics to nationalized groups (e.g., *Americans are individualistic*; *Canadians are polite*). National claims are not limited to descriptions of social groups per se, but extend to any instance when a discursive claim inculcates national categories in order to fix one's social landscape (e.g., *Figure skating is a Norwegian thing*).

Echoing Bourdieu (1991, p. 223), national claims are discursive acts of (re)creation in that they simultaneously reproduce and create national units. Any single national claim does not carry inherent legitimacy. Which claims achieve legitimacy depends entirely on the context and the situated relationships of discursive power shared among participants (Bourdieu, 1986; Dervin, 2012; Heller, 2008; Young, 2009). This is an important guiding principle: The power of the national claim is not in the content but in the context.

Discursive power is understood here as a process in which individuals in particular settings collectively determine legitimate representations of the world (Bloome, Power Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005, pp. 162–163). Wodak (2012) distinguishes between three dimensions of discursive power: *power in discourse* (i.e., the social positioning to be recognized as providing legitimate representations of the nation), *power over discourse* (i.e., the mastery of the linguistic forms and a sensitivity to the politics of national representation), and *power of discourse* (i.e., the potential of any national representation to influence further representational acts). Of the three dimensions, the present analysis focuses on *power in discourse* in that the purpose is to explore the discursive ways in which individuals in this setting legitimize spontaneous claims about national groups.

The view of national claims as subject to locally defined discursive power has an important implication. If, following Calhoun (1997, p. 3), the tangible substance of nations is "constituted in the claims that people make about them", and if national claims are sites of political struggle, then national reproduction is tipped in favor of those with the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to make their claims stick. At the same time, buried in this implication is also the possibility for transformation. Altering the content of national claims or the process in which they are legitimated has the potential for adjusting how nationalized groupings are realized, and thus the relationships of power that depend on rigid nationalized boundaries.

Language classrooms are advantageous places to study processes of national reproduction. First, as noted in Section 1 above, language classrooms are routinely organized around the study of nationalized languages and cultures following a national paradigm (Risager, 2007). Second, language classrooms are often treated by teachers and students as valuable places for intercultural exchange. This is particularly true in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms for adult students. A common teacher strategy is to elicit student talk in English by asking students about their cultures. As participants conceptualize culture exclusively in nationalized terms, language classrooms become primed to generate a wealth of national claims.

The established scholarship on the classroom/nationalism interface underscores language classrooms as sites of sociopolitical struggle for national legitimacy and authority (Golden, 2001; Griswold, 2010; Heller, 1995, 2001, 2011; Meadows, 2014). Heller's work (1995, 2001, 2011) figures prominently in this area. Her critical studies, conducted in Toronto schools, effectively tie the sociopolitics of legitimate language in the school setting to larger discourses of ethnonationalism in the Canadian context, and ultimately critiques the short-sightedness of schooling practices that favor particular interests while marginalizing others (Heller, 2001, p. 401). Turning to individual classroom case studies, Golden (2001) presents an ethnographic account of Hebrew language classrooms in Israel as sites of socialization into national identity. The study details how immigrant students resisted the national identity positions advocated by the state-sponsored immigrant integration language program. Griswold (2010) also examines immigrant integration language classes but in the United States. The analytical focus was on the national narratives intended to socialize immigrant students into national ways of life. Similar to Golden (2001), Griswold (2010) found a mismatch between student self-positioning vis-à-vis the nation and the kinds of national identity positionings promoted in the instructional materials. A further study (Meadows, 2014) introduces the term *nationalist border practices* to account for the multiple means in which an English language teacher and his students reinforce conventional borders of national identity in the classroom setting. Like the present study, Meadows (2014) examined general processes of national reproduction, but on the other hand did not focus analysis on national claims and the process in which they were (de)legitimated at that setting.

1.2. Study purpose

The impetus for this study is the disconnect between folk and academic understandings of nationalism in the context of lan-