Poststructuralism

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Our interest in poststructuralism in applied linguistics arises from our work as language teachers and researchers, and our mutual desire to promote a productive relationship between social theory and classroom practice. In support, we find three characteristics of poststructural theory of particular relevance for our work. First, poststructuralism constitutes a set of theoretical stances that serve to critique prevailing assumptions regarding the sources and nature of identity, and the rational, humanist subject of the Enlightenment (see Weedon, 1997; Norton, 2000; Kramsch, 2009; Morgan & Clarke, 2011). Second, poststructuralism critiques the conditions and foundations of knowledge, particularly with reference to its apparent objectivity and universal applicability (see Foucault, 1980). Third, poststructuralism critiques the representational capacities of language and texts, foregrounding their intertextuality, multivocality, and at times, indeterminacy (see Derrida, 1978; Sarup, 1993). Characteristic of the "linguistic turn" in contemporary thought, poststructuralist theories assign conceptual and analytic prominence to language—and indeed all forms of meaning making (cf. multimodality; Kress, 2009). In poststructuralist theory, language is seen as central to the circulation of discourses—systems of *power/knowledge* that define and regulate our social institutions, disciplines, and practices. In poststructural terms, discourses normalize the personal and collective possibilities we are capable of imagining in place and time. No longer neutral in this discursive framework, language becomes a key site for the ongoing creation and contestation of identity and its *performativity* (see Butler, 1990), even at the level of the unconscious, where the acquisition of language, following Lacan (1977), serves as a social template that structures and displaces the psychic unity of a prelinguistic self.

To explore the relevance of poststructuralism for applied linguistics, and given our interest in the relationship between social theory and language teaching, we revisit two critical incidents in classroom settings, reported in the literature, which serve to highlight how meaning is constructed across time and space, how identities are implicated in meaning making, and how knowledge and power are inextricably linked.

Two Critical Incidents

The first critical incident, reported in the *TESOL Quarterly* (Norton Peirce, 1990, p. 105), describes a discussion in Norton's language classroom following what has been called "the Montreal massacre" in Canada. Norton describes the incident as follows:

> In the wake of the December 1989 killing of 14 female engineering students by a young male in Montreal, Canada, my students were struggling to make sense of the shocking event. It soon became apparent that the ways in which different students attempted to interpret, and more importantly *name* the event, created conflict in the class. Some students understood the event as an act of hatred against women, and named it an anti-feminist massacre; others understood the event as symptomatic of generic militance in our society, and named it an act of violence; still others understood the event as the isolated act of an insane individual, and named it an act of madness . . . Why was the act of naming such an important one for my students?

The second critical incident, drawn from Norton (2000, p. 143), describes the experience of a young adult immigrant language learner called Mai in Toronto, Canada, who grew increasingly dissatisfied with her English-language class, and eventually withdrew from the course:

> I was hoping that the course would help me the same as we learnt [in the 6-month English as a second language course], but some night we only spend time on one man. He came from Europe. He talked about his country: what's happening and what was happening. And all the time we didn't learn at all. And tomorrow the other Indian man speak something for there. Maybe all week I didn't write any more on my book.

While each of these critical incidents took place at different times and in different places, what they have in common are struggles over meaning, identity, and power, themes of central interest to poststructuralism. In order to better understand and address the challenges represented in each of these classroom contexts, we will examine poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and investment, respectively, and then turn to their relevance for classroom teaching.

Poststructuralist Theories of Language, Identity, and Investment

Poststructuralist theories of language, which achieved prominence in the late 20th century, have been influenced by such scholars as Bakhtin (1981), Bourdieu (1977), Derrida (1978), Weedon (1997), and Foucault (1980). These theories build on, but are distinct from, structuralist theories of language, associated predominantly with the work of Saussure. Saussure's (1966) distinction between speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*) was an attempt to provide a way of recognizing that, despite geographical, interpersonal, and social variations, languages have shared patterns and structure. For structuralists, the building blocks of language structure are signs that comprise the signifier (or sound image) and the signified (the concept or meaning). Saussure notes that it is the interrelationship *between* signs within a specific linguistic system that guarantees their meaning, and that each linguistic community has its own set of signifying practices that give value to the signs in a language.

Poststructuralists both build on and critique Saussure's linguistic insights. One of the criticisms leveled at his notion of language is that structuralism cannot account for *struggles* over the social meanings that can be attributed to signs within a given language. The signs /research/, /SLA/, and /identity/, for example, can have different meanings for different people within the same linguistic community. Witness, for example, debates over the meaning of "SLA theory" in the field of applied linguistics (Zuengler & Miller, 2006; Block, 2007a; Swain & Deters, 2007). Thus while structuralists conceive of signs as having arbitrary meanings and linguistic communities as being relatively homogeneous and consensual, poststructuralists take the position that the signifying practices of societies are sites of struggle, and that linguistic communities are heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power.

With reference to poststructuralist theories of identity, Weedon (1997) is centrally concerned with the conditions under which people speak, within both institutional and community contexts. Like other poststructuralist theorists who inform her work, Weedon foregrounds the role of language in her analysis of the relationship between the individual and the social, arguing that language not only defines institutional practices, but serves to construct our identity, or what Weedon calls our subjectivity. Weedon notes that a person's subjectivity, which is defined as diverse, contradictory, and dynamic, signifies a different conception of the individual than that associated with humanist philosophy, which presupposes that every person has an essential, fixed, and coherent core. Poststructuralist

approaches to theorizing identity have also been influential in the work of cultural theorist Hall (1997) and postcolonial theorist Bhabha (2004), who de-essentialize and deconstruct identity categories such as race and gender. Poststructuralist theories of identity have struck a chord in applied linguistics, with a range of monographs making a significant impact on the field (e.g., Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000; Block, 2007b; Heller, 2007; Blommaert, 2008; Kramsch, 2009).

Extending poststructuralist theories of identity, Norton (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000) has developed the construct of "investment," in contrast to "motivation," to better understand the relationship between language-learner identity and language-learning commitment. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu (1977, 1991), Norton argues that if learners "invest" in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital and social power. Unlike the construct of motivation, which often conceives of the language learner as having a unified, fixed, and ahistorical "personality," the construct of investment conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction. Further, while motivation can be seen as a primarily psychological construct (Dornyei, 2001), investment must be seen within a sociological, poststructuralist framework, and seeks to make a meaningful connection between a learner's desire and commitment to learn a language, and the learner's changing identity.

Poststructuralist Theory and Classroom Practice

To what extent can poststructuralist theories of language, identity, and investment help us to make sense of the two critical incidents described above? With regard to the first critical incident, we need to address why the *naming* of the Montreal massacre created conflict in the class. A structuralist conception of language would enable students to understand the subtle difference between the naming of a "massacre" as opposed to the naming of a "murder" or "genocide." Significantly, however, it would not account for the *conflicting struggle* over the meaning that could be attributed to the sign /massacre/ with reference to the particular space/time location of the Montreal killings. It was a struggle by different groups to situate the event within a discursive framework that would legitimate some views and invalidate others. The contrasting meanings of the massacre arose partly as a result of the different investments the students had in the event. Students with investments in discourses of gender would seek to legitimate the view that the massacre was an antifeminist act; students with investments in discourses of social violence would legitimate the view that the massacre was an act of militancy; and students with investments in mental health would legitimate the view that the massacre was an act of insanity. Each discursive framework would evoke and authorize different ways of knowing and, crucially, responding to the event. In other words, the meaning of the massacre was not only a product of a linguistic system that differentiates signs in relation to one another, albeit in a social context, but was located in the intersection between the event, the sign, and the students' investments in the event and the sign. By extension, the students' contrasting investments are best understood with reference to their complex identities as constructed within particular discourses, with conflicting claims to truth and power.

With reference to the second critical incident, how can poststructuralist theories help us understand why Mai felt she was learning little in the class, appeared unmotivated, and ultimately dropped out of the class? The construct of investment, as opposed to the construct of motivation, provides for a different set of questions associated with a learner's commitment to language learning. In addition to asking, "To what extent was Mai motivated to learn English?" we would ask, "What was Mai's investment in the language

practices of her English classroom?" Although we knew that Mai was a highly motivated language learner, it was clear that she had little *investment* in the language practices of her classroom. This lack of investment arose from resistance to the pedagogical practices of the teacher, whose lesson plans appeared to reproduce identity along homogeneous ethnic lines (European, Indian, etc.). While it could be argued that the teacher was attempting to validate the ethnic identities of the students by inviting them to make public presentations about their native countries, the teacher paid little attention to other identity categories (e.g., gender, class, sexual orientation) across different sites (e.g., home, workplace, school). In other words, the teacher had an essentialized conception of the individual as unified, stable, and unchanging, rather than a poststructuralist conception of identity as multiple, changing, and a site of struggle. Further, the teacher appeared to focus primarily on the students' histories, rather than addressing the pressing demands of the present and the future. An emerging body of research on language learning, imagined identities, and imagined communities (e.g., Kanno & Norton, 2003; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) suggests that learners' hopes and desires for the future have a significant impact on their investment in language practices in classrooms and communities.

Points of Contention and Sites of Innovation

Poststructuralist theory continues to inspire both critique and innovation within applied linguistics. One key challenge remains a coherent definition for a notion of *agency* (Ahearn, 2001; Menard-Warwick, 2006). How should we understand and encourage the capacity to question dominant meanings and resist essentialized identities—as demonstrated in the incidents above? To what extent is *agency* a quality that pre-exists discourse? To what extent do we reject this humanistic assumption, and claim that we are determined, "spoken," by the language we use and by the subject positions we occupy? Drawing on Bakhtin, Vitanova (2005) suggests a promising middle ground located in dialogue and based on the subtle ways in which the sociohistorical "voices" we appropriate include and become our own. In the move from theory to practice, however, the expectations of agency can be exaggerated, placing unrealistic pressures on language teachers and applied linguists, many of whom are relatively powerless to transform their sites of practice or the social conditions of those with whom they work (e.g., Morgan, 2009).

Another key tension can be illustrated by referring again to the struggle over naming the Montreal killings and the specific discourses (e.g., gender relations, social violence, or mental health) and interventions they incite. In short, on what basis do we ultimately determine the "truth" of what happened and the best way to proceed? Arguably, when truth, reality, and meaning become pluralized and destabilized—as the work of Derrida and Foucault would indicate—we can become politically paralyzed. We become "prisoners of discourse," as Sarup (1993, p. 97) suggests, both afraid to act and interpretively desensitized to the physical realities of poverty and violence, a critique also made by Luke (2009) in respect of discourses on race and racialization. Ramanathan's (2009) study of language and bodies raises similar concerns. Though she uses poststructuralism to illuminate the shame and powerlessness that people with disabilities experience as subjects of medical discourses, she also sees the need to "*bring the body back* in humanizing terms" (p. 64, italics in original).

Still, some find the poststructural destabilization of knowledge and meaning liberating —a principled politics whose aim is not to supplant one orthodoxy with another but to provide conceptual tools that expose the partiality of all truth claims, thus weakening their commonsense power over subjects-in-discourse. Many innovative examples can be cited. The project of language disinvention (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007) examines the historical

and contemporary collusion of linguistic systems of description with colonial and nationalist ideologies. Such counter-discourses support locally responsive policies and pedagogies (Canagarajah, 2005; Ramanathan & Morgan, 2007). As Crookes (2009) notes, "aware[ness] of the existence of a range of 'theories of truth'" (p. 123) encourages teachers to become researchers and curricular decision makers. Such awareness, as well, has shifted the profession from preoccupations with "best" methods and their efficient delivery to questions of ethics and values based on postpositivistic epistemologies (e.g., Johnston, 2003; Reagan, 2004; Clarke, 2009; Crookes, 2009). Butler's theory of performativity re-situates identity's salience within acts and processes of meaning, becoming, and identification—a conceptual approach that has inspired Pennycook's (2007) research on global Englishes through rap and hip-hop, Nelson's (2009) innovative work on queer theory and pedagogies in English-language teaching, and Morgan's (2004) study of teacher identity as pedagogy. Certainly, one of the more enduring meanings to be destabilized via poststructuralism—and through the construct of "investment"—is that there is an identity, a definable, universal essence shared by all humanity.

SEE ALSO: Feminist Research; Positivism and Postpositivism

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