

Language and Subjectivity

Tim McNamara. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2019. Pp. xii + 250.

The study of language and identity has taken many forms, but *Language and Subjectivity* presents a rigorous, empirical, and theoretically-informed novel perspective on how we might investigate the relationship between language and identity. Tim McNamara, a renowned applied linguist in the field of language testing, takes a deep understanding of poststructuralist thought—particularly the theories of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler—and applies this to established areas of applied linguistics. McNamara carefully interweaves discussions of poststructuralist thinking into discussions of language—including everyday conversation, language learning, and language testing.

Chapter 1 is a theoretical introduction to the key concepts used throughout the book. McNamara introduces the Foucauldian concepts of *discourse* and *subjectivity* with a clarity and succinctness that many poststructuralist writers might envy. Discourse can be understood as groups of statements and concepts that both represent reality and produce reality (p. 3). For example, a discourse of gender provides ways of talking about women, men, and their differences, but also works to produce and perpetuate those socially-constructed differences. Importantly, these discourses produce subjectivities. While subjectivity can be likened to the notion of identity, subjectivity emphasizes that identities are socially mediated. Continuing with the example of gender, “woman” is both the *subject of* a discourse of gender, as well as *subject to* that discourse. McNamara points out how discourses are frequently about subjects—typically a stigmatized social category such as “the criminal,” “the homosexual,” or “the woman.” He contrasts these poststructuralist ideas with a discussion of Freud, who sees the subject as vastly determined by the operations of the Unconscious (p. 12). McNamara writes how there is thus a conflict between Freud and Foucault, a conflict which is resolved through Foucault’s interpretation of psychoanalysis as yet another discourse. However, both accounts downplay the analysis of human agency—the extent to which humans act independently of discourse or the Unconscious. McNamara shows that agency within poststructuralism can be understood through Derrida’s notion of *iterability*. Briefly put, iterability is the capacity of anything to be repeated, and in each repetition, to potentially alter. The subjects of discourses are iteratively produced in behaviors and interactions, and the possibility of alteration in each repetition of these subjects is a kind of agency.

Chapter 2 explores how gender and sexuality are constructed in language, both from poststructuralist and sociolinguistic perspectives. Using a vivid excerpt from the film *Gran Torino* (2008), McNamara shows what it means to “talk like a man,” and how “a man” is linguistically constructed. This is used as a backdrop to the following three sections which review linguistic work in gendered speech. McNamara chronologically outlines development in linguistic thought, from “correct” feminine speech, to the “dominance approach” of gendered speech, to the “difference approach,” which acknowledges purported differences in the speech of women and men and celebrates these differences. Both the dominance approach and the difference approach, which McNamara suggests contributed in producing a discourse of gendered speech differences (p. 29), are critiqued by Deborah Cameron. Cameron, like McNamara, takes a poststructuralist approach to critique any supposedly natural differences between the speech of women and men. McNamara then argues for the

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connection between gender and sexuality, shown through the feminization of gay men. He illustrates this clearly with an analysis of an interview where the interviewee maps masculinity onto heterosexuality yet makes evident the instability of what it means to be masculine or heterosexual. To explore this more deeply, McNamara introduces the notion of performativity, first with a discussion of the classic ethnomethodological study of “Agnes,” and second with a comparative discussion of Butler’s poststructuralist conceptualization of performativity. Butler’s concept of performativity draws on Derrida’s concept of iterability, and suggests that gender is not innate, but naturalized through constant repetitions of gendered performance. This concept is used to better understand Cameron’s study on same-gender talk, where she argues that speech does not come naturally from speakers’ gender, but rather gender is constructed by the speech itself.

Chapter 3 expands upon the theories introduced in Chapter 1 and applies them to the context of race. McNamara situates the notion of race in Hegel, pointing out how the Hegelian concept of recognition is key to understanding mutually constitutive subjects. We become subjects by being recognized by the Other. McNamara then discusses the work of three influential post-colonialist and poststructuralist theorists: Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Jacques Derrida. Fanon explores the colonizing power of language in the context of colonial Martinique; Said explores how “the Orient” comes to be understood and recognized in thoroughly Western terms; and Derrida explores the vulnerability of subjectivity through his own experience of anti-Semitic discrimination in Algeria. In typical poststructuralist fashion, McNamara discusses in detail how Derrida problematizes the mutually constitutive binaries of colonizer/colonized and Self/Other, arguing for the instability of discursively constructed binaries and categories.

Chapter 4 also focusses on discourses of race but moves the discussion from theory to everyday language, reporting extensively on one of McNamara’s early studies about everyday anti-Semitism (McNamara, 1987). The chapter opens with a consideration of a plaque at Port Phillip Bay near Melbourne. The plaque contains two inscriptions about the raising of the Union Flag in that area. McNamara argues that neither inscription details the violence that occurred between the colonizers and Kulin people who had lived there for thousands of years prior. This piece of everyday text serves to erase a violent piece of history and erase the violence inflicted on an Othered racial group. McNamara then discusses the work of Victor Klemperer (1881–1960) who wrote a book about the language of the Nazis. Klemperer suggested that the use of Nazi language in everyday interaction changed and desensitized the general public at the time, some of whom were evidently persuaded by Nazism. McNamara moves to a case study of anti-Semitism, first explaining the origin of the term itself in nineteenth century philology, while the practice of discriminating against Jewish people can be traced as far back as 270 BC. He then turns to his study where he interviewed Israeli migrants to Melbourne. McNamara presents sizeable excerpts of interview transcripts where Israelis discuss their experience of anti-Semitism in Melbourne. He suggests these people experience subjectivity as a site of struggle, having entered into a discourse in which they are seen as “Jews” (rather than Israelis) and stigmatized for being recognized through that category. McNamara outlines a range of strategies which his interviewees used to make sense of their new stigmatized subjectivity, strategies which were made available due to their “original” subject position of “Israeli.” McNamara concludes that “Racist discourse circulating in the barely noticed material of everyday conversation acts as a kind of reservoir in which the potential for racist violence lurks” (pp. 97–98). He effectively shows that casual conversation deserves close attention to observe circulations of discriminatory discourses.

Chapter 5 marks a departure from theory- and discourse-oriented discussion, and instead engages with the topic of language learning and subjectivity. As such, this chapter may be of particular interest to students and scholars of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). First, McNamara offers a background of SLA, including its interest in the cognitive and psychological understanding of language and, by extension, language learning. He suggests that despite work on identity and SLA by well-known applied linguists such as Claire Kramsch and Bonny Norton, poststructuralist investigations of the subjectivity of the language learner are still few and far between, and this chapter contributes to filling this gap. He discusses three influential discourses: the discourses of national identity, ethnicity, and gender. In these sections he shows how discourses of the speakers of other languages provide students with the opportunity to align with stigmatized or exoticized subject positions by learning the “language of the Other.” Discourses of gender also impact the subjectivity of language learners, as he shows that language learning or oral proficiency has been posited as feminine, and thus boys may be discouraged from learning. McNamara also offers a deeply personal analysis of his own language learning subjectivities. He learned Latin, Italian, Hebrew, and German, yet writes he is not communicative in any of them, an outcome discouraged by international frameworks such as the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR). Despite this, he maintains strong bonds, experiences, and emotions with each language. He suggests that the CEFR, and the communicative movement more generally, is “located firmly within discourses of globalization and managerialism” (p. 114) which treat languages and language ability as a kind of currency, developing curricula and textbooks which reflect this ethos. This erases the subjective and historically-situated facts of language and, McNamara argues, does not fulfill the goals of the education of the person.

Chapter 6 moves the discussion to a central argument of the book: that face-to-face interaction is a central site of *two* social orders—the interaction order and the macro-context of Foucauldian discourses. McNamara once again displays his skill in synthesizing complex and significant sociological concepts in a discussion of the interaction order, which he shows was formulated by Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman and led to the field of Conversation Analysis (CA). McNamara argues that the macro can be seen oriented to in the micro-context of face-to-face interaction using three examples: health visitor interactions, news interviews, and language oral proficiency interviews. In each context, the interaction is clearly marked as institutional, and this interaction itself produces institutional identities such as interviewer/interviewee. McNamara concludes that all subjectivities, not just institutional identities, ought to be visible in interaction, and that the turn-by-turn operations of talk are a site for the iterability, and potential slippage, of the inscriptions of discourse.

Chapter 7 expands on the discussion of Chapter 6 by offering a case study of how a discourse of gender is oriented to and performed in interaction. McNamara first situates his argument in a famous debate where Schegloff (1997) effectively shows how power differentials across gendered lines—supposedly obvious to the analyst—are not in fact oriented to by participants; rather participants orient to interaction-internal preferences. McNamara goes on to use CA to analyze his own data of student interactions during a university class. He carefully guides the reader through an array of excerpts where the female students, although talking explicitly about discourses of gender (as that was the topic of the class), are shown to be interactionally achieving feminine subjectivities. In contrast, the one male student in the class fails to perform the expected behaviors which a discourse of masculinity (described clearly in the content of what the other students say) posits. McNamara persuasively argues that this interaction shows both the inscription and slippage

of discourses of gender. He concludes that CA can reveal the operation of macro-structures in the filigree of interaction.

Chapter 8 is a shorter chapter which critically explores the possibilities of Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA). McNamara introduces MCA, explaining key analytical concepts such as *Membership Categorization Device (MCD)*, the *consistency rule*, *inference-rich*, and *category-bound activities*. He suggests that these key concepts of MCDs may actually be better understood within poststructuralist terms such as discourse, subject positions, and the coherence of discourses (p. 168). For example:

The fact that categories come in collections is because discourses are coherent and offer accounts of particular subject positions within the discourse; they do not identify categories at random but group certain categories of subject as having a relation to others. (p. 168)

McNamara argues that discourses construct membership categories, but that “this aspect tends to be ignored or downplayed by many practitioners of MCA” (p. 169). He suggests that MCA work seems to be divided into two broad types. The first type focuses on asking what terms and term-related activities or qualities people are categorized with. Citing several studies, McNamara shows how this type of MCA answers the “what” of members’ practices without engaging in how these categories are made relevant in interaction. This leads to the second type of MCA, which focuses on *how* categories are deployed in interaction, drawing on the tools of CA. Where the first type can be potentially “promiscuous” in its claims, the second is grounded in the participants’ orientations shown to be relevant in the interaction. McNamara concludes that even the second type of MCA is, at its core, a form of CA which focusses on categories, and that using terms such as MCD may add little value to what CA is already capable of.

The penultimate Chapter 9 transports readers to the domain of language testing and subjectivity. The chapter begins by introducing the concept of the *shibboleth*, a word which functions as a kind of language test. He cites an example of the Assam Agitation where people were asked to count to seven to distinguish if they were Assamese or illegal Bengali. In Assamese, seven is [xat] whereas in Bengali it is [sat]. If a speaker said [sat], they were taken away. The shibboleth is not limited to a single word but may be a way of speaking or accent. He argues the shibboleth, and formal language tests, are a form of the Foucauldian *examination*, a form of surveillance. McNamara then uses this concept of the shibboleth in a discussion of Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin (LADO). LADO involves analyzing the speech of an asylum seeker to determine their place of language socialization, which is then used to support or reject a claim for asylum. McNamara explains the arguably unexpected similarities between LADO and language testing: They are both used to make an assessment of language proficiency through which action follows. In both cases, validity remains an issue, a complex concept that McNamara explicates and discusses in depth. Returning to a poststructuralist discussion, McNamara suggests language test scores, their constructs, and social implications are Derridean “undecidables,” always open to interpretation. LADO, thus, can both protect asylum claims and undermine them. McNamara makes clear that LADO, and language tests generally, cannot be developed and executed only in the modernist and positivist frames in which they generally operate.

Chapter 10 concludes the book but also expands on the overall poststructuralist discussion. He argues that one of the most significant contributions of poststructuralist theory

is how it has revealed the painful experience of subjectivity and subjection to potentially oppressive and arbitrary discourses. Applied linguistics, he suggests, has several tools available to reveal processes of subjectivity. One is a focus on the content and form of what is said, e.g., Chapter 4 and Chapter 8, representative of a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. Another is to use the tools of CA, which he argues “closely parallels the notion of the endlessly iterated performativity of discourse” (p. 220).

This book represents a powerful and cohesive effort to bring a critical, poststructuralist line of thought to a range of applied linguistic disciplines. It touches on SLA, language testing, CDA, MCA, and CA. In particular, this book argues for the potential of using the tools of CA to uncover processes of discourses and subjectivity as conceptualized by Foucault, Derrida, and Butler. As McNamara himself points out, this is a potentially contentious project, yet it is a significant insight and direction for linguists, discourse analysts, and social theorists. McNamara supports this argument throughout the book with succinct explanations of difficult concepts and theories, illuminating and deeply personal examples, and rigorous analyses informed by multiple disciplines. This book is undoubtedly a key text for anyone interested in the critical investigation of language and identity.

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