

Socialization through Language and Interaction: A Theoretical Introduction

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Socialization is the process whereby novices gain knowledge and skills relevant to membership in a social group. This process is realized largely through language practices and social interactions that engage novices in a variety of communicative and situational roles. The study of socialization is to a large extent the study of how the social and linguistic organization of such language practices and social interactions bear on the emergence of social and cultural competence.

A species-wide characteristic of human beings is that they may experience socialization across the lifespan. Indeed, societal change may be related to the possibility of lifelong socialization, as each instance of socialization is an opportunity space not only for continuity of tradition but also for transformation in the expected social order and in what counts as knowledge and competence. Because participation in societies demands diverse and complex arenas of competence, members may find themselves relative novices in some arenas even though they are relative experts in others. Members may be more knowledgeable on one topic than another (e.g., politics versus religion, reggae versus jazz), more skillful in one role than another (e.g., administrator versus teacher, experimental physicist versus theoretical physicist), more experienced in one activity than another (e.g., speechmaking versus essay writing, litigating a court case versus persuading a child to eat dinner). Of course, being more or less knowledgeable, skillful, and experienced does not necessarily mean that parties to an encounter will necessarily display a stance of expert or novice. In some cases,

as in the university physics laboratory studied by Jacoby & Gonzales (this volume), local social values may place a premium on members' willingness to be a relative novice at a moment's notice given their assumption that knowledge is complex and that facts can be rapidly overturned. This ideal of science is not always adhered to, however, as demonstrated in Egbert's study (this volume) of a chemistry graduate student who uses a variety of gestural and vocal ploys to resist his colleague's attempts to define him as novice. In still other cases, social expectations may discourage the display of expertise. For example, in the academic counseling encounter analyzed by He & Keating (this volume), a counselor often withholds knowledge about which academic path to pursue given an institutional ideology that it is best not to 'advise' but rather to simply 'inform' the student of existing options. Withholding expertise is also characteristic of the Japanese interactions analyzed by Ohta (this volume), in which self-effacing and deferential displays of uncertainty characterize the speech of professional and knowledgeable women interacting with a male colleague-supervisor.

An important tenet of socialization research is that certain language practices and social interactions involving novices are organized in similar ways no matter what the social group observed. For example, in all social groups, novices carry out complex tasks with more expert members, which they cannot carry out alone (Vygotsky, 1978). Novices coordinate with more expert members to accomplish tasks such as getting the attention of others (McKee, Johnson, & Marbury, this volume), evaluating experimental results (Jacoby & Gonzales, this volume), deciding on an academic major (He & Keating, this volume), and manipulating an apparatus (Egbert, this volume). Expert-novice interactions of this sort provide what Vygotsky calls the "zone of proximal development," a developmental zone in which cognitive skills are interactionally achieved. In Vygotsky's terms, cognition takes place first on the interpersonal level and then on the intrapersonal level. More recently, researchers following this perspective have treated cognition as a "socially situated," "socially distributed," and "socially organized" process which involves persons of varying competencies engaged in an activity (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Engeström, 1987; Hutchins, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). These approaches take as central that the locus of mental processes is not the isolated individual but society. They take a strikingly different theoretical tack from other psychological approaches in that they examine mental process from the point of view of the *activity* taking

place and ask what kind of social actions and cognitive skills constitute that interaction.

This pursuit has led a number of researchers to examine closely how participants in particular activities coordinate their actions or, to put it another way, how particular activities organize the actions of participants. Researchers pursuing socially situated, distributed, and organized cognition examine how social actions and cognitive behaviors are distributed across persons of differing competencies and statuses engaged in an activity (see, for example, McKee, Johnson, & Marbury, this volume, for an analysis of how getting attention in the deaf community is a socially distributed and organized perceptual activity involving those persons wishing to be seen and those who see those wishing to be seen). An outcome of such research is that while there are cross-cultural commonalities in the social and cognitive organization of activities, there are also *local* cultural variations in the organization of activities, and these variations differentially impact the pace, distribution, and nature of the cognitive skills exercised by different members of a society (Leont'ev, 1981; Bruner, 1990; Cicourel, 1989; Scribner & Cole, 1981). In this perspective, activities are media for psychological skills to develop, and persons have opportunities to develop particular psychological skills demanded in particular activities to the extent that they participate in those activities. Social groups may differ in terms of whether or not particular activities take place or whether or not the activities are pervasive or highly restricted in time, place, and participation. Even within a single social group, access to participation in certain activities (e.g., literacy activities, sports activities, work activities) or access to particular actions (e.g., writing, coaching, offering solutions) in these activities may be socially organized. Having local norms, preferences, and expectations about participation in activities means that different members of a social group (e.g., persons differing in age, level of education, native language, ethnicity, gender, occupation) often have different opportunities for the development of higher order psychological skills.

This view of the socialization of knowledge and skills is an open invitation to social scientists involved in the study of human development to closely examine the socially situated and organized interactions of persons of varying competencies. The emphasis in post-structural approaches to socialization is on *speaking* rather than language, on social *acting* rather than social structure, and on *thinking* rather than thought. In current studies of socialization, the

trilogy of *speaking-acting-thinking* has replaced the more structural and Whorfian trilogy of "language-society (or culture)-thought" as an object of inquiry. Instead of an analytic preoccupation with the extent to which children and other novices are being socialized into mental structures that are universal or culturally and linguistically circumscribed, the current preoccupation is with the ways novices and experts jointly act and speak and in so doing involve themselves in ways of thinking. The papers in this volume speak precisely to this call to examine the interactional generation of social and cultural understandings. They emphasize that socialization is a dynamic, synergistic process that is jointly accomplished moment by moment across interactional time. These papers examine the microgenesis (Vygotsky, 1978) of socially and culturally relevant knowledge and skills and display what can be learned about socialization from a micro-analysis of the coordinated employment of vocal and gestural constructions in the course of a routine activity. In this sense, each paper offers a micro-ethnography of a particular community--a physics laboratory, a chemistry laboratory, an academic counseling unit, a staff of Japanese language instructors, a deaf family--as a contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of how people change over interactional time, and, more loftily, how people change over lifetimes, how communities change over generations, and how language practices and social interaction perhaps ultimately impact the evolution of the species.

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