

Series Editor's Foreword

The field of second language acquisition (SLA) has been transformed in the last 10 years by what has been seen by many as a social turn. Increasingly more SLA researchers feel they can no longer afford to ignore the social context of second language learning, and some have directly engaged with the need to appropriately theorize the two notions of “social” and “context.” However, multiple understandings of social context coexist across language-related fields, and exactly which one each SLA scholar may be willing to adopt matters deeply in terms of the discipline’s ability to offer satisfactory explanations for the learning of additional languages. The matter of crafting a viable ontological and epistemological substance for “social context” can also have dire consequences for the potential for SLA knowledge to be of use to educators who wish to support additional language users in their lifelong development of linguistic, academic, social, cultural, and personal competencies in several languages, rather than only one. This volume by Richard Young in the *Language Learning* Monograph Series presents a highly personal, deeply synthetic, and remarkably organic treatment of the social context of additional language learning. His proposed framework of Discursive Practice serves well the study of additional language learning as a fundamentally and inexorably social phenomenon and is one in which theory and application naturally nourish each other.

Young has himself been at the center of research on context and SLA. For over two decades, he has been committed to examining the social context of second language learning. In his influential early publications, he investigated interaction and attributes of interlocutors from a sociolinguistic perspective, placing systematic variation at the heart of SLA. This was a time in the mid- and late 1980s when SLA researchers reaped the fruits of initial forays into sociolinguistic theories. Nevertheless, for a while during the early 1990s it looked as if SLA’s decided engagement with interdisciplinarity would channel most efforts toward making connections with theories developed in a range of cognitive fields. Instead of losing sight of the importance of the social for explaining additional language learning, Young recast his interest in systematic variation into keen attention to the context-bound nature of communication. He began to lay the empirical foundations of a research program whose goal was to elucidate talk in context and context in talk, examining real-world

situations of language use such as oral proficiency interviews, college writing conferences, and high school science classrooms. This research program was also strengthened subsequently by attention to written discourse in context. In his present book, Young explicates the approach to studying second language learning that he calls Discursive Practice and which is a culmination of all this previous work. In doing so, he leads readers through an interdisciplinary tour de force in which he offers powerful tools for understanding verbal, nonverbal, and interactional resources that second language users develop as they engage with various communities and contexts.

One important contribution of the book is that it expands the intellectual landscape of SLA. It does so by synthesizing knowledge about language, action, and interaction that has been crafted by diverse positions within semiotics, philosophy, linguistic anthropology, ethnography, and sociology. Young heeds the teachings of classic ethnography of communication in its descriptions of talk in context. He also finds important insights in the political lens afforded by educational ethnography and its revealing scrutiny of local-global complementary tensions. At the same time, he details the value of the emotional standpoint summoned by self-story and narrative methodologies. And he is sympathetic to, as much as he is critical of, the sociological study of social action in the traditions of ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis. In addition to this epistemological balancing act of syncretism, Young's novel synthesis enables a cogent treatment of useful tools inherited from the Prague School of Functional Linguistics and Systemic Functional Grammar and which remain severely underutilized by SLA researchers. He glues arguments and analyses in the book through a staged, multiple successive exegesis of discourse data that provides readers with a sense of incremental and cyclical enlightenment.

Another major contribution of the book is that Young does not shy away from worldly questions about the utility of Discursive Practice for education and social transformation. He is interested in the value that his Discursive Practice framework may have to inform teaching and testing of additional languages across diverse contexts. Consequently, he does not eschew the conundrum of locating *learning* in a theory that posits everything humans learn is context-grounded and in an ontology where knowledge is not a substance that can transfer across individuals or contexts but a process that is always emergent and situated. How can knowledge of a discursive practice carry across contextual boundaries, and how can it aid learners across new contexts? Young engages with this problem of *portability of knowledge*, a felicitous term he coins in this book. His solution is to propose that what is learned are situated configurations of verbal, nonverbal, and interactional resources associated with each practice.

The same resources, once learned through use in context, can be realigned creatively and ported to new contexts, facilitating participation in new and increasingly varied practices over time. Participation in the new practice will be key to new learning, but previously acquired configuration of resources may be ported and make the learning easier.

Finally, *power* does not get forgotten in Young's account either. Throughout the book, Young's forceful argument is that "practices are the everyday pivot between societal structure and the individual" (p. 150). Thus, through his analysis of actual discourse data, he makes a convincing case for the centrality in all language learning of what he repeatedly calls "the battle for subjectivity," a term he takes from feminist poststructuralist Chris Weedon. Furthermore, he cogently draws on the current burgeoning work on community and identity in SLA, but also on Foucauldian views of power and Althusser's notion of *interpellation*, in order to argue that second language learning is only a (small?) part of a wider social ecology in which identities are negotiated, resisted, and appropriated as individuals struggle to position themselves as subjects and as they are constructed and positioned by others through dominant discourses and ideologies—that is, through situated language use itself.

This book is the sixth volume in the *Language Learning Monograph Series*, and the first under my editorship. The goal of this series is to advance knowledge in the language sciences with volumes that review recent findings and current theoretical positions, present new data and interpretations, and sketch interdisciplinary research programs. Volumes are authoritative statements by scholars who have led in the development of a particular line of interdisciplinary research and are intended to serve as a benchmark for interdisciplinary research in the years to come. In *Discursive Practice in Language Learning and Teaching*, Richard Young, who has spearheaded the Series for five volumes and 10 years, offers the field a paradigm of forward-looking interdisciplinarity. Through Young's unique blend of authority and intellectual honesty, the book conjures a rich space for thinking of novel ways forward in future SLA theorizing about the social context.

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