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SUMMARY

The book represents an introductory guide to core issues about language as a means of social interaction and suggests a combination of different research fields (from philosophy, anthropology, sociology, stylistics to linguistics) to address the following questions: “How does social interaction happen through language? And how does our knowledge of language change when we consider it to be primarily a means of social interaction?” (xvii). The presentation of the core interdisciplinary concepts and methodologies is interwoven with key guided readings, sets of data and tasks designed to relate some of the concepts to the reader’s own experience.

Coherently with the above mentioned interdisciplinary fabric, the target audience of the book ranges from students, researchers and teachers interested in Applied Linguistics (including foreign language teachers) to those interested in social and communication studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is well suited for self-study on behalf of the individual reader, the student in a group and for teachers building courses, workshops and seminar programs.

The volume is divided into three main sections, each including nine units. It can be read both longitudinally and cross-sectionally. The first section (A: “Introduction”) introduces and exemplifies the main terms and concepts of the borderline areas that investigate language use as a social practice. The second section (B: “Extension”) guides the reader through an interactive and reflexive reading of excerpts from the core literature where some of the key concepts are presented and discussed. Finally, the “Exploration” section (C) provides further samples and suggestions for field and library research to develop students’ research skills.

Within each main section the nine units are organized into three main parts: “Foundations” (units 1-3), “Analysis” (units 4-6) and “Consequences” (units 7-9). In the first part, the main ideas about the relationship between language and social interaction
are presented and reviewed. In the second part, they are applied to analyze actual instances of social interaction through language (‘discursive practices’) both from a Systemic Functional Grammar perspective and a Conversation Analysis one. The notion of ‘interactional competence’ is then introduced and discussed. Finally, the last three units focus on some outcomes of language use as a social practice, namely the participants’ construction of social identities and communities of practice, and language learning as a means of becoming part of those communities.

The summary that follows will go through the content-related units (1-9) across the three main sections (A, B and C) following the thematic cross-sectional reading of the book.

Unit A1 offers a quick overview of different approaches to language as a social practice, ranging from Bakhtin’s dialogic perspective, Wittgenstein, Austin and Searle’s action-oriented views, Hymes’s Ethnography of Communication to Conversation Analysis. The diverse disciplines are presented as different, but complementary and interacting views to understand language use as a social phenomenon. Unit B1 provides a reading from Hymes (1972), where the foundations of the Ethnography of Communication are introduced. Besides recommending further readings, unit C1 invites the reader to compare the above-mentioned perspectives and consider their strengths and weaknesses.

Unit A2 introduces the notion of ‘context’ with its several meanings (spatiotemporal, social, cultural, historical and linguistic) and empirically shows ways in which language and context affect one another in spoken and visual texts. In fact, context may be a given, but it may also be “constructed by language in interaction” as the phenomenon of ‘language crossing’ (Rampton 1998) demonstrates. Context is compared to a ‘frame’, which includes not only speakers and ratified recipients but also other participants who may influence what goes on in interaction by being there or by being evoked. A number of parameters are suggested to investigate context in talk-in-interaction, namely sequentiality, setting, participants, habitus (Bourdieu 1977), frames (Goffman 1974) and conversational inference (Gumperz 1982), where language is but one among many context-making means. Section 2B guides the reader through four excerpts from Goodwin & Duranti (1992), where the concept of ‘context’ is defined with respect to the notions of ‘focal event’, ‘figure’ and ‘ground’. Section 2C exemplifies how to explore the nature of context in two spoken narratives by applying the parameters proposed in section A. In the end the chapter invites the reader to consider the effect of transcription on the understanding of the context of spoken discourse.

Unit 3A presents two methodologies for analyzing talk-in-interaction, Systemic Functional Grammar and Conversation Analysis. The comparison between the two approaches shows that the former analyzes texts out of context, while the latter considers context as a core feature of interactions. As in unit 1, the book empirically demonstrates how both approaches are complementary in providing insights into the relationship
between language and interaction. Section 3B develops their comparison through a reading which focuses on the general principle of ‘constituency’ in Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004). The second set of readings from Hall’s (1995) sociohistorical perspective on face-to-face interaction shows how both conventional and locally-situated meanings represent resources by which participants constructs their identities in social interaction through language. In order to practice how to analyze the meaning-making resources of language in context, unit 3C invites the reader to apply the tools of Systemic Functional Grammar (i.e. phonological, lexicogrammatical and metafunctional constituency, and textuality) and Conversation Analysis (i.e. adjacency pairs, transition-relevance place, selection of next speaker and types of repairs) to naturally occurring data, bearing in mind the conversation analytic deep concern about the preservation of the online nature of talk by using its data collection and transcription tools and procedures.

Unit 4A defines the notion of ‘discursive practice’ after Bourdieu’s (1977) sociological and anthropological approach of Practice Theory and presents it as a central concept to understand language as a context-bounded social activity. Finally, the unit considers how both linguistic and interactional resources construct discursive practices. They are defined as “talk activities that people do” (Tracy 2002: 21), which have their own rules, constraints and structure (verbal and non-verbal patterns). In Hanks’s (1996) reading in section 4B focus is drawn on two aspects of linguistic systems, which make discursive practices possible, namely the ‘irreducibility’ (autonomy and arbitrariness) of language and its ‘relationality’, that is its relations inside the linguistic system and between the system and the world. By looking at the structure of the narrative, its linguistic features, turn-taking and repair structures, and participation framework, the analysis of two fragments from a story telling and a radio call-in show in section C seeks to demonstrate how discursive practices may be used by participants to construct their social identities and to create patterns of solidarity and power in interaction. Nevertheless, Practice Theory as such does not propose any methodology to systematically relate and describe linguistic and interactional resources in discursive practices, which is the object of the chapter that follows.

Unit 5A is centered on a detailed analysis of a naturally occurring interaction between a music teacher and his student during a clarinet lesson. The purpose of this analysis is threefold. Apart from empirically showing how to apply the notion of discursive practice to naturally occurring data and investigate how the boundaries of the practice (e.g. opening and closing acts) are constructed, the analysis demonstrates how the participants co-construct their local interactional identities through linguistic and interactional resources (register, speech acts, turn-taking and repair), among which indexicality plays a key role. Thirdly, the analysis is aimed at introducing a concept of learning that will be further developed in the final chapter, namely learning as ‘changing participation’ in a
discursive practice, where what is learned is not so much the content of the lesson but the participant’s way of interacting in a specific discursive practice. In section C two fragments of classroom interaction are provided to further develop the reader’s analytical skills and consider the different implications for learning of the two different methods of teaching exemplified in the excerpts. In section 5B the discursive practice approach is expanded by inviting the reader to compare it to the notion of ‘speech event’ in the Ethnography of Speaking (Hymes 1962). Moreover, the notion of indexicality is explained with reference to Ochs’s (1996) notion of language socialization, the process of becoming a member of society. Briefly, Ochs argues that since children become a member of society through experiencing the indexicality principle in discursive practices, one can conclude that language acquisition and socialization are two strictly interrelated processes. Ochs’s notion of language socialization paves the way for the discussion of the concept of interactional competence in the following chapter.

After an overview of different approaches to language competence, from Chomsky’s concept of ‘competence’ as opposed to ‘performance’, Hymes’s notion of ‘communicative competence’, Canale and Swain’s fixed and individually based approach to Bachman’s dynamic view is more in line with the usage-oriented approach in the book. Following Kramsch (1986) unit 6A defines ‘interactional competence’ as the ways in which linguistic, interactional and contextual resources “are employed mutually and reciprocally by all participants in a particular discursive practice” (101). It is argued that, first, interactional competence must be constantly co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice since it varies with the practice and the participants, and, second, it must be intersubjective, that is shared among participants, rather than simply the knowledge of an individual person. Section 6B shows the empirical use of the notion of interactional competence with reference to Cicourel’s (1995) description of how a patient, a training fellow and his attending in a teaching hospital construct their novice and expert identities through linguistic and interactional resources. On the other hand, in section 6C the guided analysis of several types of asymmetrical interactions is aimed at highlighting the practice-specific, co-constructed and intersubjective nature of interactional competence. Finally, the analysis of different discursive practices, among which an oral proficiency interview intends to illustrate how the nature of the discursive practice in which the assessment is made may influence the L2 speaker’s performance. However, the book does not really suggest any methodology to assess interactional competence, but just raises the issue that its validity and generalization is limited to the constraints of the practice itself.

Unit 7A further develops the theme of constructing identities through discursive practices. Following Tracy (2002) a flexible system of multiple identities is outlined. A first difference is made between fairly stable ‘master’ (gender, age, profession or ethnicity) and ‘personal’ identities (attitudes and routine behaviors) on one side and more
dynamic and situated ones (‘interactional’ and ‘relational’ identities) on the other side. A second distinction is made between identities claimed by the individual and those projected (‘altercasted’) by others on the basis of specific roles and relationships that people take on in interaction with different interlocutors in a specific situation. Next, focus is drawn on how identities are self-constructed by the individual, altercasted by others (e.g. by the use of address forms or honorifics), and co-constructed, namely how self-construction and altercasting of others interact. Speech accommodation and hypercorrection to a variety associated to a higher or lower status exemplify ways in which identity co-construction is strictly related to the perception of the audience (Bell 1984 and Goffman 1981). Finally, identity is discussed in connection with agency, i.e. the power of the individual to avoid or change master identities. A particular type of social identity work is shown in unit 7B after Day’s (1998) contribution on how ethnicity as a social construction is ascribed and resisted in interaction in two workplaces. However, ethnic group categorization is just one practice of altercasting social identities. So, unit 7C puts forward further activities on how to explore identity construction in a variety of fields, from shapeshifting to virtual identities and obituaries.

One aspect of a person’s identity is membership in a community of people. Therefore, unit 8 addresses the issue of the different ways in which people identify themselves as members of communities. A number of readings to approach and compare different notions of community (speech community, virtual community, discourse community, community of practice and cultural community) are recommended in section C. The notion of speech community as being composed of people using the same linguistic code (Bloomfield 1933) is rejected as too naïve, in favor of the notions of community of practice (Wenger 1998) and discourse community (Heath 1983, Erickson 1992 and 2004, Philip 1970 and 1985). The former is defined in terms of how people use language to do things, so that even people who speak different languages may share ways of doing things with words, such as greeting and turn-taking. According to Wenger the landmarks of a community of practice are the mutual engagement in activities and a repertoire of language varieties, styles and ways of making meaning that are shared by all members of the community. Instead, the notion of discourse community emphasizes different ways of using language in distinct domains by different groups of people. In Erickson’s analysis of a family conversation the two approaches intersect in showing how both linguistic and nonverbal repertoires contribute to identify the participants as members of a community (the family) through the use of common syntactic structures and gestures. Heath (of which a guided reading is given in section B) and Philip’s studies investigate how the poor performance of some children at school may be due to a mismatch of discursive practices in the school and family domains. Consequently, it is argued that learning to understand the discourse of a different community from one’s own involves developing new skills in social interaction, which is the topic of the last unit.
In fact, unit 9 develops the notion of language learning as changing participation. It takes Conversation Analysis as its empirical methodology and classroom interaction as an example of how situated learning and changing participation develop. The participation metaphor characterizes learning as becoming a participant in a community from peripheral participation to full use of the interactional and linguistic resources that are available as an expert member of the community, quite different from learning as knowledge acquisition. However, the author’s stance is not to choose one of the two metaphors but to compare them as they represent different but complementary views on the same phenomenon. The participation metaphor originates in Vygotsky’s work according to which cognitive acquisition and increased participation are aspects of the same learning process and is based on Lave & Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning and Ochs’s theory of language socialization, which the reader can also elaborate on in the guided readings (Ochs 2002: 99-120) in section B. In unit 9C fragments from Shea’s (1994) corpus of conversations between L1 and L2 speakers of English show how L2 learners with the same level of proficiency appear to have very different knowledge of English when engaged in different discursive practices with different interlocutors. This proves the context-bounded nature of learning as participation, questions the portability of participation frameworks to other practices and supports the author’s remarks in unit 6 on the limited validity of interactional competence assessment tools to the discursive practices in which the learner is engaged. In the end, the book raises two issues. The former concerns the above-mentioned portability of participation skills from one discursive practice to another, about which the author claims that transfer may be possible since the learner may find similar structures, albeit in different configurations, in new and different contexts. The latter is about the methodology to investigate the learners’ development from peripheral to full participation in a community of practice, which can be studied by observing the learners in the same discursive practice over time by using Conversation Analysis as in Nguyen (2003) and Young & Miller (2004)’s longitudinal studies.

EVALUATION

The book is well-structured and reader-friendly thanks to its clear and cohesive overall organization. Its constant cross-referencing from theory to data and library resources contributes to its cohesiveness and coherence, demonstrates the empirical outcomes of the theories considered and incrementally widens the view on talk-in-interaction.

It represents a versatile reference and resource tool, lending itself to different uses depending on the reader’s background and interests. Its action-oriented approach, guided readings, reflexive tasks, detailed analyses of naturally occurring data and library resources make it ready to be used in seminars and workshops. On one side, it gradually lays the foundations for an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language as a means of social interaction and represents a step-by-step guide for newcomers to this research.
field. On the other side, for those already familiar with the field of investigation, it provides numerous ideas and resources (and more are available online) for further research and large-scale projects. Moreover, it constantly prompts the reader to consider how language informs social practices in his own culture. Last but not least, the final chapters may be of particular interest to language teachers and teacher trainers for their focus on interactional competence and language learning as changing participation, with numerous examples of classroom interaction.

The theories and concepts reviewed may seem at times oversimplified (e.g. the Speech Act Theory in unit 1A and Systemic Functional Grammar in unit 3A) or vague (e.g. the notions of ‘community’ in unit 8A, of ‘agency’ in unit 9A and of ‘register’, where the sociolinguistic hypernym ‘variety’ might sometimes be more appropriate). Nevertheless, the reader should bear in mind that the main purpose of the volume is not to provide a comprehensive description of all the theories and concepts considered. Its main function is rather to empirically show how concepts and methodologies from very different disciplines may intersect and complement one another to highlight different but interacting features of language as a social practice and language learning as a social process. This is why the different approaches are not contrasted but compared as complementary tools to understand language in context. In other words, its main achievement is not so much in presenting theories but mainly consists of making explicit how they relate to one another and how they can be used to investigate authentic instances of language as a social phenomenon. Its two main successful outcomes are an interdisciplinary fabric to language as a social practice with contributions from a number of different disciplines and theories that rarely interact with one another (e.g. Systemic Functional Grammar and Conversation Analysis), constantly applied to naturally occurring data, and a toolbox of theories, concepts, methodologies and analytical tools the reader can choose from for his own investigations. In the end, it is up to the reader to elaborate on the notions and theories reviewed and to choose his methodological procedures out of the readings, library sources and field activities suggested in the book.

Despite the fact that the data samples mainly consist of discursive practices in American English in the US society (its primary audience), whose nuances may not always be easily grasped by nonnative speakers not fully socialized in the US community, the reader interested in discursive practices in other languages and societies may follow the examples in the book to investigate other data according to the same procedures and categories. Advanced researchers may also find it stimulating to pick some of the challenges and open questions raised in the book, e.g. whether it is appropriate to generalize from a single instance of a practice to ways of speaking in the community at large without a long-term participant observation, how to assess interactional competence and how to investigate language learning as changing participation.
In sum, the resource book suggests a path one may follow to investigate language as social action and offers suggestions for further studies. It represents an outstanding proposal to bridge the gap among different disciplines and theories having them to intersect and interact on naturally occurring data.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Michela Biazzi has a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Pavia (Italy). She wrote her dissertation within the framework of Interactional Linguistics, working on reformulations in naturally occurring interactions among first- and second-language speakers of Italian. Her research interests also include second language acquisition (English and Italian) and migration sociolinguistics. She teaches English as a foreign language in Italy and is actively involved in teacher training programs.
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