

# Practice Theory in Language Learning

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Ortega (2011) has argued that second language acquisition is stronger and better after the social turn. Of the post-cognitive approaches she reviews, several focus on the social context of language learning rather than on language as the central phenomenon. In this article, we present Practice Theory not as yet another approach to language learning, but as a philosophical and methodological frame within which the interplay between social context and language learning can be understood. We review the work of Bourdieu, de Certeau, Foucault, Giddens, and Goffman, who argue for the centrality of practice in human semiosis. Through analysis of introspective accounts by ten first-generation/working class students of their foreign language learning experiences, we show how Practice Theory reveals a dialectic between the immediate experiences of language learners and the durable and transposable dispositions emanating from and integrating their past experiences.

**Keywords** agency; structuration; social class; nonverbal communication

## Introduction

In the collection of responses to Firth and Wagner's (1997) watershed reconceptualization of second language acquisition (SLA) research, one of the most strident contributions was Kasper's (1997) article titled "'A' Stands for Acquisition." At the conclusion of her article, Kasper admitted that despite her avowed interest in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, she held to the view that "learning or acquiring anything is about establishing new knowledge structures and making that knowledge available for effective and efficient use" (p. 310). It is fair to say Kasper has modified her opinion since her early view

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that the letter “A” in SLA refers to the establishment, implementation, and use of new knowledge structures. Evidence of this change can be found in the recent coauthored essay that she contributed to a collection of critiques of cognitive approaches to SLA. In this essay, Kasper and Wagner (2011) take a radically different approach to SLA, in which they view second language learning as a social practice and consider what is learned to be the ability to perform effectively in interaction with others, which they term “interactional competence” (p. 118). Instead of “A” for acquisition, with its trope of the human mind as a container to be filled with certain materials and the learner as one who becomes an owner of these materials, in Kasper’s most recent writing, the internal process of acquisition is re-examined and found to be an externally observable process of development of interactional competence.

In the present article, we take aim at another of the three letters in SLA. Traditionally, SLA has focused on how language mediates practice, and 2,500 years of recorded work in linguistics have provided a nuanced understanding of the grammar of tame, well ordered, written language; more recently, thanks to work in conversation analysis, there is an increased understanding of language in talk-in-interaction. In this essay, we argue that a myopic focus on language ignores the broader field of human semiosis, of which language is only a part. Taking a broader view of language has been welcomed by some scholars including Ortega (2011), who has argued that epistemological diversity provides unique opportunities to enrich our understanding of SLA.

Approaches to SLA that focus on the social context of language learning rather than on language as the central phenomenon include those that prioritize individual learners’ identity struggles and those that front language learners’ socialization into the values of a new or a heritage community. These approaches view second language development not simply within a social context but rather as both constructing and constructed by that context. We want to argue that working within this broader field of inquiry, the “L” in SLA stands for something bigger than language itself. In the pages that follow, we propose Practice Theory as the theoretical framework for SLA research that takes into account the larger context of language learning and use.

## **Attention and Disattention**

What lies beyond language is a complex of physical, spatial, temporal, social, interactional, institutional, political, and historical circumstances. The relationship between that to which we attend and the circumstances that attend it has been described by Goodwin and Duranti (1992) as an interaction between a

1. C: Mama. I gotta go to the bathroom.
2. M:
3. C: Mama. Donnie's gotta go.
4. M: Sh-sh.
5. C: But mama.
6. M: Later.
7. C: Ma ma.
8. M: Wait.
9. C: Oh mama, mama, mama.
10. M: Shut up. Will yuh.

**Figure 1** Language data extracted from Birdwhistell (1960, Figure 1, p. 61).

focal event and a field of action within which the event is embedded—two elements which “seem to stand in a figure-ground relationship to each other” (p. 9). Goodwin and Duranti distinguish between different attentional tracks in interaction: the *main-line* or *story-line track*, to which participants orient as the main business of the encounter, and a *disattend track*, to which are assigned a whole variety of actions that are not counted as being part of the interaction at all. The lack of attention paid to the ground of human interaction is not only short-sighted, but also represents a political stance in which researchers ignore the economic and material bases of human activity or only treat them in a cursory manner.

The question then arises: How can researchers' attention be shifted to elements of interaction that are not present in the talk, in the transcript, in what is considered to be data? This shift of focus to the disattend track is not only a political stance but also a necessary research posture that helps explain what *is* present in the data. The necessity of attending to the disattend track was theorized by Goffman (1979) in his criticism of conventional theories of interaction and the crude constructs of “speaker” and “hearer.” The first researchers to attend to the disattend track outside language were those who studied body movement and gesture, including the microsociologist Ray Birdwhistell (1960). In the following extended example of Birdwhistell's approach, we aim to show not only how body movement and gesture inform understanding of language but also how social and political context frame an interaction. The language data are entextualized in Figure 1.

The language in this particular interaction consists of both grammatically well-formed sentences and short bursts of language. If one takes a functional approach to the language data, line 1 illustrates three ways in which C makes meaning. Using the vocative “Mama,” C establishes an interpersonal theme to enact M's participation in the interaction. C then proceeds by means of

the experiential metafunction to describe his bodily experience: “I go to the bathroom” with a clause consisting of a process verb “go” the participant “I” and the location circumstance “to the bathroom.” Within the same turn, C employs the interpersonal metafunction to comment on his own experience with the modal “gotta.” In line 3, C repeats the same meaning omitting the circumstance, which is coherently recoverable from line 1. M replies using imperative modality “Sh-sh” (line 4), “wait” (line 8), “Shut up” (line 10), and introduces a new temporal circumstance “Later” (line 6).

In the interaction represented in Figure 1, speaking is no longer a fluid and volatile activity but an activity that has been captured as a text, a text that has become a cultural object in its own right that may be scrutinized, evaluated, and reproduced once more. Because language has been removed from its original context and entextualized (produced in the new context of this essay), it has been transformed in Bakhtin’s (1986) terms from an “utterance” to a “sentence.” Birdwhistell (1960) attempted to reintroduce some of the fluidity of speech in Figure 2, in which he enhanced the transcript with entextualization of participants’ body movement, gaze, voice quality, and pitch movement. By widening the boundaries of semiosis from language to include nonverbal communication in this expanded transcript, Birdwhistell showed how participants’ actions were performed through associated semiotic modes. The mother’s actions in line 8 demonstrate how the rough irritating sound of her voice, the rapid downward pitch movement of her voice, the movement of her gaze toward the child, and her slap across his legs all contribute to a multimodal action whose import goes far beyond the single word that she utters.

There are, however, still further levels of meaning beyond those that can be entextualized on even the most attentive transcript. In Birdwhistell’s (1960) data, these semiotic modes are indexed in two ways in the participants’ language and gesture. First, Birdwhistell has indexed the social identities of the two focal participants by naming them as “Mother” and “Child,” and indeed the social identity of mother is indexed throughout the interaction by C’s vocative “mama” and, by doing so, C has constructed his own social identity as M’s child. Second, Birdwhistell’s description of the mother’s actions in line 10 includes, “Suddenly she looked around, noted that the other passengers were watching, and forced a square smile.” Here, for the first time, our attention is drawn to important aspects of the scene, which Birdwhistell describes in Figure 3.

The event that Birdwhistell (1960) observed happened on a bus, and participation in the event was not limited to the participants identified on the transcript. As Goffman (1979) noted many years ago, “Our commonsense notions of hearer and speaker are crude, the first potentially concealing a complex

1. The little boy ... seemed tired of looking out of the window, and, after surveying all of the car ads and the passengers, he leaned toward his mother and pulled at her sleeve, pouted and vigorously kicked his legs.  
Child: <sup>3</sup>Ma<sup>2</sup>ma ((pause)) <sup>3</sup>I <sup>2</sup>gotta go to the <sup>3</sup>bath<sup>2</sup>room
2. His mother had been sitting erectly in her seat, her packages on her lap, and her hands lightly clasped around the packages. She was apparently "lost in thought."  
Mother: ((no verbal reply))
3. When the boy's initial appeal failed to gain the mother's attention, he began to jerk at her sleeve again, each jerk apparently stressing his vocalization.  
Child: <sup>2</sup>Ma<sup>3</sup>ma ((pause)) <sup>2</sup>Donnie's gotta <sup>3</sup>go<sup>1</sup>
4. The mother turned and looked at him, "shushed" him, and placed her right hand firmly across his thighs.  
Mother: <sup>2</sup>Sh-<sup>1</sup>sh
5. The boy protested audibly, clenched both fists, and pulled them with stress against his chest. At the same time he drew his legs up against the restraint of his mother's hand. His mouth was drawn down and his upper face was pulled into a tight frown.  
Child: <sup>1</sup>But ((pause)) <sup>4</sup>ma<sup>3</sup>ma
6. The mother withdrew her hand from his lap and resettled in her former position with her hands clasped around the packages.  
Mother: ((softly)) <sup>3</sup>La<sup>1</sup>ter
7. The boy grasped her upper right arm tightly, continued to frown. When no immediate response was forthcoming, he turned and thrust both knees into the lateral aspect of her left thigh.  
Child: ((whining)) <sup>3</sup>Ma: <sup>1</sup>ma:
8. She looked at him, leaned toward him, and slapped him across the anterior portion of his upper legs.  
Mother: ((rasping voice)) <sup>3</sup>Wait<sup>1</sup>
9. He began to jerk his clenched fists up and down, vigorously nodding between each inferior-superior movement of his fists.  
Child: <sup>1</sup>Oh <sup>3</sup>ma<sup>1</sup>ma <sup>4</sup>ma<sup>2</sup>ma <sup>3</sup>ma<sup>3</sup>ma:
10. She turned round, frowning, and with her mouth pursed, she spoke to him through her teeth. Suddenly she looked around, noted that the other passengers were watching, and forced a square smile. At the same time that she finished speaking, she reached her right hand in under her left arm and squeezed the boy's arm. He sat quietly.  
Mother: ((loudly)) <sup>3</sup>Shud<sup>1</sup>dap ((softly)) <sup>2</sup>will <sup>3</sup>yuh

**Figure 2** Simplified version of Birdwhistell's transcript (1960, pp. 60–61).

differentiation of participation statuses, and the second, complex questions of production format" (p. 146). To escape from the crude representation of participants on the story-line track, other participants are invoked not only by their physical presence but their participation may be indexed by the gaze,

Mother and child spoke with a Tidewater, Virginia, accent. [...] The bus route on which the [...] event was recorded leads to [an upper-middle-class] neighborhood. The way in which the mother and child were dressed was not consistent with the other riders, who disembarked, as did the observer, before the mother and child did. [...] The child was about four, while his mother seemed to be about twenty-seven to thirty.

**Figure 3** Birdwhistell (1960, p. 58).

gesture, and addressee status of the focal participants. Participants on the disattend track are capable of engaging in interaction at some level, they are a focus of attention oriented to by other participants, they have a positional location relative to other participants, and may reciprocate address with a communicative gesture of some kind. According to these criteria, there are other participants in the interaction who are not recorded on the transcript. In line 10, Donnie's mother noted the other passengers on the bus, who were watching the interaction between her and Donnie, and the other passengers occupied specific locations relative to them. With her "square smile," a symbolic act of deference (Goffman, 1956), Donnie's mother indexes the participation status of the other passengers on the bus.

The semiotic boundaries of the practice are expanded still further by Birdwhistell's (1960) description reproduced in Figure 3. The Tidewater accent of the two participants indexes them as coming from the Hampton Roads, the Outer Banks of North Carolina, or part of the eastern shore of Virginia or Maryland. Speaking Tidewater English is often a badge of solidarity among people who live on Tangier Island and the outer islands of the Chesapeake Bay but, when Tidewater speakers move outside their dialect area, they may be marked as rural and lower class. The dress of the two focal participants also indexes them as different from the other passengers, who disembarked near an upper-middle-class neighborhood. Their background is indexed by their accent and by their dress, which differentiate them from the other passengers. What is indexed is their personal history, a history that differs from the other passengers and introduces yet a further semiotic dimension of *habitus*, an old philosophical notion expanded at length by Bourdieu (1977).

Habitus is a mediating notion that bridges the gap between the individual and social, capturing the way society becomes deposited in individuals in the form of lasting dispositions, structured propensities to think, feel, speak, and dress in determinate ways, which then guide individuals in their "creative" actions in response to the constraints of their lived social environment. The habitus of Donnie and his mother as indexed by their accents and dress is a means by which social structure becomes mental structure and, although habitus

operates beneath the level of consciousness, it rises to the surface when social dispositions are countered by exposure to novel external forces or differences of power.

In layering on the different attentional tracks of an interaction on a bus, we want to bring forward the multiple and diverse semiotic modes that an analysis of language ignores. The words, the prosody, the gestures, the gaze, the participation framework, the personal histories, the social actions, and the symbolic acts of deference and demeanor together form a *social semiotic* that extends beyond language. Although we have presented each semiotic mode separately from the others, in fact they form a multimodal ensemble. Taking language as part of a social semiotic involves attending to strata of meaning that linguists have traditionally ignored. Those strata include the physical, spatial, temporal, social, interactional, institutional, political, and historical circumstances in which language is typically located. Attending to circumstances like these and the way that together with language they make meaning in interaction has been the focus of the rapidly developing field of pragmatics but, even in pragmatics, the notion of context has been under-analyzed: While it is considered indispensable for understanding utterance meaning, context is nonetheless reduced to a simple list of features. In our opinion, it is not enough to simply list them; what is needed is a way of explaining how the local conduct of talk influences and is influenced by those strata that lie beyond the temporal and spatial horizon of the immediate occasion of utterance. To provide such an explanation is the ambitious project of Practice Theory.

## **Practices and Practice Theory**

The terms practice, practices, or praxis denote a concept developed during the 1970s to refer to human actions that are both the medium through which social structure is enacted as well as the outcome of that structure. Practice Theory has developed in several directions since then and has been embraced by sociologists, cultural theorists, philosophers, anthropologists, and most recently by applied linguists. In what follows, we will provide a brief summary of two generations of Practice Theory, beginning with the early formulations by Bourdieu (1977), de Certeau (1984), Foucault (1995), Giddens (1979, 1984), and Goffman (1956).

Bourdieu (1977, 2001) used the concept of habitus to interpret gender roles among the Kabyle people in northeastern Algeria. Among a series of ethnographic observations, Bourdieu wrote that Kabyle men and women carried their bodies differently; their gait, posture, and gestures enacting and reflecting

a double standard of community values to male and female activities. “Not only can a man not stoop,” Bourdieu (2001) wrote, “without degrading himself to certain tasks that are socially defined as inferior (not least because it is unthinkable that a man should perform them), but the same tasks may be noble and difficult, when performed by men, or insignificant and imperceptible, easy and futile when performed by women” (p. 60). For Bourdieu, *habitus* denotes a set of dispositions that are inscribed in the human body, shaping its most fundamental habits and skills, and transmitting the effects of social power into the person. The Kabyle body is thus a mnemonic device that helps to reproduce fundamental cultural oppositions and is integral to a cultural *habitus* learned more through observation than formal teaching. In making the connection between social structures of gender roles and power and personal embodied experience, Bourdieu struggled to build a bridge between structuralism and phenomenology, two traditions of sociology that had previously been considered incompatible. Structuralism establishes objective regularities independent of the individual while phenomenology, by contrast, equates agents’ representations of the world with reality itself. In support of his position, Bourdieu (1977, p. vi) quoted the first of Marx’s (1845) *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The principal defect of all materialism up to now [...] is that the external object, reality, the sensible world, is grasped in the form of *an object or an intuition*; but not as *concrete human activity, as practice*, in a subjective way.”

Bourdieu’s (1977, 2001) focus on the human body as a nexus between action and social structure has remained a common theme in all variants of Practice Theory as Postill (2010) epigrammatized, “Practice theory is a body of work about the work of the body” (p. 11). In applied linguistics, the semiotic body in its environment has been a common theme of research by Goodwin (2003, 2007) as well as in the sociocognitive approach, of which Atkinson (2011a) wrote “that mind, body, and world function integratively in second language acquisition” (p. 143). It is not the case, however, that through *habitus* the actions of human agents are determined by their history. This is a point made forcefully by de Certeau (1984) when discussing spatial practices in his essay “Walking in the City.” De Certeau reflected on his experience of looking down at the streets of New York City from the top of a skyscraper. He imagined the activity of a person walking through the streets and contrasted the practice of walking with his view of the walker’s route from a high vantage point. At a particular point in time and space, the person on the streets is walking in a particular way—fast or slow, running or dawdling—with a particular activity in mind—a goal of arriving somewhere, of meeting someone, or just window shopping. The view from the top of the skyscraper, however, is a map of the walker’s route, an



abstraction of the practice of walking that is not a representation of the *who*, *where*, *when*, *how*, and *why* of the walker's practice. It is a representation only of the route the walker took—the *what*. As de Certeau wrote, the lines on the map of the walker's route “only refer, like words, to the absence of what passed by” (p. 97). But the walker is not a super hero, free to go wherever he or she likes. There are streets in the city that can be taken or not, there are high walls that cannot be surmounted, intersections that must be crossed. These can be represented on the map as constraints that describe a limited number of routes, constraints that Bourdieu invokes as *habitus*; but to the walker they are affordances and impedances, environments that allow the walker to go in one direction and not in another, environments that the walker negotiates tactically and on the fly. The practice of walking, like an individual's performance in a discursive practice, is situated and ongoing; it is a lived experience within an environment. The map, the bird's eye view of the route, like lexicogrammatical constraints on practice, is a different representation entirely, located nowhere and nowhen. In other words, the social actor's agency as user is manifested in particular selections from among a variety of prestructured possibilities for choice.

In contrast to de Certeau's (1984) focus on the strategic choices that an actor makes within the constraints and affordances provided by *habitus*, Foucault (1995) foregrounded constraints on action in his concept of discipline. Like *habitus*, discipline is structure and power that have been impressed on the body, forming permanent dispositions. In contrast to Bourdieu, however, Foucault in his later work emphasized the means that modern political regimes and institutions such as schools, hospitals, and prisons use to regulate people's bodies through spatialization, timetables, and repetitive exercises. Discipline is not only imposed in an overt way as might be observed in the lives of inmates of institutions but, in our ordinary everyday lives, the nature of discipline consists in routinization. Social practices are routines: routines of moving the body, of understanding and wanting, of using things, interconnected in a practice. Thus discipline does not exist solely in the head or in patterns of behavior; it can be found in the routine nature of action.

The fourth major contributor to the early development of Practice Theory is Giddens (1979, 1984) in his theory of Structuration. In *The Constitution of Society*, Giddens (1984) set out the relationship between the individual and society as a central concern of this theory. Giddens argued that social-interactional phenomena are not the product of structure or agency alone, but of both. Objective social structures are defined by properties of society as a whole, while autonomous human agents are not only constrained but also

enabled by social structures as they employ cognitive and practical skills to negotiate them. Giddens took a perspective on history that is certainly broader than Goffman's (1983), who considered the interaction order as a phenomenon in its own right, and broader still than Bourdieu's, for whom habitus originates in an individual's early formative experiences. For Giddens, social structures are best seen in the long term, what French historians have called *la longue durée*, and it is these enduring structures through which practices in everyday life must be seen. In his own words, "[h]istory is [...] the interconnection of the mundane nature of everyday life with institutional forms stretching over immense spans of time and space" (1984, p. 363). In Giddens's theory that repetition of mundane actions by individual agents reproduces institutional structure, he invokes Marx's (1852) view of history: "Men [humans] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (chapter 1). Although social structures constrain the actions of individual agents, for Giddens (and for Marx), social structures are neither inviolable nor permanent. Persons do make history; indeed, societal structure and individual action constrain each other in an evolving way.

From the broad societal perspective of Giddens (1979, 1984), in order to understand how structuration operates at the level of persons, it is necessary to turn to the micro-sociological perspective that Goffman took on the nature of face-to-face interaction. Goffman (1956) achieved this in his discussion of two symbolic acts in interaction: deference and demeanor. Deference he defined as "the appreciation that an individual shows of another to that other, whether through avoidance rituals or presentation rituals" (pp. 488–489), while demeanor "is conveyed through deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities" (p. 489). Both deference and demeanor are conveyed in many different ways in face-to-face interaction including: by choice or avoidance of words and topics, by tone of voice, by prosodic features of language—high/low pitch, rapid/slow speech, fluent/hesitant delivery; by dress; by patterns of eye-contact; by facial expression; by how an individual stands, sits or otherwise places their body vis-à-vis the other person; by gesture, facial expression, and bodily movement; and by turn-taking in conversation.

The contributions of the founders of Practice Theory were important, but they remained at the level of theory until a second generation stressed the centrality of the human body to practice, while paying closer attention to questions of culture and history. Practice Theory has not regularly been applied

to the analysis of language learning and use. Rather, proponents of the theory have been more interested in rituals in Polynesia or in matrimonial choices, gift exchange, and the mundane economic conduct of everyday life of the Kabyle people of Algeria. The second generation applied Practice Theory to new areas, including human ecology (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012), organization studies (Whittington, 2006), and applied linguistics (Erickson, 2004; Young, 2009).

### **Practice Theory in Language Learning**

How is Practice Theory central to understanding language learning? How would paying closer attention to questions of culture and history inform our understanding of language learning? What are the levels of meaning that lie beyond the transcript of a conversation? Answering these questions involves expanding the focus of practice beyond language; it requires descriptions of social semiosis distant from the immediate utterance or interactional level with the goal of understanding individual SLA as a cultural and historical process. A first step in this direction has been made by Astarita (2012), who has collected introspective accounts of college students' foreign language learning experiences in order to understand how their social class backgrounds informed their practice of language learning. While some SLA researchers have described the role of learners' social class identity in second language study and during study abroad, there exists a significant research tradition that demands further investigation of the impact of social class identity in the foreign language classroom. Astarita investigated the language learning experiences of 11 first-generation/working class college students who studied foreign languages in the United States. The majority of participants self-identified as working class; in fact, several were members of the Working Class Student Union and almost none of their parents had graduated from a four-year institution. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview and illustrate how social class is indexed in the foreign language classroom and the interconnection between personal moments in class discussion and personal histories. They also show how, in their language study, participants struggled to reconcile personal history with actual experience by ventriloquizing their families' strong beliefs about the impracticality and cost of language study. We will use Astarita's data to illustrate how, through the practice of classroom foreign language learning, language learners construct identities for themselves and how, through construction of their identities, they reproduce and resist categorization as working class.

First, what is practice? Most practice theorists are interested in the relationship between social forces and individual agency, or how participants reproduce preexisting social values and how those values are resisted and transformed. As Bourdieu (1977) suggested, the human body can materially signify social power, and Astarita's data show that learners from working class backgrounds were aware of how their demeanor was perceived by their peers in foreign language classes. Grey hair, pregnancy, dentition, hairstyle, posture, gait, race, speech and (particularly) dress were all cited as indexing social class. One participant, Kay, noted that her fellow students used clothing to create a particular identity for themselves in her Spanish class where "earrings and tans and brand names" were the norm. Another participant, Emily, said her Spanish classmates' hometowns were often indexed by high school apparel:

There are certain areas of Wisconsin that are more affluent. So if you have kids from Brookfield or something like that, you know that they come from money. . . . And then you have kids from like where I'm from or other areas in Wisconsin.

A student's hometown as displayed by a high school athletic sweatshirt such as, *Brookfield Track*, indexed the relative wealth and privilege of the wearer. Astarita's participants were aware of the ways their social class and that of their classmates were indexed in the foreign language classroom. Yet, as de Certeau (1984) argued, these indexes of social class did not predetermine their social position in the foreign language class. In fact, Astarita reports some of her participants made a conscious effort to distance themselves from what they perceived to be undesirable aspects of their backgrounds by "cherry-picking" from their life experiences. For example, in Swedish class, Astrid preferred to say she was from Minnesota, where she had resided prior to beginning graduate school, instead of her home state of Kansas because "people just make so much fun of Kansas. Kansas is not nearly as prosperous as Minnesota."

In addition to serving as an opportunity to exercise agency, foreign language class participation is a space for symbolic acts of deference. As the only working class American student among classmates who all appeared to be from upper class Malaysian families, Lindsey found herself deferring to her Muslim classmates by saying:

things that I knew would make Muslim people feel comfortable, like, describing summer, that "everyone wears too short of shorts." You know, saying things like that so they would be like, "oh, she's ok, she's ok."

Lindsey's carefully crafted contributions to class discussions deferred to her classmates' religious background while simultaneously projecting what she believed to be desirable qualities. For example, she suppressed parts of her background for a classroom activity in which she and her classmates were asked to design a poster advertisement for a celebration or holiday in their hometowns:

So in my hometown we have the Brat Fest, which is a huge, drunken, pig-ingesting, beer orgy with tractor pulls. So, how am I going to talk about that? Like, other people are talking about, "Oh Ramadan, we go and visit our relatives." And I'm going to talk about, "We all get shitfaced and puke on each other and eat pork!" . . . And so, I think I made up something about a lumberjack festival and log rolling.

Using her knowledge of Islam, selecting from her life experiences and working within her language capabilities, Lindsey crafted a demeanor symbolizing that she was a person of desirable qualities while at the same time concealing those qualities that she believed symbolized bad demeanor.

So what does a practice approach to language learning and use seek to explain about these participants' foreign language learning experiences? A practice approach seeks to explain the genesis, reproduction, and change of social and cultural realities such as social class, gender, and ethnicity. Such social and cultural realities and their reproduction are not an unthinking reaction of human automata to powerful social forces over which we have no control, nor is social change the result of the individual's struggle against such forces. The middle ground that Bourdieu and de Certeau argued for is reiterated by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992):

[Practice is analyzed] by escaping both the objectivism of action understood as a mechanical reaction "without an agent" and the subjectivism which portrays action as the deliberate pursuit of conscious intention, the free process of a conscience positing its own ends and maximizing its utility through rational computation. (p. 121)

In this light, class participation by the participants in Astarita's study can neither be seen as an automatic expression of their working class identity, nor as demeanor strategically constructed to resist such an identity. Instead it is the practice itself—symbolic interaction with classmates—through which agentive learners defer to the other members of the class while at the same time conveying a demeanor that displays qualities that they value through choice or avoidance of dress, topic, and speech.

In a practice approach, history is enacted in the present. The tradition of considering language in the present as fundamentally different from language history is a dichotomy that can be traced to the Saussurean distinction between synchronic and diachronic dimensions of language. Unfortunately, it is a distinction that obscures connections from the present to the past that help us to understand the present. A practice approach thus involves expanding again the semiotic boundaries to include the personal histories of participants and the generic history of the practice. For the participants in Astarita's study, history—the milieu of beliefs and practices in which they were immersed during childhood and adolescence—provided cultural schemata so that participants perceived experience through cultural categories that were established by the myths and legends of their youth. This became apparent when, in response to interview questions about their families' attitudes toward foreign language study, participants ventriloquized family beliefs about the impracticality of language study and study abroad. Negative family attitudes coupled with limited financial resources narrowed participants' study abroad horizons.

For many participants, there was not a sympathetic audience at home for discussions of language study or traveling abroad. For example, Lee chose to fulfill her language requirement with German because she planned a trip to Germany with her German boyfriend; but her study of German annoyed her family: "My mother thought I should be in secretarial school. You know, my sister thought I was, you know, frivolous in wasting my time and money." Lee reported that her family actively discouraged her study of German because studying it set her apart from the rest of her family:

It was a personal insult and affront. It was like telling them that, you know, they weren't smart enough or good enough or, I mean, yes. It was definitely angering them intensely, and they felt that I thought I was better than them or, you know, or what am I doing this useless, crazy thing for at my age, you know.

Similarly, Ann's family was of the firm belief that "we speak English in this country," and anything she shared about what she learned in French class was met with laughter. The view that language study was impractical made her the object of ridicule in her family. Jonah reported that his family didn't see the point of study abroad and the only person in his life who spoke about it was his Norwegian teacher. In his family's eyes, "it was a big enough deal just to be in college."

Generally speaking Aimee's family didn't value foreign language study, but due to her ongoing letter exchange with a German pen pal, studying German

seemed to make sense because she was using the language for this practical purpose. Although they never discouraged her from studying the language, her family saw no value in it:

My grandma was like, “What do you want to do that for?” You know, like, “Don’t you like it here? Why do you want to go there?” I mean, but, and she was like that with everything. I mean, she, she was also like, “What do you want to go to college for?”

Irina also reported that, while her family wouldn’t encourage or discourage her from studying a foreign language, she speculated that her mother would have:

no idea why you would study a foreign language unless you were going to somehow go there and work, or you were going to maybe, you know, translate documents, you know, if that were what your job was going to be.

Given her previous military deployments to the Middle East, Catalina’s family associated being abroad with placing their daughter in danger. Her parents would be anxious, she said, and preferred that she stay close to home: “I know my mom would be like, ‘Don’t go, just stay here.’” Octavian said he didn’t realize study abroad was an option until it was too late. Although he believed his family would have encouraged him, going abroad would have meant losing his job and, “Money’s a standard kind of thing for not doing things, especially when you’re working class. It just gets filed in the folder with ‘I can’t do that because it’s expensive.’”

As an undergraduate, Astrid felt she would never leave the United States, and this frustrated her. Not only were finances a limitation, she could not imagine herself abroad. She saw foreign travel as something frivolous. She explained:

Even if I had the money to do it, that’s just not the sort of thing you do in my family. It was weird enough that I was in college. You know, it’s like why don’t you just get married and get a real job? It’s like if you can’t envision yourself as a person studying abroad and you add to that the financial strain, it’s like, I don’t know, I have no idea where I would visit.

Of the 11 participants, only Astrid and Emily studied abroad, and both were language majors. Though she had never studied Russian, Astrid was offered a full scholarship to study abroad in Russia for one year. She worked all summer to earn enough money for the plane ticket with the understanding that all other

expenses were covered. However, when the program turned out not to cover living expenses and her family was only able to send \$500 to sustain her for the year, she returned home after only eight days abroad.

Emily had a traditional junior year study-abroad experience. Thanks to the emotional and financial support of her family, Emily was able to realize her dream of studying in Spain for a semester:

My parents wanted me to do it. They were really supportive of it. And they helped me pay for it. And my grandma helped me pay for it, but I had to take out a little bit of a loan for that, too.

While Emily had the psychological and financial support of her family, Astrid lacked both. As described above, other participants felt financial and psychological constraints that resulted in maintaining what Foucault (1995) recognized as the discipline of routine. From a class ideology that values the practical and economic benefits of human activity expressed eloquently by the members of their families—whose words the students themselves used—the constraints on their activity are clear. Getting “a real job” instead of “frivolous” engagement in foreign language study limited some individuals to a cellular existence (within the same communities in which they were raised), which seemed quite natural to their families and which controlled their physical activities for a period of time.

Astarita’s research brings social class to the SLA table—a long overlooked dynamic in SLA scholarship. We have included her research here to illustrate but one layer of social semiosis. Although we have argued that attending to the social class of L2 learners enlarges our understanding of SLA, it is not social class in itself—any more than ethnicity, (dis)ability, gender, or sexual orientation—which should be taken as a language learning variable; it is the sociohistorical context of learners and the practice of language learning that according to Practice Theory demands attention.

## Conclusion

Practice Theory goes beyond the introspective focus of identity theory and the cultural perspective of language socialization. The implications of Practice Theory for language learning are clear. A practice approach expands the field of consideration beyond what can be observed in an interaction. It recognizes that every instance of embodied talk is a discursive practice and what participants bring to a practice is a set of dispositions that has accumulated over a lifetime and sometimes longer. The practice itself is an interpretive schema, a way



of organizing experience in the mind, a way that participants make sense of themselves, a way in which they construct and reconstruct cultural categories and personal histories that are established by the myths and legends of the cultures in which they live.

Kasper began deconstructing SLA by challenging her own claim that “A” stands for acquisition; we have continued the work of deconstruction by arguing that the “L” in SLA stands for something larger than language. In contemporary debates about the proper focus of SLA such as Atkinson’s (2011b) anthology of “Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition,” there appears to be a divide between scholars who take a social approach to SLA and those who take a view of language learning as a fundamentally cognitive process. What we believe Practice Theory can offer is an approach that overcomes distinctions such as those between social and individual, between language learning and language use, between discourse with a small “d” and Discourses with a capital “D,” and between personal moments of language use and the history of persons. Practice Theory conceives of those distinctions as a dialectic, as a process by which the immediate horizon of social interaction expands to include the durable and transposable dispositions that emanate from and integrate past experiences of the individual. But understanding the dialectical process involves attending to ways of meaning-making which, for historical and methodological reasons, researchers have ignored. There is much work to be done.

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