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Phillip M Carter, *Florida International University*



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Poststructuralist Theory and Sociolinguistics: Mapping the Linguistic Turn in Social Theory

Phillip M. Carter*
Florida International University

Abstract

Poststructuralist theory has been broadly influential throughout the humanities and social sciences for two decades, yet sociolinguistic engagement with poststructuralism has been limited to select subfields. In this paper, I consider the possibilities for richer cross-disciplinary work involving sociolinguistics and poststructuralist social theory. I begin by describing the place of social theory within sociolinguistics, paying attention both to the possibilities of interdisciplinarity and the resistance to it. I then introduce the basic tenets of poststructuralism, focusing primarily on its two main constructs, 'performativity' and 'discourse,' and briefly discuss the discontentment with structuralism that resulted in 'the linguistic turn'. I outline the sites in the literature where sociolinguists have already made use of poststructuralist approaches, and conclude by suggesting new possibilities for cross-disciplinary collaboration. Though the paper focuses primarily on variationist sociolinguistics in the U.S. academy, I also make reference to other fields that work with non-static, anti-essentialist approaches to sociality, such as critical discourse analysis. I contend that poststructuralist approaches to social theory are useful for sociolinguists, especially variationists, in that they resist the false dichotomy between agency and structure and provide a comprehensive way of thinking about identity that ignores neither practice nor subjectivity.

1. Introduction: Sociolinguistics and Social Theory

Although a number of studies from the first half of the 20th Century addressed the relationship between language and society (e.g., Gauchat 1905; McDavid 1948; Fisher 1958), the advent of modern sociolinguistics in the U.S. context is customarily associated with the 1960s and the work of U.S. linguist William Labov (e.g., Labov 1963, Labov 1966). Since the time that such work began to cohere into a more-or-less autonomous academic discipline sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s, sociolinguists have been from time to time haunted by questions about their own disciplinary identity. Among these are questions about the relationship to 'mainstream' linguistics (constituted in recent history by structuralist and generativist approaches), the proper object of analysis, and the relationship to allied disciplines. All of these questions are at least in part related to the way in which sociolinguists articulate the purpose of their discipline; namely, whether or not sociolinguistics should marshal linguistic data to answer questions about society or marshal social data to answer questions about language. Fasold (1984; ix) comments on this disciplinary dualism as he describes the rationale for writing two separate texts on sociolinguistics, *Sociolinguistics of Society* (1984), and *Sociolinguistics of Language* (1990):

Although the size of the subject area dictates a second volume, the division into two books is also useful since it reflects the idea that there are two large subdivisions in the field. One of these subdivisions takes *society* as the basic starting point and language as a social problem and resource... The other major subdivision starts with *language*, and social forces are seen as influencing language and as contributing to an understanding of the nature of language.

It turns out to be the case that variationist sociolinguistics has traditionally been dominated by questions oriented to the second of these (i.e., the structure of language). The structuralist orientation to the social (and by extension, to the discipline) was articulated most strongly in Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog's (1968) paper on language change, in which social structure is mobilized as a means of illuminating linguistic structure in an effort to answer questions about language variation and, especially, language change (i.e., diachrony) raised by linguistic structuralists such as Saussure, Bloomfield, Paul, and others. In her woefully under-cited text *Sociolinguistic Metatheory*, Figueroa (1994, 71) points out that 'Explanation for linguistic phenomena such as language change may be social, but this does not then require the sociological study of language change'. Thus, what the 'social' means in sociolinguistics is not something one may take for granted.

While some forms of sociolinguistics such as the sociology of language (Fishman 1968, 1972; Ferguson 1959) and interactional sociolinguistics (e.g., Hymes 1974; Halliday 1978) continued to develop their own socially oriented approaches to language, variationist sociolinguistics moved firmly in the direction of linguistic structure through the final decades of the 20th Century. (See Fishman 1991 for more on the development of non-variationist approaches to sociolinguistics. See Chambers 2003: 54, for more on the relationship between sociolinguistics and the social sciences.) As a result, variationist sociolinguists interested in using language to illuminate questions about the social have from time to time lamented the lack of adequate social theory in which to ground their work. Rickford (1986: 219), for example, cautions that disengagement with other socially oriented disciplines will result in 'constantly reinventing the wheel and sometimes missing it completely'. In a very influential and widely cited paper published in *The Annual Review of Anthropology*, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 484) describe sociolinguistics' indifference to theories of social construction, writing that

With only a few exceptions, linguists have ignored recent work in social theory that might eventually deepen our understanding of the social dimensions of cognition. Even less attention has been paid to the social (including the linguistic) construction of gender categories: The notions of 'women' and 'men' are typically taken for granted in sociolinguistics.

Fifteen years following Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, Coupland (2007: 82) still identifies the lack of integration with social theory as an enduring problem for sociolinguistics, imploring linguists who study style and identity, major areas of investigation in the current sociolinguistic agenda, to turn to social theorists such as Raymond Williams, Dick Hebdige, and Pierre Bourdieu in order to bring linguistic style in line with other styling practices.

The collective call for cross-disciplinary work has resulted in increased engagement with social theorists in recent years. Dodsworth (2008) turned to the work of sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) and his theory of 'the sociological imagination' to illuminate speakers' conscious understanding of the interplay between levels of social structure and daily life. Mallinson (2006) makes a deep and sustained engagement with sociology by using intersectionality theory (e.g., Hill-Collins 2000) and Giddens' (1979) structuration theory to explain the relationship between social organization and linguistic practice. Mendoza-Denton (2008) recruits a wide array of social theorists in her discussion of the cultural and linguistic practices of Latina gang girls, including Althusser (1971), Bourdieu (1977, 1991), Butler (1990), Foucault (1977), Gramsci (1971), and Hebdige (1979), among numerous others. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1991) has been particularly influential in variationist sociolinguistics. His 'linguistic marketplace' construct and theory of symbolic capital have now been utilized in sociolinguistics for several decades (Sankoff and Leberge

1978; Haeri 1996; Eckert 2000; Zhang 2005; Hall-Lew 2009). In recent years, practice theory (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) has become very influential in variationist sociolinguistics, especially in the context of the 'community of practice' construct (see Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999). In a sign that engagement with social theory is not a passing fad, a number of recent dissertations in [variationist] sociolinguistics have addressed decidedly social questions (e.g., Podesva 2006; Rose 2006, *inter alia*) and at least one edited volume (Coupland et al. 2001) has brought together work on language, social structure, and social action. Finally, the question of interdisciplinarity and integration of social theory into sociolinguistic analysis has itself been the specific object of concern in publications such as Mallinson (2009), who examines the relationship between sociolinguistics and sociology, and Mallinson and Kendall (2013), who look generally at the state of interdisciplinarity in sociolinguistics, and in chapters that describe non-essentialist approaches to identity, such as Mendoza-Denton (2004) and Kiesling (2013).

Following from earlier engagements with social theory (Woolard 1985; Milroy and Milroy 1992; Rickford 1986; Eckert 1989/2000), momentum has been building for cross-disciplinary approaches to sociolinguistic analysis. Coupland (2007: 86) has commented on this trend, noting that '...sociolinguistics is increasingly well positioned to engage with ideological debates in social theory'. Commenting on the potentially close relationship between sociology and sociolinguistics, Mallinson (2009: 1035) observes that 'the disciplinary divide...between sociology and sociolinguistics remains current'. This, she notes, is largely due to the fact that the commitment to training in more than one discipline is time consuming. Similarly, Labov (2006:99) writes that the disciplinary divide between sociolinguistics and sociology is greater than that between sociolinguistics and anthropology and psychology, noting that few sociologists and few linguists have committed to learning the tools of the other discipline. In addition, there are already signs of resistance to greater cross-disciplinary collaboration and greater focus on social matters. For example, Thomas (2007: 216) cautions that the 'sociological focus' may detract from collaboration with 'the mainstream of linguistics'.

Sociolinguistics thus faces the same sort of threat that led to the demise of dialect geography in North America, in that dialect geography became increasingly concerned with cultural geography issues...during the mid-twentieth century and lost sight of its role as a means of testing linguistic theories. Sociophonetics – or phonetic sociolinguistics – represents a path into the mainstream of linguistics. Whether sociolinguistics will exploit or squander this opening remains to be seen.

This resistance clearly stems from the field's ongoing disagreements over such defining matters as the proper object of investigation and the intellectual purpose of sociolinguistic inquiry. On the other hand, Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (2008: 542) point out that 'linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics have come together again' in light of renewed interest in contemporary cultural issues. Similarly, Bucholtz and Hall (2008) contend that the vitality of sociocultural linguistics depends on its interdisciplinary voices and commitment to social theory.

The diversity of positions presented here illustrates a lack of consensus among sociolinguists about the utility of interdisciplinarity and engagement with social theory. This is especially true in the case of variationist sociolinguistics. It is, therefore, no surprise that those scholars interested in social theory have not cohered around a single approach or agreed on which theoretical path, if any, is most fruitful for sociolinguistic analysis. In the remainder of this article, I describe one theoretical tradition that has already influenced sociolinguists working across many fields: poststructuralist theory. The influence of poststructuralism on sociolinguistics can be described, on the one hand, as direct, entering various fields such as linguistic anthropology, critical discourse analysis, and variationist sociolinguistics through the work of scholars such as Otto Santa Ana, Ruth Wodak, and

Scott Kiesling, who have made sustained engagement with poststructuralist theories. But the influence of poststructuralism on sociolinguistics can also be said to be indirect, in the sense that poststructuralism helped to bring about the more general turn to social constructivism and anti-essentialist approaches to identity throughout the humanities and allied social sciences, which in turn has influenced sociolinguistic theory in recent years.

In the current paper, I describe the relationship between sociolinguistics and poststructuralist theory. Section 2 provides a general introduction to poststructuralism for sociolinguists unfamiliar with its basic approaches, methods, and relationship to other theoretical traditions. Section 3 outlines the historical impact of poststructuralist theory on sociolinguistics, focusing primarily on the fields of language and identity, gender, and sexuality, as well as some of the debates that have arisen as a result. The final section highlights some recent work in sociolinguistics that makes a sustained engagement with poststructuralist theory and identifies several areas of research where future engagements with poststructuralism may prove fruitful.

2. Introducing the 'Linguistic Turn' in Theory

The 'linguistic turn in theory' refers to the broad shift in the humanistic, interpretive social scientific, and philosophic disciplines away from 'objects' of knowledge to 'processes' of knowledge. This shift is considered 'linguistic' in the sense that it is through language that knowledge and, indeed, reality, are constituted. The 'linguistic turn in theory' encompasses a range of contemporary social constructionist frameworks and has its roots in the Western philosophic tradition. For example, the epistemology of 'performativity' takes us from Butler (1990) back to Austin's (1955) speech act theory and back again to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953). While it would be historically inaccurate to call Wittgenstein a 'social constructivist', his account of 'the language game', does give us a theory in which meaning cannot be assumed in advance of context. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953: 31), the dialectical relationship between meaning, context, and language is already evident:

Instead of producing something common to what we call language, I am saying that these phenomena [i.e. language games] have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language'.

Thus, two of the primary assumptions of the linguistic turn – that language 'constructs' reality and that meaning is an emergent property of *relations* – are already evident in Western philosophy well before social constructivist frameworks gain currency in the humanities and interpretive social sciences.

Readers unfamiliar with poststructuralism are likely more familiar with the popular term 'postmodernism'. Although both poststructuralism and postmodernism roughly index a similar shift in culture and thought away from the values and aesthetics of a particular historical era (namely, modernity since the Age of Enlightenment, roughly the late 17th Century), each term marks different domains within that historical trajectory. While 'postmodernism' functions as an umbrella term, comprising a variety of popular cultural forms including literature, architecture, and the arts, 'poststructuralism', on the other hand, describes a movement in philosophy and theory toward an analysis of *sociality* and *subjectivity* that is rooted in language. This orientation contrasts with the structuralist tradition in theory, philosophy, and linguistics, which focused on discrete, 'material' structures (e.g., social structure, narrative structure, linguistic structure). The structuralist movement in theory has its epistemological roots in Saussurean Linguistics and the structuralist tenants found in *A Course in General Linguistics* (1916). The intellectual reach of

structuralist thought is profound, influencing many of the humanistic, philosophic, and social scientific disciplines throughout much of the 20th Century. Harris (1980:154) describes structuralism's five major theoretical exponents:

1. centrality of 'the sign'
2. strict bi-planarity (form and meaning are separate)
3. self-containment (independence of the structural system)
4. finite itemization (structures are finite and identifiable)
5. supra-individuality (system is unaffected by individual use)

These ideas are evident in the work of well-known theorists across the disciplines, including psychologist Jean Piaget (1970), philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1962), and, most notably, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1963, 1969), and of course in the work of linguists from Bloomfield (1933) to Chomsky (1957). Levi-Strauss was particularly taken by the promise of Saussurian Linguistics, which he praises heavily throughout his own *Structural Anthropology* (1963). Citing Radcliffe-Brown, Levi-Strauss (304) writes, 'Structure is not immediately visible in the 'concrete reality'...When we describe structure...we are, as it were, in the realm of grammar and syntax, not of the spoken word'. Levi-Strauss recruits structuralist methods to analyze and theorize a wide variety of cultural domains, including religion, myth, and kinship. Despite the reach and popularity of the structuralist project, by the 1970s, discontentment began to grow with some of its premises and consequences, particularly among French intellectuals such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1980), Julia Kristeva (1980), and Jacques Derrida (1974). A pivotal figure in this discussion is the philosopher, historian, theorist, and genealogist Michel Foucault. Although I associate him here with the linguistic turn, he is sometimes classified as a structuralist in light of the influence of Saussurian structuralism in some of his early writing. However, Foucault eventually began to depart from structuralist notions of language, resisting the impulse to reduce it to either structure or content. Instead, Foucault theorized language as something with *effects* that extended beyond structure and meaning, finding inspiration in the work of J. L. Austin's (1955) speech act theory.

Language, however, represents only one domain in which certain social theorists became discontent with structuralist approaches. In general, the turn away from 'structure' and to 'language' was about refocusing on *process* and *representation*. For example, poststructuralists are concerned with the process of objectification rather than object as structure, subjectivization rather than subject, universalization rather than the universal, and so on. This is to say that whereas structuralism takes the objects of its analysis for granted, poststructuralism is invested in causes and effects, or how its objects of analysis are historically and culturally produced. In even broader terms, the poststructuralist paradigm calls into question assumptions associated with the Western, liberal ('humanist' or 'modernist') philosophic tradition that emerged from the 17th Century European Enlightenment. Poststructuralists look at this tradition with skepticism, believing that the notion of the universal, self-constituted 'free' subject that underwrites Enlightenment philosophy and politics is partially responsible for contemporary forms of social inequality. Moreover, provided that modern science and the contemporary academic disciplines are also in part products of the Enlightenment, poststructuralists also tend to call into question the authority of science as the only legitimate form of knowledge. For example, Foucault (1976 [2003]: 10) is interested in what types of knowledge are disqualified when *not* considered scientific. He considers his own methodology of critical genealogy to be an 'antiscience', or a way of rereading traditional narratives about history, subjectivity, and truth.

Rather than being a discrete, singular theory, poststructuralism can instead be thought of as a broad framework composed of philosophy and social theory that share a common critique of forms of post-Enlightenment knowledge production and similar orientations to understanding contemporary forms of human subjectivity. One way of organizing poststructuralist thought is around two distinct yet related constructs: 'performativity' and 'discourse', which I describe in turn. Readers should note that there are many other poststructuralist constructs that I could choose to describe in this article (e.g., 'deconstruction'). I have chosen to limit the discussion to 'performativity' and 'discourse' because these already have some degree of circulation in sociolinguistics and are intimately related to language and, as such, likely to be the most useful to readers of this journal.

2.1. PERFORMATIVITY

Performativity is the poststructuralist construct that has been most influential in linguistics, especially in studies of language and gender. This is undoubtedly related to linguists' familiarity with the work of J.L. Austin (1955) and speech act theory. Austin theorized 'performative utterances' as those utterances with illocutionary force, that is, utterances that constitute, rather than describe, an action. In contrast to other, referential uses of language, a performative utterance produces as its effect the thing that it names (e.g., 'I pronounce you husband and wife.'). It is from Austin's work that Butler draws influence in a paper titled 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' (1991) and the earlier, book length *Gender Trouble* (1990). Although a direct genealogical line can be traced from Austin to Butler, Butler's theory of performativity deserves further discussion, considering that *Gender Trouble* (1990) is easily the most cited poststructuralist text in the whole of linguistics.

I would like to begin by distinguishing between 'performance' and 'performativity', which are distinct yet easy to conflate when reading Butler. In the final chapter of *Gender Trouble*, the most referenced section of the book, Butler discusses performativity in the context of drag performance. For readers unfamiliar with this genre, 'drag' refers to the deliberative performance of masculinity by women and femininity by men. According to Barrett (1999: 314) the goal of drag [queen] performance is 'to produce an image of hyperfemininity that is believable – an image that could 'pass' for an ideal woman'. Because drag is a *literal* performance (e.g., 'drag show'), some scholars have taken 'performativity' to mean that individuals *literally* perform their genders, identities, or sexualities. However, Butler uses the image of the drag queen metaphorically in order to expose what she calls 'heterosexualized genders', that is, forms of masculinity and femininity that rely upon the putative authenticity of heterosexuality. In this view, heterosexuality is predicated on the assumption that biological sex (i.e., 'male' versus 'female') exists *before* the social effects of gender (i.e., 'masculine' versus 'feminine') and gets expressed through gendered behavior. However, if gender is performative and produces as its *effect* the 'naturalness' of biological sex, then biological sex can be said to be 'the copy' rather than 'the original', to use Butler's terms. To put it more simply, 'sex' follows 'gender', not the other way around.

The same order holds for sexuality as for gender. Butler puts it this way: 'if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin'. Therefore, once the putative origins of subjectivity (e.g., biological sex and heterosexuality) are exposed as the *effects* of the ostensible parodies (e.g., gender and homosexuality), one can say that there is nothing 'before' language. A common way of putting this using poststructuralist jargon is 'there is no pre-discursive subject', meaning that there is no body, no sexuality, no gender, and no subjectivity before inscription in language. This example aptly illustrates what is meant by 'the linguistic turn'.

Thus, the distinction between ‘performance’ and ‘performativity’ is essential in Butlerian philosophy. To review, in ‘performance’, one assumes an underlying or pre-existing performer who plays a role, as in drag. The same cannot be said of ‘performativity’, for which there is no underlying subject. Instead, the subject is itself constituted through the repetition of its actions. For Butler, gender is not a *performance*, what an underlying subject projects, but is instead *performative*, composed of the actions that bring the subject into being.

The theoretical utility of Butler’s intervention is not that individuals agentively perform genders or identities. On the contrary, Butler gives very little room in her work for agency. Instead, what is useful about her account of performativity is that it detaches individuals from identity categories (gender, ethnicity, sexuality) that would otherwise seem to ‘naturally’ constitute them. This was a powerful theoretical move for sociolinguists looking to get beyond what Eckert (2005) has called ‘second-wave’ analytics in which sociolinguistic variables were understood as cues to a limited set of pre-determined identity categories. Butler’s work, and the broader rethinking of identity in the humanities that attended it, has already helped sociolinguists to move past the moment in which identity was ‘interpreted in terms of place in the social grid’, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 469) put it. In other words, ‘performativity’ helped move the analytic lens in sociolinguistics from identity categories to identity making or, put differently, from ‘being’ to ‘doing’. Butler’s influence was a part of a broader turn to constructivist frameworks in the humanistic, philosophic, and social scientific disciplines that offered non-static views of identity. An especially influential example that predates Butler is West and Zimmerman’s (1987) work on ‘doing gender’, which also emphasizes gender as a process and has been influential among sociolinguists.

2.2. DISCOURSE

Another poststructuralist notion that has exerted a great deal of influence on humanities and interpretive social science disciplines is ‘discourse’. As the term suggests, ‘discourse’ shares a number of commonalities with various branches of linguistics, including, of course, discourse analysis. For Foucault, whose name is most associated with this approach, ‘discourse’ encompasses both language and culture, and always has some temporality, or historical embedding. As in Austin’s speech acts, which produce changes in conversational settings, Foucault’s discourse can also be said to be ‘productive’. This simply means that discourses produce ways of knowing, subjectivities, etc. Unlike Austin’s speech acts, Foucault’s discourse applies to history and culture at large, rather than to a particular conversational setting. Foucauldian scholar David Halperin (1995: 30–1) describes what Foucault means by ‘discourse’.

For one thing, Foucault’s example teaches us to analyze discourse strategically, not in terms of what it *says* but in terms of what it *does* and how it *works*. That does not mean that we learn from Foucault to treat the *content* of particular discourses as uninteresting or irrelevant...; it does mean that we learn from him not to allow the truth or falsity of particular propositions to distract us from the power-effects they produce or the manner in which they are deployed within particular systems of discursive and institutional practice.

What is useful for sociolinguists about Foucault’s theory of discourse is that it is intimately connected to power. His work examines discourses in a variety of cultural and historical sites, including sexuality, the state, and insanity. For example, in *Madness and Civilization* (1965), Foucault’s interest is not in documenting the practices and meanings associated with madness per se or in providing a strictly historical account of the historical rise of madness. Instead, his concern is with the processes by which the idea of madness was incorporated into medical

and scientific discourses, ultimately creating the notion of the 'insane', which became the discursive opposite of 'reason'. That is, Foucault's interest is in the way madness was discursively situated within a matrix of relations including reason, knowledge, and rationality. Together, these produced a new subject type, namely, 'the insane'. Foucault (1978) takes a similar approach in his work on the rise of sexuality as a distinctive form of knowing and 'being'. By tying the rise of 'sexuality' as an independent form of knowledge to specific historical and discursive processes, Foucault is able to think through the production of new sexual 'types', or subjects named by their sexual practices. To say that sexuality became a form of knowledge is to say that sexuality became a vector through which human subjectivity could be understood. Further, as a form of knowledge, sexuality became something that could be named in language, studied, and proliferated into various identity formations.

It is important to emphasize that Foucault theorizes power and discourse together; every instantiation of discourse is equally an instantiation of power. In other words, discourse does not merely reflect 'underlying' relations of power, but rather it creates them. Foucault understands power to be suffused throughout society rather than 'held' at the top by an elite few. This means that subjects from the top of the social order to the bottom have access to forms of power, unlike in monarchical power, where citizens were literally subjects of the king. This is not to say that he does not see inequality in society, but simply that inequalities ebb and flow with the discourses that produce them. The effects of this view are theoretically productive for sociolinguists in at least two ways. First, every relationship of power yields *differentiation*. That is, power relations produce difference, including juridical or traditional differences in status or privilege, economic differences, and 'differing positions within the processes of production, linguistic or cultural differences, differences in know-how and competence...' (1982: 344). This provides a useful framework for thinking about the ways in which speaking subjects, or the individuals we study, exhibit different social behavior, including linguistic difference.

Second, the discourse and power framework allows scholars to think about the possibility of freedom for the subjects they study. This is important in sociolinguistics as the conversation about agency and language use becomes more central to the discipline's overall agenda. In Foucault's work, freedom is possible for individuals because power is suffused throughout the social body. However, the sort of freedom that Foucault theorizes is not akin to the final emancipation that readers familiar with Marx will know. Instead, freedom and power are always conditions of one another. Power is only exercised upon subjects who are 'free', where being free means being 'faced with a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behavior are available' (1982: 342). The contemporary debate over 'same sex marriage' provides a current example of the dialectic between power and freedom that Foucault's work elucidates. As lesbians and gays gain the right to marry (i.e., 'a freedom'), they are subjected to new forms of power, such as regulation by the state, the pressures and restrictions of marriage, and conscription into more tightly controlled identity categories. The interlocking of 'power' and 'freedom' is also useful for sociolinguists because it dissolves the unproductive and false dichotomy between 'structure' and 'agency' that has commanded attention in recent years.

For readers interested in learning more about key concepts in poststructuralist theory without going to primary texts, which can be admittedly time consuming and challenging to read the first time through, I recommend Belsey's (2002) introduction to poststructuralism. Readers specifically interested in Butler should see Salih (2002), which very clearly outlines Butler's thinking on gender, sex, the subject, and language, and Salih (2007), which offers a very clear outline of performativity. For readers interested in approaching primary texts, I recommend Foucault's (1978) *History of Sexuality, An*

Introduction Volume I, which is the most accessible example of his work on cultural discourse, and Butler (1991), which describes performativity in a much shorter form than in *Gender Trouble* (1990).

3. Poststructuralist Theory and Sociolinguistics: Current Conversations

Although the engagement between sociolinguistics and poststructuralist theory remains somewhat limited, particularly where variationism is concerned, a number of scholars in various sociolinguistic fields have made use of poststructuralist theories in their work. The sociolinguistic fields where poststructuralism has been most influential are language and gender and language and sexuality. This is not surprising given the tremendous impact of poststructuralism on Feminist theory and Queer theory since the 1990s. Here it should be noted that the vast majority of work in the fields of language and gender and language and sexuality has been conducted within anti-essentialist, constructivist frameworks, even if not explicitly poststructuralist as such. (Readers should see Holmes (2011) for a discussion of the impact of social constructionism on language and gender research.) Nevertheless, poststructuralist thinking does very clearly inflect the language and gender literature. For example, the second edition of Cameron's *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1992) was updated to include a larger engagement with poststructuralist theory, which at the time was beginning to make an impact on feminist thinking. Livia and Hall (1997a, 1997b) also provide a thoroughgoing review, written explicitly to an audience of linguists, of poststructuralist theory, focusing in particular on the use of Butler, Derrida, and Foucault in Queer theory. They draw out the useful analogy between Foucault's (1978) theory of cultural constitution through the discourses of a particular historical era and the so-called 'strong version' of the 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' (linguistic determinism), illustrating one of many continuities between poststructuralist theory and linguistics. In her review of several theoretical debates in feminist linguistics, Cameron (1997) outlines Butler's performativity, noting its affinities with symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology in the tradition of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, as well as with Gal's (1995) notion of the 'ideological-symbolic' construction of gender. In addition, Barrett (1999) provides an extensive review of queer theory in his study of drag performance. Hall (2000: 186) gives a thorough review of the history of 'performativity', tracing it from J.L. Austin through Judith Butler to contemporary linguistic anthropology. Valentine (2003, 2007) invokes the work of queer theorist Michael Warner (1999) and Foucault's (1978) work on sexual desire and identity categories in his study of New York City transsexuals. In the introduction to a section on linguistic style and performance in *The Language and Sexuality Reader*, Cameron and Kulick (2006: 98) point out that although not all the essays in the section make explicit reference to Butler, they all take up her concern for the effect of stylistic practice on identity. More generally, they note that poststructuralists from Foucault to Althusser have influenced sociolinguistic conceptions of identity. Chapters in recent edited volumes addressing language and sexuality (Campbell-Kibler et al. 2002; Leap and Boellstorff 2004) draw heavily on poststructuralist theory, particularly Butler and Foucault. The body of work by Scott Kiesling, both variationist and discourse analytic, exemplifies a productive engagement with Foucault's notion of cultural discourse. For example, Kiesling (2005) shows how the language used to create and maintain male-male friendships in homosocial contexts is constrained by cultural discourses of masculinity. Rather than simply interpreting the men's linguistic behavior as a projection of heteronormative masculinity, Kiesling convincingly demonstrates that these patterns of behavior are the result of the careful negotiation of cultural discourses. Similarly, Kiesling (2006) considers the narrative construction of hegemonic identities in light of various

discourses of masculinity, while Kiesling (2009) uses the notion of cultural discourse to understand the broader social meaning associated with patterns of sociolinguistic variation among fraternity men. Zimman and Hall (2010: 171) demonstrate how 'socio-cultural linguists can contribute to the poststructuralist argument that sex is discursively achieved' through an analysis of discursive and lexical practices of transsexual men and the gestural practices of *hijras* in India. They explain, for example, that the coining of new expressions among female-to-male transsexuals to refer to 'female' anatomy and the recruitment of vernacular terms for 'male' anatomy with reference to their own bodies, both undermines the binary construction of sex (i.e., the notion that there are only 'male' and 'female' bodies) and undermines the notion that 'gender' (a social category) proceeds logically from 'sex' (a biological category). Their work turns the order of things around, showing how 'biology' is constructed on the basis of culture. Similarly, Motschenbacher's (2009) poststructuralist analysis of body part vocabulary in men's and women's magazines shows that the repetition of lexical terms is *performative*, constructing as its effect gendered identities even in the absence of a clearly defined, 'underlying' speaker/writer. Further, he invokes Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation, or 'hailing', (an act of naming that calls a subject into a particular identity category) to explain how these constructions influence the subjectivities of readers.

While this article has been mostly concerned with variationist sociolinguistics, I would be remiss to fail to mention two areas of inquiry where poststructuralism has been influential: 1) critical discourse analysis and 2) the identity versus desire debate within language and sexuality study. Fairclough (1995: 3) situates CDA's theoretical orientation to language within the 'linguistic turn', broadly conceived, while van Dijk (1998: 369) traces the influences of CDA¹ to figures associated with poststructuralist theory, including Foucault and Althusser, but also Stuart Hall and others in Cultural Studies.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 272–6) explain that in CDA 'power relations are discursive', 'discourse constitutes society and culture', and 'discourse is historical'. These are key notions in poststructuralist theory. While it cannot be said that the whole of CDA is poststructuralist as such, its questions are animated by the dialectic between materiality² and discourse, choice and constraint, and cause and effect that similarly animate a great deal of poststructuralist work. This dialectic is explained in work dealing with the theory and methods of CDA, such as Wodak and Meyer (2009), Fairclough (2010), and Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart (2009). The dialectic between national discourses and national and local identities is explored in work by Wodak et al. (2009), Heller (2011), and Martin Rojo (2010).

Poststructuralism has also been influential in the debates around identity and desire in work on language and sexuality. In 2003, Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick published a book called *Language and Sexuality* in which they critiqued the zeitgeist study of sexuality in linguistics for its emphasis on sexual identity, arguing that the identity paradigm reduces sexuality to 'sexual orientation'. They note (2003: xi) that 'sexual identity is not all that is relevant to the construction and communication of sexual meanings' and, therefore, proposed concentrating on sexual desire, a task that requires a different theoretical framework. Owing much to poststructuralist theory, Cameron and Kulick's critique focuses on the way that emphasis on identity, both through the proliferation of identity categories and interest in 'identity construction', has foreclosed other ways of thinking about language and sexuality and backgrounds sex and power.

One year later, Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2004) published a response in which they critiqued the rejection of identity as a valuable heuristic for sociolinguistic theory. Though Bucholtz and Hall agree that a theoretical program focused on categorical identity formations that ignores power and subjectivity is problematic, they disagree that this is the way sociolinguists studying language and sexuality have theorized identity. They clarify that the identity paradigm is already informed by recent developments in social theory that account

for ‘social subjectivity’, (472). Bucholtz and Hall advocate a framework for the sociocultural study of language and identity that understands identity in terms of its social practices rather than ‘essence’ (478).

Not all engagements with poststructuralists (and the constructs they have inspired) are limited to language, gender, power, and sexuality, however. Pennycook (2003) relies on Butler extensively, for example, to unpack the relationship between globalized forms of English and identity formations in traditionally non-English-speaking contexts, while Chun (2004) and Schilling-Estes (1998) investigate performance registers in English.

4. *Poststructuralist Theory and Sociolinguistics: Future Directions*

Sociolinguists have made great strides in elucidating the complicated relationship between language and social formations, especially identity. We now have many highly nuanced, socially rich accounts of the way local identities unfold through language in context. Social theory has clearly been influential in this work. Moreover, the important de-essentializing of the relationship between language use and predetermined identity categories is due in large part to the influence of constructivist frameworks and poststructuralist constructs such as Butler’s performativity. I should once again point out that a great deal of work in sociolinguistics, variationist and otherwise, is already influenced by the epistemological shift in theory brought about by the linguistic turn, even if that work is not poststructuralist as such. I encourage readers interested in the influence of non-poststructuralist constructivist frameworks on sociolinguistics to see Irwin (2011), who outlines the work of Luckmann, Goffman, Bourdieu, Bakhtin, and Said. Several calls have already been made by scholars working in sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis, and allied fields for deeper engagement with poststructuralist theories. For example, while noting that poststructuralism is often critiqued for being overly theoretical, Motschenbacher (2009: 5) notes that ‘Sociolinguistics could be one of those disciplines to build a bridge between those abstract theorizations of gender and what they actually mean in concrete communication situations...’ Indeed, sociolinguistics has much to offer poststructuralism, particularly in the areas of language ideology and language as social practice, which are absent or under-theorized in poststructuralist accounts of language.

Despite the broad influence of constructivist frameworks on sociolinguistics, we have not yet exploited the continuities between sociolinguistic theory and poststructuralist theory to the fullest extent possible. By way of brief conclusion, I would like to describe three very related ways that poststructuralist theory can be useful to sociolinguists in socially oriented research projects.

1. Attention to the subjectivite/affective/affiliative dimensions of identity

Sociolinguists have done an excellent job describing both the ways that inequality is reproduced in language and the ways in which identities are produced by social forces beyond the control of the individual subject. Despite the strong interest in identity in sociolinguistics, we know relatively little about the way speaking subjects *experience* their attachments to identity other than through expression in linguistic variation and identity-based practices. Coupland (2007:110–11) has also noted this tendency:

Projecting a social identity is not the same as feeling or living a social identity with personal investment in it and felt ownership of it – if identities can in fact be ‘owned’. The subjective/affective/affiliative dimension easily gets lost in practice-oriented theories of social identity, just as practice and achievement, and process as a whole tend to get lost in both descriptivist and cognitive approaches.

In recent years, new fields of inquiry theorizing and investigating what Coupland (2007) calls the subjective/affective/affiliative dimensions of identity have emerged. Work in queer phenomenology, such as Ahmed (2006), seeks to understand how social relations are oriented within broader social dynamics and how subjects experience their situation with respect to other bodies, objects, and identities. Work in affect theory and attachment theory has been especially influential, including in empirical disciplines such as anthropology. Berlant (2011) is interested in understanding why subjects attach to identities, structures, and forms of life that do not serve them. Work in these emerging fields could be useful to sociolinguists interested in studying and theorizing the ways in which subjects make sense out of the social forces that produce them. Sociolinguistic ethnography (e.g., Bucholtz 1999, Eckert 2000, Mendoza-Denton 2008, Zentella 1997) is a powerful way of learning about how subjects understand the ways in which social forces and language operate in their lives. Finally, the work of Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall on intersubjectivity (Bucholtz 2003; Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005) theorizes the ways in which identity formations relate to lived subjectivities through language. Their ‘tactics of intersubjectivity’ has been extremely valuable for helping sociolinguists account for identity as the interplay between social forces acting on subjects and the subjects’ agentive responses in local contexts. The coupling of affect theory and attachment theory with sociolinguistic ethnography and Bucholtz and Hall’s ‘tactics of intersubjectivity’ is a productive way of answering Coupland’s (2007) call for better understanding of the subjective/affective/affiliative dimension of identity.

2. Further emphasize the individual speaking subject

Though many individuals populate a wide range of sociolinguistic studies, as Johnstone (1996:14) has described, sociolinguistics, especially variationism, has nevertheless invested most heavily in analysis of the group. This is surely related, at least in part, to sociolinguistics’ early affinity to sociology, the study of social groups (see Mallinson 2009 for more on the early relationship between sociolinguistics and sociology). However, Johnstone (1996: 180) raises another explanation; namely, that the push to be understood as a science or social science resulted in study of group-level phenomena, which in turn resulted in the foreclosure of the individual. [See Gal and Irvine (1995) for more on the ideological construction of disciplinarity.]

The individual matters in sociolinguistics because the circumstanced individual is a locus of cultural discourse and ideology, issues already of great import to the field. Poststructuralism sees the individual subject as the *result* of complicated processes of subject formation and agentive articulations of the self. Even as we ask how speaking subjects apprehend the affective/subjective/affiliative dimension of identity, as suggested above, it may also be fruitful to ask how individual speaking subjects – and the language forms they use – are constituted by broad cultural discourses, in addition to those local conditions that have been emphasized in recent sociolinguistic theory.

3. Continued interdisciplinarity

As a general set of theoretical orientations to subjectivity and language, poststructuralist theory is known throughout the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Therefore, further engagement with poststructuralist frameworks opens up the possibility for greater interdisciplinary collaboration, as suggested by Coupland (2007) and Motschenbacher (2009). Where continuities exist, specific poststructuralist theorists could be useful to sociolinguists thinking about a variety of social and cultural issues. For example, Jose Muñoz’s (1999)

theory of disidentification could be useful to sociolinguists working through the complexities of identity. Judith Halberstam's (1998) theory of female masculinity could be illuminating to scholars studying female groups who eschew traditional forms of femininity, while Ferguson's (2004) 'queer of color critique' could be productive for sociolinguists looking to ground empirical findings in a framework that at once considers the subjective effects of race, class, and sexuality.

Moving the research question from 'how do individuals create and express identity with language and linguistic variation?' to 'what are the historical, social, political, cultural, and juridical contexts and processes that produce certain types of subjects?' and 'how do those same contexts and processes render possible and legitimate certain ways of talking and not others?' may be a productive way to move forward. Coupland (2007: 188) makes a similar call, arguing that 'the future agenda for sociolinguistic stylistics should be to analyze the social conditions in which ways of speaking come to be naturalized or demanded of speakers'. Poststructuralist approaches to social theory are useful for sociolinguists working toward this endeavor in that they resist the false dichotomy between structure and agency and provide a comprehensive, socially rich way of thinking about identity that ignores neither social practice nor individual subjectivity. In a lengthy discussion of Foucauldian discourse analysis, Santa Ana (2002: 20) notes that 'critical discourse analysis can adapt the notion of *discursive formation*, identifying it in concrete linguistic content, to pursue its own brand of critical theory'. Santa Ana's suggestion can be useful to sociolinguists working in other fields, as well. For example, Kiesling (2009) illustrates how variationist studies can recruit the notion of cultural discourse to help explain patterns of sociolinguistic variation in identity-based social formations. Similarly, Baxter (2003) outlines a methodology for feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis and explains how to adapt poststructuralism in empirical contexts by demonstrating its application in studies about teenagers' classroom conversation and meetings among business managers. Finally, with respect to interdisciplinarity per se, Rampton (2008: 529) notes that fields in the humanities and social sciences 'have been softened by various 'linguistic' and 'discursive' turns', providing new continuities and points of entry for cross-disciplinary collaboration involving sociolinguists. I would like to point out that no tradition of social theory has invested more in language and discourse than poststructuralist approaches, for which language is the primary apparatus for theorizing culture, society, subjectivity, and history.

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Short Biography

Phillip M. Carter's research coheres around a set of interdisciplinary questions having to do with language, identity, and human subjectivity. His work ties together approaches from cultural anthropology, sociolinguistics, linguistic historiography, philosophy, and cultural theory. His research projects include work on language and *Latinidad*, Spanish language change in the U.S., and the development of Spanish and Latino English in the U.S. South. He has authored or co-authored papers on these areas in journals such as *English World Wide* and *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, in addition to publishing chapters in several edited volumes. He holds a B.A.

in Spanish Language and Literature from North Carolina State University, an M.A. in English (with a concentration in sociolinguistics) also from North Carolina State University, and a Ph. D. in English Linguistics from Duke University. He is currently an Assistant Professor in the Program in Linguistics at Florida International University. He was previously the Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Linguistics at the University of Southern California.

Notes

* Correspondence to: Phillip M. Carter, Department of English, Program in Linguistics, DM-453, 11200 SW 8th Street, Miami, FL 33199, USA. E-mail: pmcarter@fiu.edu

¹ CDA is in conversation with a diverse and varied list of social theorists who offer a non-static view of identity and sociality, including Bourdieu, Habermas, Harvey, Giddens, Luckmann, and Gramsci, *inter alia*. Readers interested in the specific relationship between Foucauldian notions of discourse and CDA should see Jäger and Maier (2009), while readers interested in the relationship between discourse analysis and social theory of power (e.g., the work of Foucault, Habermas, and Bourdieu) should see Farfán et al. (2011, 140–144).

² ‘Materiality’ refers to non-symbolic forms of capital, material culture, and material bodies.

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