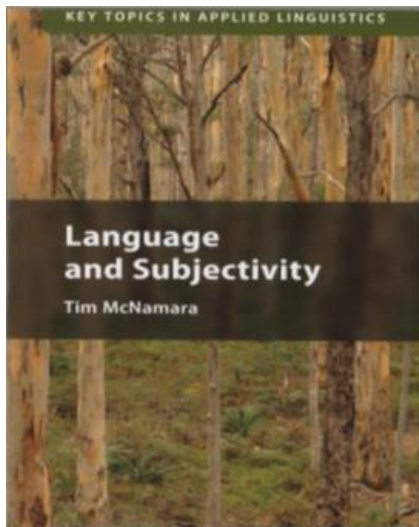




Book Review

Language and Subjectivity, by Tim McNamara, Cambridge University Press., 2019, 250 pp., £29.78 (Paperback), ISBN: 9781108468558



In recent years, topics surrounding subjectivity have been rigorously discussed in different sociolinguistic contexts based on the presupposition that language and subjectivity are intricately intermeshed. The volume entitled *Language and Subjectivity* serves as an intellectually stimulating resource for those who are interested in learning how subjectivity is constructed through and by language. In this volume, McNamara demonstrates his profound understanding of poststructuralism and elaborates on poststructuralist discourse theory associated with Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler.

Chapter 1 introduces Foucault's notion of *discourse and subjectivity and other core concepts covered in the book*. Discourse in Foucault's view can be interpreted as "the way an aspect of reality is conceived of or represented at a particular time in history" (p.221). Subjectivity is socially situated and focuses on how the Self is shaped in and through the use of language. And subjectivity is understood as the result of both being the *subject of* and *subject to* discourse.

Chapter 2 focuses on how gender and sexuality play out in dialogic interactions, that is how gendered conversations reflect social power imbalances or different rules adopted by men and women for 'appropriate' verbal interactions. McNamara introduces Butler's theory of performativity with the conviction that gender is not an innate attribute, rather, it is achieved through the iterative performance of gendered speeches.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the theoretical discussions of subjectivity are reviewed in colonial and racial contexts. Drawing upon Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), McNamara reports extensively on his earlier research about anti-Semitism (1987) and argues persuasively that the Self is constructed and perceived in relation to the often stigmatised Other.

Chapter 5 takes up the relationship between language learning and subjectivity and discusses influential discourses associated with nationalism, ethnicity, and gender. McNamara begins by providing an overview of language learning and subjectivity underpinned by Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. His position seems to be aligned with that of Kramsch (2009) who also addresses the importance of "subjective aspects of language acquisition" (p.5). The author quotes his own language learning experiences as part of his analysis of such subjective aspects of the language learning experience as heightened emotions and inner conflicts. These emotions and conflicts seem to be pivotal to the language learning experience, yet hard to grasp within the prevalent SLA paradigms which tend to focus more on the process of language acquisition than on the learners themselves.

Chapter 6 moves back to the key topic of the book and delves into micro-level everyday conversational



encounters. Drawing on Conversation Analysis (CA), the author makes a compelling argument that micro-level everyday conversational patterns are guided by the regulatory effects of macro-level discourses. McNamara helps us see how subjectivity can be made evident through a turn-by-turn analysis of micro-level interactions.

In Chapter 7, McNamara continues to build a case for his argument on discourses of gender, shedding a light on how discourses of masculinity and femininity are ‘performed’ in face-to-face interactions.

Chapter 8 explores how the macro-level discourses of subjectivity operate, introducing Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA). McNamara explains that MCA can be classified into two types. One type is centred around categorised groups and their practices without referring to the relevance of categories in interaction. The author points out that this type is likely to reveal the weakness or ‘messiness’ of category-bound discourse patterns. The other type focuses on how categories are strategically invoked by interlocutors whose orientations are made relevant in interactions. McNamara argues that CA plays an important role in clarifying the mechanism of macro-level discourses since it is more holistic than MCA in its analytical scope and MCA’s central concepts such as *Membership Categorization Device* can be understood through reference to poststructuralist discourse theory.

Chapter 9 turns readers’ attention to the role of language testing. McNamara introduces the concept of *shibboleth*, a language test used in biblical times to check if an individual belonged to a particular social circle or not. As McNamara reports in his previous study (2005) that the word ‘shibboleth’ bears metaphorical implications and the modern version of shibboleth tests has been used to identify insiders and outsiders in situations of intergroup conflicts. He brings this concept in a discussion of Language Analysis for the Determination of Origin (LADO), which serves as a method for screening asylum seekers by analysing their language patterns. The author emphasises that fairness in interpreting language test scores must be ensured so that the use of language tests can be justified.

In the concluding chapter, McNamara reiterates the significance of the correlation between discourse and subjectivity. He argues that one of the most noteworthy endeavours by poststructuralist theorists is how their empirical research has unravelled the often painful and conflicting nature of human subjectivity or our sense of ourselves.

Language and Subjectivity discusses the role of language within the concept of subjectivity, presenting solid arguments to address a wider spectrum of topics in depth. McNamara has made such complex ideas accessible to readers, which is quite an accomplishment. Minor drawbacks are that this book may be a dense reading for those who are not well acquainted with discourse analysis. Moreover, the subjectivity of language learners, which scholars and students of SLA may want to read more about, is described with brevity. Nevertheless, the volume offers useful insights into the formation of subjectivity and numerous research suggestions for future studies. The book can be recommended to anyone who hopes to get a better grasp of how subjectivity can come into play when teaching or learning English as a second or foreign language.

References

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