

The Community of Practice: Theories and methodologies in language and gender research

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an introduction to this issue of *Language in Society* by exploring the relationship of the concept of Community of Practice (CofP) to related terms and theoretical frameworks. The criterial characteristics and constitutive features of a CofP are examined; the article points out how a CofP framework is distinguished from other sociolinguistic and social psychological frameworks, including social identity theory, speech community, social network and social constructionist approaches. (Community of Practice, speech community, gender, sex, social practice, ethnographic sociolinguistics, discourse analysis)

The term “Community of Practice” (CofP) has recently shouldered its way into the sociolinguistic lexicon. The purpose of this issue of *Language in Society* is to provide analyses of language variation, discourse, and language use that illustrate the potential (and also the limits) of this concept as a theoretical and methodological basis for inquiry.

It is not generally helpful to add a term to one’s field unless it is intended to serve some demonstrably useful purpose. The term “Community of Practice” bears a strong similarity to the existing term “speech community” – a concept that has proved to be a productive and useful tool for research into the orderly heterogeneity of language in its social setting; thus it must be shown how the CofP in some way takes us farther toward our goal of understanding the constraints on natural language variation.

In addition, some sociolinguists may see in the CofP a tool for the description of language variation that bears a strong resemblance to fundamental principles

of social identity theory. The distinction between intergroup and interpersonal identities has been the basis for social psychological research for more than two decades. It must, therefore, be demonstrated how the notion of the CofP buys us something more than social identity theory does, and how it can be of direct help in understanding human behavior, and particularly linguistic behavior.

The contributors to this issue all present work that can be characterized as research into the relationship between language and gender, and all of them work with conversational data; however, the groups with which they work differ qualitatively. These qualitative differences will illuminate the contribution that a CofP analysis can make to the study of language and society. The chief purposes of this introductory article are to exemplify communities of practice, and to provide a principled basis for distinguishing the CofP from similar concepts such as the speech community, social networks, and social identity .

The term “Community of Practice” was introduced to language and gender research by Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992. Following Lave & Wenger 1991, they defined a CofP as follows:

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages. (1992:464)

This definition suggests that the concept of a CofP is a dynamic, rich, and complex one. It emphasizes the notion of “practice” as central to an understanding of why the concept offers something different to researchers than the traditional term “community” – or, in the context of sociolinguistic research, more than concepts like “speech community” and “social network.”

For Lave & Wenger 1991, the CofP is one component of a social theory of learning, and Wenger 1998 uses it to critique traditional models of learning. These, he argues, abstract learners from their normal interactional contexts; they require learners to assimilate material that the TEACHERS have selected in an artificial environment, the classroom. Wenger suggests instead that learning is a natural and inevitable aspect of life, and a fundamentally social process. He regards the concept of CofP as a means of examining one natural method of learning which, in many respects, resembles an apprenticeship. The process of becoming a member of a CofP – as when we join a new workplace, a book group, or a new family (e.g. through marriage) – involves learning. We learn to perform appropriately in a CofP as befits our membership status: initially as a “peripheral member,” later perhaps as a “core member” (or perhaps not – one may choose to remain a peripheral member). In other words, a CofP inevitably involves the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence.¹

The CofP is one way of focusing on what members do: the practice or activities that indicate that they belong to the group, and the extent to which they belong. The practice or activities typically involve many aspects of behavior, including global or specific aspects of language structure, discourse, and interaction patterns. The obvious appeal of this approach is that it offers the sociolinguist a framework of definitions within which to examine the ways in which becoming a member of a CofP interacts with the process of gaining control of the discourse appropriate to it. By emphasizing a process in which apprentices absorb attitudes to situations and interlocutors – and in which they learn how to modify their linguistic and other behaviors, in such a way as to feed perceptions of self and other – the CofP also has obvious attractions for social psychologists.

DIMENSIONS OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Wenger (1998:76) identifies three crucial dimensions of a CofP:

- (1) a. Mutual engagement.
 - b. A joint negotiated enterprise.
 - c. A shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time.

We will exemplify each of these criteria, drawing on recent research on language in New Zealand government policy units (Holmes 1997, Holmes et al. 1999).

Mutual engagement

This typically involves regular interaction: It is the basis for the relationships that make the CofP possible. People who work together in policy units typically interact regularly: casually, as they pass in the corridor or share morning tea; intensively, in pairs or small groups to discuss particular projects; and, in a unit, comprehensively, as a large group which meets once a week to discuss more general issues.

Joint enterprise

This refers to a process: The joint enterprise is not just a stated shared goal, but a negotiated enterprise, involving the complex relationships of mutual accountability that become part of the practice of the community (Wenger 1998:80). The stated goal of the policy units we researched was summarized in their mission statements, which specified their role in contributing to the development of government policy. However, in Wenger's terms they constituted a CofP, since members of the policy units were engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating and building their contributions toward the larger enterprise. These negotiations reflected members' understanding of their personal roles within the institution, and they are one characteristic that defines them as a CofP.

From a sociolinguist's perspective, this characterization of a joint enterprise or shared goal appears very general. While it may be satisfactory for a theory of learning, it seems likely that what precisely constitutes a shared goal or joint enterprise will have to be specified more fully in order for the notion of the CofP

to be useful to a wider range of research programs in the social sciences. Meyerhoff's article in this collection explores in more detail the need for a specific shared goal.

Shared repertoire

Over time, the joint pursuit of an enterprise results in a shared repertoire of joint resources for negotiating meaning (Wenger 1998:85). This includes linguistic resources such as specialized terminology and linguistic routines, but also resources like pictures, regular meals, and gestures that have become part of the community's practice. In the New Zealand policy units, for example, we observed regular greeting rituals between members, understandings about how much social talk was tolerable in varying contexts (Holmes 1998b), and preferred ways of coming to decisions in meetings in different units. These linguistic manifestations of a shared repertoire provide an especially fruitful source of insights for the sociolinguist and discourse analyst.

As noted above, the progressive nature of a CofP means that individual membership in a CofP will differ. Some people will be core members, and some peripheral members. The basis of this variation lies in how successfully an individual has acquired the shared repertoire, or assimilated the goal(s) of the joint enterprise, or established patterns of engagement with other members. In a similar vein, Wenger proposes (1998:130–31) that the criterial characteristics of a CofP are instantiated through a number of more specific features:

- Sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual.
- Shared ways of engaging in doing things together.
- The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation.
- Absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process.
- Very quick setup of a problem to be discussed.
- Substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs.
- Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise.
- Mutually defining identities.
- The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products.
- Specific tools, representations, and other artifacts.
- Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter.
- Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones.
- Certain styles recognized as displaying membership.
- A shared discourse that reflects a certain perspective on the world.

These features present a wealth of opportunity to interested researchers. With appropriate operationalization, they lend themselves to developing an index of the distinctiveness of different communities of practice. The articles in this col-

lection that deal with clearly defined Communities of Practice begin to specify the relative and absolute importance of these features in the theory. Thus, for researchers interested in the relationship between language and society, these features provide a basis for exploring the utility of the CofP model in relation to particular communities.

This may generate very practical outcomes. For instance, a consistent set of features forming the basis for comparison between Communities of Practice – allowing us to specify the degree to which they are similar or different – shows considerable promise for research on interaction in the workplace. The extent to which practices at one workplace differ from those at another has implications for people who join these workplaces, and also for outsiders who want to interact with those members effectively.

Some of the New Zealand policy units from which we collected data provided evidence of meeting a large number of these features of a CofP. For example, the features of lack of preambles and rapid setting-up of problems were displayed in the way a manager could give instructions to an administrative assistant.

(2) Senior policy analyst Greg enters office of administrative assistant Jo.

G: can you ring these people for me Jo + set up a meeting for Tuesday afternoon

J: sure no problem [PAUSE] what time

G: 2 o'clock

J: fine

G: oh and and book the committee room

It is important to keep the three criterial characteristics of a CofP (1a–c) distinct from the 14 constitutive features listed above. CofPs will display the latter to different extents. For example, not all government policy units in our data shared the property of having “inside jokes.”²

CONTRASTING COFP WITH OTHER MODELS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Having outlined the properties and provenance of the CofP, let us now attempt to distinguish the CofP more precisely from other sociolinguistic and social psychological frameworks.

Social identity theory

The notion of social identity was first articulated by Henri Tajfel, and it has subsequently been tested in numerous experimental and qualitative studies in the field of social psychology. As Tajfel proposed it (1978:44), social identity theory holds that individuals' social behavior is a joint function of (a) their affiliation to a particular group identity that is salient at that moment in the interaction, and (b) their interpretation of the relationship of one's ingroup to salient outgroups. In Tajfel's theory, an individual's social – or intergroup – categorizations are cognitive tools, the function of which is to help an individual make sense of and facilitate social action (Tajfel & Turner 1986:15). Tajfel (1978:43) saw interper-

sonal and intergroup identities as a continuum, although other ways of modeling the relationship between them have subsequently been proposed. Giles & Coupland 1991 suggest that personal and social identities are independent of each other. Meyerhoff & Niedzielski 1994 represent them as interdependent, but they characterize the dependence in a non-scalar fashion.

These identities are, however, taken to be highly abstract representations (Abrams 1996:147) which must be constructed through social processes and over time. Tajfel suggested (Tajfel & Turner 1986:16–17) that the primary process by which a positive social identity is established is through comparison with other groups. Naturally, many social behaviors are the basis for this process of comparison, and language is just one of the ways in which an individual develops a strong social identity. Social identity theory is a key principle behind communicative accommodation theory (Giles et al. 1987), and to this extent it has become a dimension regularly employed in the investigation and interpretation of language variation.

The speech community

The notion of the speech community is a fundamental one in linguistics. It is the unspoken basis of most linguistics research, and its relevance has been articulated with the greatest precision for the study of language variation and change. But despite its significance to the study of language, there is no single, agreed-upon definition of the speech community (see Santa Ana & Parodi 1998 for a recent discussion).

Labov (1972:121) defined the speech community as a group of speakers who participate in a shared set of norms, where “these norms are observed in overt evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation.”³ In this way, the notion of a speech community is compatible with inter-individual variation. For any linguistic variable, it may be the case that no individual’s performance realizes the range of possible variants, but rather that the heterogeneity of all individuals’ linguistic behavior shows consistent effects across an ordered set of domains. When it can be shown that this kind of orderliness is unlikely to result from chance, then it can be inferred that the speakers share underlying evaluations of the social or stylistic significance of the possible variants.

Gumperz 1971 provided a more interactional definition of the speech community, focusing on the frequency and quality of interactions among members, where the quality of interaction is defined partly in terms of contrasts with others. Preston 1989 takes this qualitative slant even further; in some of his research, the boundaries of speech communities are described according to whether speakers share the same beliefs about their own language and the language of outgroups.

Even though these definitions of the speech community are somewhat diverse, there is a common thread in them: the sense that a speech community is a way of being. One’s membership in a speech community depends on social or behavioral properties that one possesses. The dimensions along which a CofP differs from

TABLE 1. *Different assumptions and predictions that can be used to distinguish research based on the speech community, social identity theory, and communities of practice.*

Speech Community	Social Identity	Community of Practice
Shared norms and evaluations of norms are required.	Shared identifications are required.	Shared practices are required.
Shared membership may be defined externally.	Membership is constructed internally or externally.	Membership is internally constructed.
Nothing to say about relationship between an individual's group and personal identities.	Relation between group and personal identities is unclear: continuum? orthogonal?	Actively constructed dependence of personal and group identities.
Non-teleological.	Non-teleological: any outcomes are incidental.	Shared social or instrumental goal.
Nothing to say about maintenance or (de)construction of boundaries between categories.	Group identity is defined through comparison and competition with outgroups.	Boundaries are maintained but not necessarily defined in contrasts with outgroups.
Acquisition of norms.	Learning incidental.	Social process of learning.

a speech community are discussed in much greater detail in the articles by Bucholtz and by Eckert & McConnell-Ginet in the present collection. Table 1 summarizes the differences and similarities among the three constructs – speech community, social identity, and CofP – all of which have variously proved useful in the study of socially stratified language variation.

Social networks

An analysis of language in use employing the CofP framework also has features in common with social network analysis (cf. Bortoni-Ricardo 1985, Milroy 1987, Lippi-Green 1989, Kerswill 1994). But again, the two frameworks can usefully be distinguished. Both include some distinction between core membership and peripheral membership. The ideas of measuring an individual's ties within a network (multiplex and uniplex), and of the density of a network as a whole, are similar to the idea that membership in a CofP is acquired as the result of a process of learning. Such measures provide an escape from unhelpful dichotomies – a point elaborated in Bergvall's article in this collection.

By contrast, a CofP offers a different perspective from a social network on the study of language in society: A CofP requires regular and mutually defining interaction. In a social network, by contrast, weak ties exist even among people

who have limited or infrequent contact. In short, a social network and a CofP can be differentiated by the nature of the contact that defines them. A social network requires QUANTITY of interaction; a CofP requires QUALITY of interaction.

Notwithstanding these differences, it is possible to imagine developing an index of an individual's degree of integration into a CofP – one that might be comparable with the measures that have been used to account for different degrees of integration into social networks. This cross-comparison of metrics might be enlightening because both networks and CofP focus on diversity and variety, allowing for variation over time; both concepts provide a means of measuring change, both linguistic and social.

Social constructionist approaches

Recent research on the relationship between language and gender has been dominated by approaches that examine the ways in which gender is socially constructed in interaction, rather than existing as a fixed social category to which individuals are assigned at birth (e.g. Crawford 1995, Hall & Bucholtz 1995, Bergvall et al. 1996, Bucholtz et al. 1996). The concept of CofP is clearly much more compatible with this kind of social-constructionist approach than are other less dynamic or activity-focused concepts. Thus the CofP been welcomed in language and gender research as a corrective to unsatisfactory essentialist approaches to the analysis of gender.⁴ In Cameron's words (1992:13), it encourages a different focus: "not gender differences but the difference gender makes." Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992:466) point out that, rather than emphasizing gender differences that result from differing patterns of early socialization, gender researchers can more fruitfully focus on "people's active engagement in the reproduction of or resistance to gender arrangements in their communities." Instead of abstracting gender from social practice, they note the need to focus on "gender in its full complexity: how gender is constructed in social practice, and how this construction intertwines with that of other components of identity and difference, and of language" (472). The concept of CofP, they suggest, offers a fruitful way forward. In the present collection, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet pursue these points further, illustrating ways in which the concept has proved useful in their own research. Similarly, Bergvall examines the broader implications of the CofP for theory and methodology in language and gender research.

The linguistic behaviors and social characteristics of specific communities of practice are sketched in the articles by Bucholtz and Ehrlich. Bucholtz's data provide useful evidence of the role played by peripheral or apprentice members of a CofP, and the level of work that is expended in the ongoing process of maintaining the boundaries of a CofP. Ehrlich explores the links between the construction of individual identities and communities of practice. She examines how discourse patterns, shared by the CofP constituted by a disciplinary tribunal, deconstruct the identity of the victims whose case they are hearing.

The contributions by Meyerhoff and Freed illustrate that the behavior of some social groups may not be most informatively described in terms of a CofP. Meyerhoff concludes that the notions of a speech community and intergroup distinctiveness account most appropriately for the distribution of apologies in women's and men's speech in Vanuatu (South Pacific). Freed argues that, although pregnant women are often referred to in ways that suggest that society perceives them as a CofP, the operative communities of practice in their lives are really the doctors, health professionals, and family members with whom they interact. These groups, in concert, produce a "master narrative" of pregnancy.

Finally, the CofP concept offers a potentially productive means of linking micro-level and macro-level analyses. The CofP inevitably involves micro-level analysis of the kind encouraged by a social constructionist approach. It requires detailed ethnographic analysis of discourse in context – to identify significant or representative social interactions, to characterize the processes of negotiating shared goals, and to describe the practices that identify the CofP. A CofP must, however, also be described within a wider context which gives it meaning and distinctiveness. In other words, "the patterns, generalizations, and norms of speech usage which emerge from quantitative analyses provide a crucial framework which informs and illuminates the ways in which individual speakers use language" (Holmes 1998a:325). Just as quantification depends on preliminary analysis in order to establish valid units and categories of analysis, so detailed ethnographic analysis cannot account for individuals' linguistic choices in a vacuum. There is a limit to the kinds of patterns that are evident at the micro-level of the individual.

It is here, in the linking of micro-analysis and macro-analysis, that the concept of CofP and the associated methodologies perhaps have most to offer, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet illustrate in their contribution. The level of analysis involved in the CofP approach encourages a focus on social diversity, while simultaneously facilitating the perception of subtle yet meaningful patterns. Thus Eckert 1988 showed that some patterns of variation are simply overlooked without the information provided by her long-term and highly local studies of Detroit teenagers. She demonstrated that innovative forms of the Northern Cities phonological shift were being transferred along paths from the so-called "burnouts" to the "jocks" in the high school she studied. Moreover, looking in detail at the most innovative speakers among the burnouts, she made the earliest academic observation of extensions to the ongoing chain shift of vowels in the Northern Cities. By incorporating into her study principles and methods that are also required by the CofP framework, she was able to relate phonetic details in the speech of individuals to larger patterns of sociolinguistically stratified variation. In addition, she was able to relate the patterns of innovations and conservatism, as constructed by individuals in their speech, to the social patterns that the speakers were also actively involved in maintaining or building.

The CofP thus offers a fruitful concept to those interested in exploring the relationship between language and society. With its criterial characteristics, it

provides an ideal framework for exploring the process by which individuals acquire membership in a community whose goals they share; it provides a means of studying the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, as individuals locate themselves in relation to other community members; and, for similar reasons, it provides a framework for examining language change. A precise definition of the distinction between core and peripheral members in a CofP promises further to flesh out our understanding of the paths by which linguistic changes spread through a speech community. The specification of constitutive features permits comparison among different communities of practice along a range of diverse dimensions. Thus, while the CofP shares some characteristics with the concepts of speech community, social identity, and social network, it also offers different and enriching perspectives. In this collection, practitioners in language and gender research illustrate the potential and the limitations of the concept of CofP in extending theoretical and methodological boundaries for those interested in new insights into the relationship between language, gender, and community.

NOTES

¹ Wenger distinguishes “peripheral” members of a CofP from “marginal” members, depending on whether the position is temporary and dynamic. Even though core members of a CofP may perceive someone as a potential member, their participation may be peripheral as they gradually learn the practices that will eventually make them a core member. However, individuals may elect to remain peripheral. By contrast, marginal members are individuals prevented from full participation. Wenger gives as an example the fact that “we often find it hard to be grown-up participants within our own families of birth” (1998:175); i.e., our own practices and those of other members of the CofP instantiate our marginal position. The distinction between marginal and peripheral members of a CofP may be of importance in a theory of learning. However, we believe it remains to be shown that the distinction is salient for the synchronic study of (linguistic) behavior.

² As anyone who has worked in such policy units can attest, they also differ markedly in the extent to which they are characterized by the “rapid flow of information and the propagation of innovations.”

³ The concept of “evaluative behaviors” has sometimes been mistakenly interpreted in terms of “attitudes” (e.g. Hudson 1980:27). The evaluative behaviors to which Labov is referring include, e.g., the tendency of all speakers to shift toward variants with higher overt prestige as they pay greater attention to their speech. They may be markedly different from clearly held or articulable ATTITUDES.

⁴ There are obvious parallels, too, in the shift within social psychology to treat an individual’s group (or personal) identities as highly local constructions, or as the cumulative result of a number of interactions. Examples include research into the constructions of a disabled identity (Fox & Giles 1996) and the construction of an identity as a member of a particular age cohort (Coupland et al. 1991, Ryan et al. 1995).

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