Language Matters: Thinking and Writing Critically about Sociolinguistics

Michelle LaFrance, Ph.D.

UMass Dartmouth
mlafrance@umassd.edu

Shawna Shapiro, Ph.D.

Middlebury College
sshapiro@middlebury.edu

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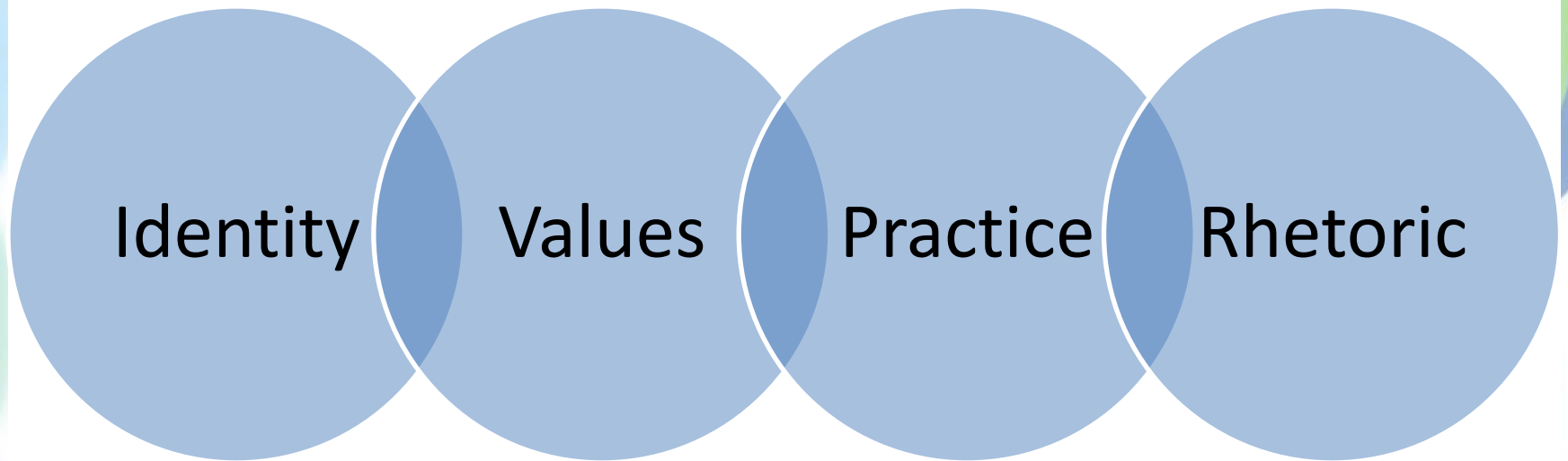**(for slides and handouts)**

What is Sociolinguistics?

My definition, used in course descriptions:

Sociolinguists explore the ways that language creates and reflects social identities. [In this course] We will look at the contextual factors-social, cultural, geographical, political, etc.-that impact language use and variation. Themes for this course will include linguistic variation, language and identity, language policy, and language in the media...*In essence, we will learn how language shapes our world, and how we shape language itself.*

What is appealing about Sociolinguistics?

- Interdisciplinary
  - Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, etc.
- Identity-focused
  - Micro and Macro levels
- Cognitively-demanding
  - Metalinguistic/Metacognitive awareness
- Critical
  - How are we constructed through language?
  - How does language (dis)empower people?

Writing Studies research often uses Sociolinguistic methodologies. . .

Identity   Values   Practice   Rhetoric

In what ways do community belonging and language use coincide?

←write-to→ learn ←to-write→

WAC /Composition Pedagogies:

- the nature of a writing situation bears a relationship to community values and practices
- attune students to the differences between discourse communities
- center on the social construction of student texts and experience
- use a variety of forms of personal data collection (observation, ethnography, self-reflection, close reading)

WRPR 102: The English Language in a Global Context

Overall Objectives:

- WAC course designed to "appeal" to non-native speakers
- Introduce/engage with disciplinary writing conventions in social sciences
- Offer multi-faceted study of World Englishes for students with no linguistics background
- Bring in Midd students' linguistic/cultural backgrounds and experiences

http://shawnashapiro.com/courses/wrpr0102a-s10/index.html

Major Projects

1. Sociolinguistic Profile of a Variety of English e.g. Hinglish, Australian English, Chicano English, English for Specific Purposes [medicine, etc.]

2. Position Paper: Key Questions in World Englishes (e.g. linguistic imperialism, standardization, English as lingua franca, linguistic pluralism through education)

3. World Englishes and Social Justice (research-based writing for outside audience)

   E.g.: Letter to the Editor (or to a family member)

   Brochure on how to promote bilingualism in the home

   Personal essay about linguicism at Middlebury
   Short story highlighting complex role of English in Japan

Ling 10: Introduction to Sociolinguistics

This class will introduce students to the ways that researchers examine the interconnectedness of language and culture.

Readings and class activities will introduce a range of popular methodologies in linguistic research (morphology, syntax, phonetics/phonemics, and semantics) but will focus on how researchers trace, theorize and analyze the linguistic aspects of identity, ideology, gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race.

Outcomes: "Introducing Ways of Thinking"

- Develop ***introductory familiarity with sociolinguistic research***: components of language (morphology, phonology, syntax, and semantics);

- Develop ***introductory familiarity with methodological principles, key terminologies and core concepts*** used by researchers to analyze the linguistic aspects of ideology, identity, gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race;

- Demonstrate ***introductory ability to "think like a sociolinguist":*** by asking research questions, pursuing questions with research and field work (observation, note taking, interpretation), and writing up preliminary research findings.

My Concerns as a Writing Teacher:

- Rhetorical Awareness
- Sensitivity to the nuances of language
- "Try on" different heuristics (Critical Thinking/Problem Solving/ Methodology)
- Mechanics of language
- Attention to detail

Weekly "Case Studies"

Descriptive reading paired with research essay that demonstrates methodology in action.

- Phonetics/phonemics (and Eckert)

- Morphology (and White)

- **Syntax, Grammar**
  - —**Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English" (1969)**
  - — **Lippi-Green, "The Educational System" (1997)**
  - — **Stygall, "The Author Function and Basic Writers" (1994)**

Prompt: Analyze one feature

- Choose one feature of the language to look at in both texts. (Verbs, Nouns, Sentence Construction Patterns, Specialized Terms, etc.)

- Count the occurrences and/or note the patterns you see, noting any sub-categories that also occur.

- Create a simple chart that demonstrates your findings in each text.

Example: Drinking Water

Drinking Water: Verb Conjugations		Craigslist: Verb Conjugations	
Total Word Count: 456		Total Word Count: 270	
Total verbs: 44		Total Verbs: 38	
#	Conjugation Information	#	Conjugation Information
13	Past (Passive)	16	Present Slang Form —4 substitutions "got" (past for present) —5 substitutions "can" (present for conditional)
12	Simple Paste	8	Present
6	Past Perfect	4	Verb Deletions
2	Negative	2	Slang ("Ain't" and "Bullshittin")
2	Future Perfect	2	Imperatives
1	Imperative	1	Contraction
1	Future		
Other:	1 Compound Sentence	Other	1 Compound Sentence

Notable repeating features:
Drinking Water: 11 uses of "are; 9 uses of "has"; 3 uses of "have"; 3 uses of "is"; 3 uses of "was"; 2 may be; 2 "was"
Craigslist Ad: 6 uses of "can"; 4 "got"; 4 "has"; 3 "is"

Example: Craigslist Ad

Drinking Water: Jargon		Craigslist: Obscenity	
Total Word Count: 456		Total Word Count: 270	
Total: 45		Total: 12	
#	Word Used	#	Word Used
10	Coliform/ Coliform Bacteria	5	Defecation
4	Bacteria	4	Sex Act
3	Samples (Testing)		
2	Exceeded		
2	Tested Positive		
2	Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs)		

Notable features: vowel dropping in spelling occurs most frequently in use of obscenity in the Craigslist Ad.

Write a 3 pages. . .

- Discusses the features of language you have focused upon. How do these features lend to your sense of:
  - The purpose of this text?
  - The audience for this text?
  - The situation of the author(s) of this text?

Prompts from World Englishes

- **Cartoon**: What is the message? What is your response? Does this remind you of anything you've seen or heard in the news?

- **Poem:** What is the author showing/telling in this poem? What tensions does this raise, both as you read the poem and as you consider its implications? What connections can you make to your personal experience?

- **Jigsaw Survey:** Choose one question and survey your classmates. Report back to the class next session.

Q's for Discussion

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1. In what ways might courses like these open into "critical thinking" opportunities or help to address other learning objectives in an undergraduate writing curriculum?

2. What other sorts of exercises have you offered in classes that ask students to fine tune their awareness of and ability with language?