

Micro-Paper 40: *Indexicality*

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Defining the Term

The notion of indexicality, influenced by work in semiotics and sociolinguistics, defines language use from two very particular points of view. On the one hand, we talk about indexicality as the analysis of how language forms and social meanings are linked in text creation. This analysis takes place at the macro (how language affects individuals and groups) and micro (how people affect language forms) levels of society.

A second level of understanding indexicality entails looking at the connection between language and identity, which also relates to people's need to seek more authentic and realistic forms to use language. This link also explores formal and casual language use, how to characterize it, the purposes for social language use, and the ways in which individuals fulfill said purposes in the social contexts in which they live.

From a practical standpoint, indexicality helps us explore how people engage in spaces of dialog and transgression through language, how that appears in public and private spaces, and how communities begin to engage with languages. This becomes particularly important in multilingual contexts, as in those contexts languages and cultures intertwine to create more layered meanings.

Connecting it to LSLP

At LSLP, we have particularly explored the idea of indexicality in our urban literacies studies. As we have analyzed literacy practices in the city, indexicality has, for instance, helped us analyze how the presence of messages with sarcastic or foul language, rather than intend to offend, are showing playful uses of language where English may offer a resource that Spanish might not otherwise.

We are still relying on indexicality to help us make sense of the urban narratives behind tattoos and

graffiti, and we expect to use it as an analytical device as we move toward looking at community practices in English in the extended urban (and possibly rural) spaces of the city.

Expanding Second Language Research

As literacy, sociolinguistics, and second language studies begin to merge in research, we see more potential for studies related to indexicality. The interest in social meanings in language and literacy practices and how communities appropriate a second language in the spaces to which they belong will provide new avenues of research for indexicality studies in the second-language context.

Particularly, from our findings we can see a very interesting line of inquiry for second language research: The ownership of casual language and how said ownership transcends the boundaries of what one may consider "polite" use of language. As communities own that second language, we may begin to contemplate the need to rethink what politeness may entail beyond traditional sociolinguistic markers. As multilingual communities become the norm, new forms of indexicality will emerge and we will need to adapt our views of language usage to reflect these new configurations.

References

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