

## Preface

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This issue of *Language in Society* has been designed to explore the relevance of the concept of Community of Practice (CofP) – as presented by Lave & Wenger 1991 and by Wenger 1998 – to research in sociolinguistics, with a particular focus on its value in language and gender research. The contents of the issue grew out of a symposium at the Sixth International Conference on Language and Social Psychology, held at the University of Ottawa in May 1997. I invited the contributors whose work is represented in this issue to join me in exploring the usefulness of the CofP framework in relation to their own research.

The format of this issue follows in broad outline the format of the Ottawa symposium. The first article is a brief discussion, by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff, of the distinguishing criteria for the notion of the CofP, including a list of the constitutive features that Wenger considers in his 1998 book. This article explores the question that all the contributors were asked to address: “What does the Community of Practice concept offer to the sociolinguist?” In considering this question, we distinguish the CofP from similar concepts that have proved useful to sociolinguists and social psychologists, such as the speech community, the social network, and the notion of social identity.

In the next article, Penny Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, who first suggested that the CofP had much to offer to research in language and gender, examine its implications for the direction in which such research has developed in the past ten years. Their paper identifies the social constructionist characteristics of a CofP, and it illustrates the ways in which the model has been used to explore the co-construction of language and gender in several communities of practice, including those discussed in the present collection. Penny Eckert’s research with adolescents in Detroit, and more recently in northern California, provides compelling evidence for the analytical value of the concept.

The next four articles explore the value of the CofP in analyzing the relationship between language and gender in four specific speech communities. Mary Bucholtz uses the notion to characterize an American high school community of computer nerds. She first clearly distinguishes the concept from the more familiar concept “speech community,” and she then shows how language is used very effectively by the community of nerds to construct femininities and masculinities that critique normative gender identities.

Miriam Meyerhoff explores ways in which shared practices, even within a single community, do NOT constitute a CofP unless they have a shared goal. This negative approach is effectively used to highlight the distinguishing features of a CofP. Meyerhoff illustrates her argument with a discussion of the significance of the distribution and use of a particular discourse strategy, *sore*, in a community on Vanuatu where gender roles are very clearly delineated and reflected in many different aspects of language use.

By contrast, Susan Ehrlich and Alice Freed each suggest that there is value in taking a rather broader perspective on the CofP concept. Ehrlich considers the utility of the concept for an analysis of the language used by women in a sexual assault tribunal, while Freed examines narratives of pregnant women, studying the ways in which they reflect interrelations with the range of communities of practice with which the women engage.

Finally, Victoria Bergvall provides a retrospective and prospective on language and gender research, evaluating the CofP concept in relation to current issues in the area. Critically examining the utility of the concept for a range of theoretical and methodological questions, she suggests that a CofP approach is most useful in analyzing particular kinds of communities (emergent, complex, and non-conformist), but that it requires augmenting in order to develop a comprehensive theory of language and gender.

The results of these analyses suggest that language and gender research has already benefited from insights using a CofP approach. This issue of *Language in Society* is intended to encourage other sociolinguists to consider what value the concept offers to their research.

Readers will also note that, although the book reviews in this issue do not make use directly of the CofP concept, they are closely related to the articles in their themes, as well as in the theoretical and methodological issues that they address.

## REFERENCES

- Lave, Jean, & Wenger, Etienne (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenger, Etienne (1998). *Communities of practice*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press.