



Turning language socialization ontological: Material things and the semiotics of scaling time in Peruvian Aymara boyhood



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ABSTRACT

This article develops an approach to semiotically mediated processes of socialization that can make sense of the agency that non-humans – especially material things – wield in socialization. The empirical focus is the densely material game of marbles, as played among indigenous Southern Peruvian boys. I show how an account of the identities at stake in marbles – i.e., human-ness and masculinity – requires an analysis of the “dis-ordering” or “parasitical” (Serres, 1982) agency of the marbles playing field. Doing so reveals a graduated series of qualitative changes – i.e., a trajectory of identification (Wortham, 2005) – across which boys appear more fully human and masculine.

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1. Introduction

When Alberto and his two younger brothers go out to play marbles, they can't help but do other things. In the Peruvian, Aymara-speaking Andes, they must take their family's alpacas and sheep out to far-flung grazing areas. And, once there, Alberto – the oldest brother and a nine year old – keeps an eye on the animals as they drift towards uneaten pastorage. The area where they play marbles, then, is part and parcel of a landscape that is quite unlike, for example, the radically transformed, angular spaces where games like basketball and football (ideally) get played. Although tree-less and shrubless, it is a landscape that is dense with rocks small and large, thick clumpings of grass, short twigs, holes, eroded gulleys, and inclines and declines. In such a case, marbles play must go where alpacas and sheep go, and virtue must be made of this necessity. And, frankly, it is. When Alberto and his brothers play marbles, they must shoot them through this thicket of things, aiming for a series of small holes dug into the ground. Much of the intrigue of the game consists, then, of whether and how these material things serve as agents in marbles, and whether and how boys contend with the way in which these things act. Does a rock divert a marble's path? What does a boy do in response? From the perspective of an Aymara boyhood imagination, the stakes here are quite high. Is a marbles player who cannot contend with a rock or a twig really a boy or really a human? This question ultimately suggests the one that I will answer in this article. How do material things like rocks, twigs and grass help to produce masculinity and human-ness across processes of socialization in Aymara boyhood?

Answering this last question provides the opportunity to expand the theoretical reach of scholars interested in the timescale of socialization, particularly scholars of language socialization. Language socialization researchers have, to great effect, shown how language usage serves as both a medium for socialization as well as its object (i.e., socialization occurs both through language and to use language [Ochs, 1986:2]). Some of the most innovative research in the paradigm has made it

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clear that, in addition to language-based forms of “metacultural positioning” (Smith, 2012) like teasing, motherese, prompting, correcting, etc., it is just as much the case that a whole range of semiotic resources (e.g., body posture and movement, gesture, the artifactual context of some interactional event, etc.) serve as the media and object of socialization. In much of this work, these non-linguistic phenomena have been framed as resources for socialization or as the multiple modalities¹ of socialization (e.g., the role of gestures that provide evaluative assessment [Goodwin and Alim, 2010] or the significance of bodily contact for infants and caretaker [De León, 2000], to cite just two examples).

The promise of an analysis of marbles is that it extends this concern in a new direction. Although the things that make up a marbles playing field are, to be sure, media or modalities of a specific (non-linguistic) sort, they also act as *semiotic agents* within processes of entextualization or discursive positioning, processes that are implicated in socialization.² Making sense of the semiotic agency of material things in socialization – or, really, the agency of non-humans more generally – opens onto a new line of inquiry for scholars of language socialization. To the extent that non-human agents can be framed, if you will, as “fashioners of speaking,” what gets revealed is the contingent emergence of human-ness – i.e., understood as a dimension of subjectivity – across semiotically mediated ontogenetic time. In other words, it re-opens questions about the timescale of human development, albeit in a way that de-naturalizes our understanding of both the content of human-ness and the course of its emergence. Making these kinds of questions possible requires an engagement, however, with a literature that has not fully been put in conversation with language socialization or, to some text, with linguistic anthropology: the largely socio-cultural concern with “ontology” or the “ontological turn.”

2. Extending language socialization “ontologically”

One of the strengths of the language socialization paradigm has been the way in which it has expanded the range of communicative partners considered relevant for processes of socialization, a project that an account of marbles pushes forward. Whereas, as Ochs and Schieffelin note, language acquisition researchers have privileged “the mother-child conversation as a site of observation, language socialization research extends the object of inquiry to the range of adult and child communicative partners with whom a child or other novice routinely engages in some capacity across socioculturally configured settings” (2012:1). The Aymara variety of marbles requires a further extension: it poses the problem of how to theorize the communicative role of material things in socialization. In the Aymara version of marbles, it is the marbles playing field that, in concert with a wider range of human and non-human actors, helps to bring about processes of socialization into masculinity and the human. And, it does so as a semiotic or communicative agent (and is recognized as such): ultimately, it is rocks and twigs that select for boys of a certain sort, and it is boys who, indeed, respond to them in both linguistic and non-linguistic ways. How, then, can material things – and non-human agents more broadly – be understood as, indeed, semiotic agents in socialization, agents comparable in some way to parents, peers, and siblings?

Another strength of language socialization research – one that the peculiarities of marbles also helps to advance – has been its concern with processes of socialization into communicative practices that take place over a particular kind of timescale: ontogenesis or, more broadly, “longitudinal time.”³ Much of the classic work in language socialization has shown how, as novices interact with more expert members of some community of practice, they come to be – that is, across some period of longitudinal time – competent participants within that community (Goodwin, 2001; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1996). The Aymara variety of marbles focuses the analysis on a timescale that, despite this traditional strength, has been undertheorized: it requires an account of, in Vygotsky’s words, “abrupt and major shifts and displacements, changes, and discontinuities” (1998:191) across longitudinal time. To put it too starkly, it is the game of marbles that sorts boys into different, age-graded kinds of humans and men, age grades that imply a course of socialization characterized by discontinuity: toddlers who are relatively non-human, young boys who are unmanly, weak, and cheats, and older boys who are tough and responsible. How can these moments in which human-ness and masculinity erupt into the life course be convincingly linked to communicative practices?

These two questions are motivated by concerns that are, in the contemporary sociocultural idiom, “ontological.” This is a movement that is diverse in its theoretical concerns, being primarily linked to the relatively divergent agendas of scholars like Bruno Latour (2005), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014), and Philippe Descola (2013). It is well beyond the goals of the current work to give an accounting of this line of scholarship. From a semiotic or linguistic anthropological perspective, the primary utility of this work – and, indeed, the one that inspires the current piece – is its attempt to broaden the range of entities that can be considered agents within human worlds.⁴ As these scholars (and others) have theorized the agency of entities like

¹ I am referring obliquely here to the linguistic anthropological concern with “multimodality” (see Streeck et al., 2011).

² Goodwin and Goodwin (2004:239) gesture towards this kind of account in their theory of participation.

³ I prefer the admittedly clunky “longitudinal time” to the term “ontogenesis.” “Longitudinal time” has the virtue of flagging its status as a kind of temporality. It also, perhaps more importantly, remains agnostic about whether some process of change should be understood as a process of development.

⁴ One of the central themes of the ontological literature is its relative inattention to (or, on occasion, outright dismissal of) processes of “representation.” To put it a little crudely, the criticism is that a focus on representation considerably displaces some native concept from the reality it captures – in doing so, it oftentimes privileges a Western vision of what really gets represented (e.g., questions of political economy or power). The generally anti-representationalist bent of much of the literature on ontology helps to explain the relative slow uptake of ontological concerns among linguistic anthropologists. In some cases, also, these authors are engaging with (and criticizing) a Saussurean vision of representation, a model that has been under critique in linguistic anthropology for half a century at least.

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