‘She’s a Somali Pippi Longstocking’: The emergence of interactional competence and student identity in a Swedish primary classroom

Asta Cekaite

Linköping University, Sweden

Within the language socialization framework, the present study explores a Somali immigrant child’s (7 year old) development of interactional competence in Swedish as a second language (L2) over one school year. Building on a theoretical view of multilayered timescales and indexicality, it discusses the trajectory of a positive student identity: from a socially problematic student to being identified as ‘Somali Pippi Longstocking’, a will-powered and independent girl and student. In that Somali immigrants in Sweden generally have a negative set of possible identities regarding academic achievements, the study examines the dynamic accumulation of the resources that account for the local, and the larger timescale social typifications and identity categorisations.

The study combines a multimodal interactional approach (Goodwin, 2000) with ethnographic analyses of socialization within a classroom community: it examines the L2 novice’s recurrent interactional moves employed to disagree with/refuse the teachers’ directives and tracks their lexico-grammatical and embodied features, and the affective stances displayed by the classroom participants. It is demonstrated that affective stances, defined as indexing the interlocutors’ affectively valorized evaluation and alignment towards a specific focus of concern (Dubois, 2007) constituted some of the crucial interactional features in the situational and longitudinal ascriptions of the social and moral personhood. By conceptualizing emotion as “a situated practice entailed in speakers’ performance of affective stance through intonation, gesture, and body posture” (Goodwin, Cekaite & Goodwin, 2012: 16), the present study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of interactional competence and social identity as comprising language and body hexis (Bourdieu, 1996) i.e., assembled as language-mediated, and embodied stances, configured to accomplish social actions and identities, and relevant in making categorisations and inferences about individuals and groups.

Keywords: interactional competence, timescales, indexicality.