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Analyzing Language, Gender and *Communities of Practice* in the New Knowledge Economy[1]

Bonnie McElhinny

INTRODUCTION

In an article in *The Systems Thinker*, Juanita Brown and David Isaacs argue for "Conversation as a Core Business Process." It is time for managers to recognize, they argue, that "'the grapevine' is not a poisonous plant to be cut off at the roots, but a natural source of vitality to be cultivated and nourished" (1996–1997, 1). "Conversations," they insist, "are as much a core business process as marketing, distribution, or product-development" (1). A key method through which companies can harness this organizational intelligence is through "the discovery" of communities of practice, "self-organizing networks [which] are formed naturally by people engaged in a common enterprise—people who are learning together through the practice of their real work" (2). The phrase "community of practice" (henceforth, *CofP*) is generally said to have been coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 in their book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, a study of the social organization of learning in a variety of professional groups that were inducting and training new members, and perpetuating routines for set tasks (see also Wenger 1998).[2] Although, as we will see, CofPs have been defined somewhat differently in different settings, Eckert defines a CofP as

> an aggregate of people who come together around some enterprise. United by this common enterprise, people come to develop and share ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values—in short, practices, as a function of their joint engagement in activity. . . . It is not the assemblage or the purpose that defines the community of practice; rather, a community of practice is simultaneously defined by its membership and the shared practice in which that membership engages. (2000, 35)

One of the central theoretical goals of materialist feminism is to understand "why representations of identity are changing. . . . and how these changes in identity are connected to historical shifts in the production of

life under late capitalism" (Hennessey and Ingraham 1997, 9). In this chapter, I take up this challenge by considering CofP, a way of understanding identity and interaction that has become widely used in linguistic anthropology (especially in feminist analyses) to challenge structural-functionalist accounts of social relations, bounded notions of speech community and essentialist accounts of identity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992, 1995; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1991). CofP has also, however, circulated widely in corporate circles, as an innovative strategy for institutional reorganization. Drawing on Emily Martin's (1994) work on how ideologies of flexibility play into neoliberal visions of bodies and corporate culture, I offer a critical overview of recent writings on CofPs by business consultants and in business journals, considering when and how representing the self as performed may contribute to the formation of a subject more adequate to a globally dispersed, multinational corporate culture (Hennessey 1993, 6), and when it may be used to challenge reified notions of identity and social relations in ways that envision alternatives to such cultures. The notion of CofP can be seen as an attempt to meet the late capitalist challenge of developing new tools, new definitions of community, and new definitions and forms of interaction that go beyond the traditional focus on fixed places, moments and groups described by Heller and Duchêne (this volume). This chapter thus contributes to a growing body of literature on language ideologies that considers how "different images of linguistic phenomena gain social credibility and political influence," both within linguistic disciplines and beyond (Gal and Woolard 2001, 2). It considers how globalization might not just lead us to new topics for analysis, but also new methods for managing and organizing knowledge, and asks us to consider in detailed ways how sociolinguistic scholars and corporations are all trying to elaborate new ideologies of personhood, community and organizational structure, and what the differences and similarities between those might be. Finally, the chapter asks when academic analytic notions might be complicit with hegemonic ideologies about globalization and when they might contest them.

The article in *The Systems Thinker* (Brown and Isaacs 1996–1997) is just one of dozens of articles in corporate organizational circles which has taken up, tested, developed and trumpeted the notion of CofP in the past twenty years as a tool to "support strategic conversation as a key business leverage" (2), and as a strategy for enhancing organizational performance and making the most of intellectual capital (see the following especially salient citations for examples of the use of the notion in a range of realms: Agresti 2003; Bond 2004; Brown and Duguid 1991; Cox 2005; Endsley, Kirkegaard and Linares 2005; Gongla and Rizzuto 2001; John 2006; Kimble, Hildreth and Wright 2000; Lesser and Everest 2001; Lesser and Storck 2001; Liedtka 1999; McDermott 1999; Mitchelle, Wood and Young 2001; Swan, Scarbrough and Robertston 2002; Vlaenderen 2004; Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002; Wenger and Snyder 2000). In the spring of 2006, CofP had 26 million hits on Google. Articles carefully

parse the differences between *project teams, formal work groups, informal networks* and *CofP* (cf. Wenger and Snyder 2000) as well as other relevant units of social interaction, as they consider how to improve service and product delivery. CofPs are now seen as key to the knowledge management strategies of such influential organizations as the World Bank, DaimlerChrysler, American Management Systems, IBM Global Services, the Mexican Conservation Learning Initiative, Medico, and the European Aerospace, Defence and Space Corporation. Business school scholars elaborate on how to "build business value through communities of practice" and how to "link competitive advantage with communities of practice" (Liedtka 1999). The elaboration of the value of CofP becomes the elaboration of certain ideologies about *conversation, interaction, community,* as well as about *corporations, knowledge, productivity* and *innovation.*

In the same period, CofPs have become a key analytic tool for sociolinguists, especially scholars working on language and gender. Scholars meticulously parse the differences between *speech community, network analysis, intergroup theory* and *CofPs* (Davies 2005; Meyerhoff 2002), as they consider how to improve social scientific understandings of how communities, interaction and language work. The elaboration of the value CofPs becomes, here too, the elaboration of certain ideologies about *language, discourse, interaction,* and *community* as well as about *objectivity, innovation and change,* and perhaps *scholarly productivity.* CofP (and related concepts, like "best practices) has become a keyword in the new knowledge economy.

The notion of keywords is adapted from Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1976). The significance of keyword analysis arose for Williams during the writing of what became *Culture and Society,* published in 1958. There, he examined intellectual and historical changes in the use of five keywords: *culture, class, art, democracy* and *industry.* Williams continued to use his approach to analyze issues of contemporary political and economic concern: in a brief paper published in 1985 in the *New Socialist* he analyzed four key words—*management, economic, community* and *law-and-order*—in a coal miners' strike.

Williams was resolutely interested in historicizing the rise of certain formulations, but also in criticizing them. He notes that though, in the main, speakers of the same language use the same words to mean the same things, certain terms—keywords—become sites at which the meaning of social experience is negotiated and contested. Williams wanted to record the variability in meanings available for these words, but he also wanted to consider the often implicit connections that certain meanings had with markedly different ways of understanding culture and society. Literary critic Michael McKeon (1977) argues that keywords are those words which are complex or difficult because (a) they connect areas that we tend to keep separate, (b) they are words whose continuous verbal identity masks radical semantic variation and (c) they often express a contradiction. McKeon argues that

Williams' contribution is to move beyond a chronological approach to historical semantics to a dialectical one (130). In Williams' account semantics becomes not only historical, but also political and critical; lexical analysis becomes a discussion of ideology and hegemony (see Fraser and Gordan 1994). It is precisely here, in this move away from a narrow notion of history, that Williams' work bears some similarity to Foucaultian style genealogy. Lexical labels are one kind of contested representation. Indeed, rather than being dismissed because they are minimal, this minimalism itself requires explanation: how do complex, contextually nuanced discussions get summed up in, entextualized through, a single word? How do words become "compacted doctrines"?

This chapter will (a) analyze the ideologies of language and culture evident in the ways the keyword CofP is used in key articles in the corporate and NGO management literature, and (b) compare the ways CofP is used in feminist and corporate literatures. There are other key social domains where the notion of CofP has also been extensively developed, most notably education, including but not exclusively online education (Gulledge 2007; McLaughlin and Talbert 2006; Ruopp et al. 1992; Palincsar et al. 1998; Palincsar et al. 2004; Schlager et al. 2002). There is, as Gee (2000) notes, a close relationship between the changing forms that work takes, and the ways educational practices are changed, putatively in order to train students for these changing formations; this relationship is an important one to explore further. For the purposes of this chapter, though, I focus on the corporate and feminist literatures; the feminist literature has, as its implicit or explicit aim, critique and transformation of current inequitable social formations. It is thus particularly crucial to consider whether and how our units of social scientific analysis are implicated in ongoing processes of globalization, and the implications of this for the possibility of critique.

STUDYING LINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES

To study corporate and scholarly frameworks about language is to study ideologies about language. Studies of face-to-face interaction have long been privileged in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, as in anthropological studies more broadly. Gal (1998, 333) argues that one of the salutary effects of recent work in linguistic anthropology is the expansion of empirical foci from face-to-face talk to studies of mass media and the ways they connect disparate communities and textual debates. This does not mean that studies of face-to-face interaction have been displaced, but rather that they have been decentered. Two interrelated arenas in which this transformation has taken place are in studies of languages and publics (Gal and Woolard 2001) and in studies of language ideology (Blommaert 1999; Kroskrity 2000; Schieffelin et al. 1998). Both bodies of work are interested in how "different images of linguistic phenomena gain social credibility

and political influence" and "the role of linguistic ideologies and practices in the making of political authority," both within linguistic disciplines and beyond (Gal and Woolard 2001, 2). These methods for analysis also force an attention to history, by asking us to think about when, how and to what ends certain ideas are produced (Inoue 2006; Irvine 2001; Irvine and Gal 2000; McElhinny 2010; Weidman 2006).

Some of the most compelling work on linguistic ideologies comes from studies of colonial era issues (Woolard 1998, 24). Studies of colonial linguistics examine dictionaries, grammars and language guides to show the ways that linguists constructed rather than discovered distinctive linguistic varieties, and the ways their ideas about language were shaped by their own ideas about nation, racialized ethnicity, kinship and gender, as they show how linguistic differences became a resource for naturalizing inequality in colonial settings (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Errington 2008; Fabian 1986; Irvine 2001; McElhinny 2005, 2010; Rafael 1988; Said 1978; Trechter 1999). The ways that our current categories and strategies for analysis might also be inflected by hegemonic political and economic trends has generally received much less analysis—for reasons, perhaps, that are obvious. It is harder to gain perspective on contemporary trends, to escape dominant ideologies and to capture a sense of ongoing, incomplete shifts in paradigms and perspectives. Not all studies of language ideology do this; as Philips (1998, 213) notes, some studies of ideology are merely substituting that concept for the notion of *culture*, in ways that lose the meaning of the word ideology as elaborated within a long Marxist tradition of analysis, and that attend to questions of history and power. Nonetheless, some fine examples of such work include Hill's (2002) analysis of the commodification of endangered languages, and the dangers of certain metaphors about endangered languages, and Heller's (1999) account of why variationist sociolinguistic studies enjoyed particular popularity in Quebec in the 1970s and 1980s as a strategy for legitimizing the local variety of French. (See also the forms of historicization discussed in other chapters in this volume.)

The introduction to this volume flags the emergence in the 1990s of more and more discursive elements that treat language primarily in economic rather than political terms—with an implicit focus on those realms where one would not have seen this emphasis in the past. Also of interest is the changing ways language is understood in corporations, where one might have already expected an economic emphasis. In recent years, new management styles adopted in the context of global competition have intensified awareness of language in corporate circles as something that needs to be managed, in order to enhance productivity or produce corporate brands (see Cameron 2000a, 2000b; Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996). The interest in CofPs also reflects this new interest in managing interactions in corporate circles (see McElhinny 2010 for further reviews of work on language and neoliberalism). In examining contemporary linguistic ideologies, I turn first to the corporate literature and then to the feminist linguistics literature.

"LINKING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE WITH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE": CORPORATE DISCOVERIES OF COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Not all corporations may be interested in corporate restructuring. As Heller and Duchêne (this volume) note, an emphasis on flexibility in the new economy exists in tension with a focus on increasing taylorization. Arguably, also, a focus on tertiarization has a different kind of weight in national settings that are losing primary and secondary sectors to other global sites than in those sites that are still gaining primary and secondary sectors. Corporations attracted to the competitive advantage associated with CofPs may be those that focus more on the production and circulation of information and symbolic goods, rather than those focused on the production of services or products or services or products or on harvest and extraction. Nonetheless, there are discussions of the utility of CofPs in a wide range of settings, from family medicine to the European defense industry, from IBM to community development work. Corporate proponents of the notion of CofP write about it with the kind of breathless prose associated with the release of a new kind of dishwashing detergent. They are a new tool, a new product, something to be "discovered" and "identified." Hinton argues that "Communities of Practice arose as a tool to facilitate knowledge sharing in a learning environment" (2003, 6), while Brown and Isaacs talk about the "discovery" of CofP (1996–1997, 2). Even Etienne Wenger wrote in a widely cited article in the *Harvard Business Review* (Wenger and Snyder 2000) that "a new organizational form is emerging" and that "communities of practice are the new frontier." Such strategies for framing CofPs take it from concept and keyword to buzzword, from contested tool to promotional discourse.

In the context of changing industrial reorganization, corporations are being advised to reorganize from Fordist models to "learning organizations" that must adapt if they want to survive (Martin 1994, 209). In order to counter precisely such understandings (understandings for which he is not entirely blameless!) and to challenge the idea that CofPs are a "fad," Etienne Wenger has also more recently weighed in with the explanation that "communities of practice are not a recent invention. They are not a business technique. They have been with us since the beginning of humankind" (2005, 1). The point, though, is not whether CofPs are new or old. Invocations of tradition and timelessness themselves are ideological, used to construct the inevitability of a particular notion of social formation (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Inoue 2006). The key question is why CofPs are newly fashionable.

In a useful review article, economic geographer Meric Gertler contextualizes the interest in CofPs within a larger interest in "tacit knowledge" in new economies. In studies of innovation that assume that the production and dissemination of knowledge is a fundamental characteristic of contemporary capitalist dynamics, a key distinction is made between tacit and codified knowledge. The tacit component of knowledge is that "defies

codification or articulation—*either* because the performer herself is not fully conscious of all the secrets of successful performance or because the codes of language are not well enough developed to permit clear explication" (2003, 78). In an era when everyone is presumed to have relatively easy access to codified knowledge, tacit knowledge has come to preoccupy management theorists because the creation of unique products/processes is seen to rely upon accumulating and leveraging "intangible" assets. Tacit knowledge is seen as particularly recalcitrant because it defies easy articulation, can only be acquired experientially, may require a shared social context and is difficult to exchange over long distances. The knowledge management literature is thus concerned with how to *produce tacit knowledge*; how to *find, measure and appropriate tacit knowledge*; and how to *share tacit knowledge*, especially amongst organizations with different units that are located far from one another.

Gertler argues that at least three different solutions are conventionally presented to these problems in the industrial management literature, each of which contains its own ideologies of space and scale and, I would argue, communication: *learning regions*, *knowledge enablers* and *CofPs*. The *learning region* literature principally addresses the dilemma of how tacit knowledge is shared, arguing that tacit knowledge does not travel easily; it argues for (or assumes) the importance and necessity of face-to-face interaction between partners with basic similarities (characterized by Gertler as "the same language, common 'codes' of communication, shared conventions and norms, and personal knowledge of each other based on past histories of collaborations" [2003, 84]), and assumes that industries will look locally first for appropriate forms of tacit knowledge. Certain places, like Silicon Valley in the United States, or the Ottawa region in Canada, are seen as regions where relevant tacit knowledge is produced, and are seen to have perhaps an uncatchable economic advantage, because they are the "first movers" in certain industries.

The literature on a *knowledge enablers*' perspective documents the use of knowledge activists (sometimes, management consultants) who diffuse tacit knowledge, making heavy use of "structured story-telling" (Lesser and Storck 2001, 84) and sharing "war stories" (Hinton 2003, 6). Production of tacit knowledge remains localized, but this perspective is more optimistic about its wider dissemination through certain key individuals than the learning regions perspective.

The *CofPs* perspective is seen as distinct from each of these, in that (in at least some iterations) it de-emphasizes the necessity of face-to-face interaction for the production of tacit knowledge and is more optimistic about the possibilities for ready diffusion of tacit knowledge. CofPs are often seen as groups which self-organize to solve problems; the members' shared background is said to facilitate the sharing of tacit knowledge, again with "story-telling" being seen as key. However, they may do this online, at a distance, and so on. Taken as a group, all of these "learning-through-interacting"

models tend to reinforce the local over the global, in ways which purport to explain geographical concentration in the context of expanding markets, weakening borders, and cheaper and more pervasive communication technologies (Gertler 2003, 76; see also Duguid 2008a).

In business circles, CofPs are contrasted with *departments*, *divisions*, *teams*, *taskforces*, *formal workgroups* and *informal networks* (see Agresti 2003, 27; Por and von Bekkum 2003, 5; Wenger and Snyder 2000, 142). The parsing of these differences varies according to different authors' slightly different agendas; however, the sharpest division is between formal and informal groups, which are often also contrasted in terms of management vs. peer control. *Teams* and *workgroups* are assigned specified tasks—to deliver a product or service—with assignments made by management, and the manager responsible for their operation, and are held together by job requirements, or milestones and goals. *CofPs* are generally seen as voluntary, peer-governed, created by members themselves, and held together by a shared passion in the area of the group's expertise, with a key goal being the development of members' own capacities and exchanges of knowledge. John Seely Brown, former director of Xerox Corporation's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), describes them not as a team or task force or authorized or identified group, but peers in the execution of the "real work" of the organization, held together by a common sense of purpose and a real need to know what others know (cited in Amidon, 1997, 1). CofPs are generally seen as being composed of people with shared or similar types of work, rather than the different kinds of work that may be brought together by more formal teams. There is an extensive literature assessing the utility of CofPs for organizations. However, CofPs are generally promoted as having at least five valuable functions in corporations and NGOs: (1) socializing novices, (2) developing and managing institutional memory and knowledge, (3) being more flexible than traditional corporate hierarchies, (4) serving as "safe" places to try out innovation and (5) helping to construct virtual communities in a global economy. I treat each of these in turn now.

First, CofPs are seen as good for socializing novices, and thus for codifying and sharing tacit knowledge. In the corporate literature, the dilemma this is framed as addressing is the fact that talented knowledge workers may circulate amongst different sites or between different organizations, or both. This implies significant agency for workers that belies the experience of many workers themselves (a point I discuss further below). A number of articles focus on the need for incorporating new members of an organization into the community (Lesser and Storck 2001, 832), in order to rapidly increase their productivity, particularly in organizations that are dispersed and where supervisors are in different sites (836).

Second, CofPs are seen as good for developing and maintaining long-term organizational memory. Lesser and Storck (2001) studied ten companies with "existing communities of practice" (for sociolinguists, of course,

this raises the question of what a company without a CofP might look like) and found that in virtually every case a CofP resulted in the development of a structured repository, where workers deposited "knowledge artifacts" like research papers, presentations and other forms of intellectual capital that could be used by others. In CofPs, people transfer and formalize "tacit knowledge." Though this could again be framed as a way of dealing with the worker who "chooses" to move on (e.g., in an entrepreneurial spin-off that becomes a competitor), it is also notably an effective strategy for capturing the social and intellectual capital of workers who might be laid off at times of corporate downsizing.

Third, CofPs are seen as flexible, as a way of overcoming the problems of slow-moving, traditional corporate hierarchies in a fast-moving virtual economy (Lesser and Storck 2001, 832), as a way of handling unstructured problems and sharing knowledge outside of traditional structural boundaries. Bond (2004) believes CofPs negotiate the duality of structure, that is, the dilemma that structure enables as it constrains, and that overly institutionalized communities seek to conserve existing practices rather than promote innovations. In order to develop new competencies and creative solutions to problems, organizations are supposed to be autonomous, flexible and responsive. Note the flexibility described here is not affixed to individuals but rather to organizations.

Fourth, CofPs are said to act as breeding grounds for innovation because they are "safe" places to share challenges (Lesser and Storck 2001, 839). The focus on peer interaction is seen as constructing a shared set of common goals. Peer interaction here is idealized as nonconflictual, as indeed it has sometimes been in some sociolinguistic accounts (see McElhinny 1997).

Finally, the principal question debated about CofPs in the management literature is whether they are effective for addressing the dispersal of corporate sites (cf. Gertler 2008 for a review; Lesser and Storck 2001). Gertler (2001) notes that for CofP proponents occupational proximity (and often similarity) is seen as more significant than geographical proximity, and so learning is seen as possible at a distance using new technologies and business travel. The "local" is thus not seen as critical for competitive advantage. However, Gertler notes that a focus on occupational similarity does not explain how relational proximity is cultivated, nor does it consider how

> systemic institutional influences might play an important role in helping determine which practices will flow between locations most easily and which will not. The unspoken assertion in the communities of practice literature is that the adoption of new routines . . . is a relatively easy and unproblematic matter, depending solely on the volition of the individuals comprising the community of practice and an enlightened senior management. (2001, 26)

Gertler notes that Brown and Duguid (2000) stand in clear contrast to other proponents of CofPs in arguing that CofPs are usually most productive and creative when they are face-to-face communities that meet regularly and develop their own subculture, style, judgment and slang.

Strikingly, also, the emphases embedded in the notion of CofPs align with an Anglo-American industrial model, which is distinguishable from other models (Japanese, German, etc.). Gertler (2003) (drawing on Christopherson 2002 and Lam 2000, 91–92) argues that under different models of governing capital, labor and corporate governance, the concept of the firm will vary, and so will the kinds of social relationships that form between economic actors. The American-style industrial model is shaped by the drive to maximize short-term investment returns, so that U.S. strengths have emerged in project-oriented industries like electronic media, computer services, advertising, engineering and industrial design. Because U.S. workers have little expectation of continuous employment, there is little loyalty to employers, and trust is invested more in other workers in similar positions rather than employers. The employees themselves act as individual technology-transfer agents, and thus as the route for the sharing of tacit knowledge. Within such a context, the influence of the employer's practices is overstated, while the significance of national institutional features is understated (Gertler 2003, 93). This is also true, I will argue, of the literature in feminist sociolinguistics. In its focus on peer relations and individuals, rather than on larger scales of social interaction, CofP thus could be said to reflect ideologies of social relations framed within Anglo-American industrial structures.

SILICON VALLEY SOCIAL SCIENCE? COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

A year after Lave and Wenger (1991) was published, Penny Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992) published an influential article on CofPs that disseminated the concept to, and has influenced its use in, sociolinguistics. As Murray's (1998) study of social networks in the development of sociolinguistics argues, we need to use our own tools as social scientists to elaborate sociological histories of how ideas arise and disseminate.

A key site at which CofP was extensively developed was the Institute for Research on Learning (IRL), in Palo Alto, California, where Etienne Wenger (now an independent consultant) and Penny Eckert (now a faculty member at Stanford) both worked, alongside other well-known ethnographers and linguists interested in corporate interaction (e.g., Brigitte Jordan and Charlotte Linde). IRL was situated close to Stanford, and to many key Silicon Valley corporate campuses. An online description describes IRL as

> a non-profit organization founded in 1986 in Palo Alto, California, committed to understanding what leads to successful learning in the schools, the workplace, and everyday life. A basic premise of IRL research, that people learn best when they are engaged with others, leads IRL's researchers to perceive schools and workplaces as communities of learners and to focus on the design of environments, technology, and activities that support learning as a collaborative activity. IRL pursues its research in collaboration with schools, universities, corporations, and government agencies—in the actual settings in which learning takes place.[3]

IRL was already a rather hybrid sort of research organization, connected in complicated ways with XEROX PARC (where linguistic anthropologists Marjorie Harness Goodwin and Charles Goodwin also spent a year as they continued to develop their approach to language as an *activity*, which has some resonance with notions of *practice*). IRL was a relatively short-lived institution (about ten years), funded initially by XEROX in 1986 with the hope of developing some kind of intelligent tutoring system.

I was associated with IRL as a "legitimate peripheral participant"; I was a graduate student in linguistics at Stanford from 1987 to 1993. I regularly visited Penny Eckert, a member of my dissertation committee, at IRL, participated in a weekly discourse analysis session run by Brigitte Jordan, and was hired as an research assistant for a project directed by IRL employee Charlotte Linde, in which I analyzed and coded videotapes of when and how people in two different settings used new computer technology in their workplaces.

Penny Eckert (Stanford) and Sally McConnell-Ginet (Cornell) both have positions at influential U.S. institutions for the education of graduate students, taught a widely attended course on language and gender in 1991 that introduced the notion of CofP to a wide audience of graduate students and faculty at the University of California Santa Cruz who were participating in one of the biennial summer institutes sponsored by the Linguistic Society of America, and played key roles in the development of the International Gender and Language Association, which grew out of the regular conferences hosted by the Berkeley Women and Language group. It's not at all inappropriate, then, to frame the notion of CofPs as Silicon Valley social science—a notion developed by and within a distinctively hybrid organization, to meet the distinctive challenges of its place and time.

As Meyerhoff (2002) and others have noted, CofP has been widely embraced by researchers working on language and gender, but has not been as extensively used by scholars working on racialization, ethnicity, aging or other axes of social differentiation. CofP participates in a family cluster of notions in studies of language and gender—gender as activity, gender as performance, gender as accomplishment, gender as practice—all of which suggest that gender is something one continually does in order

to challenge the idea that gender is something one has (McElhinny 2003). Although these all have slightly different trajectories, histories and uses, they all critique essentializing analytic categories, since gender (like "race") remains stubbornly linked to essentialist biological explanations in both popular and scientific discourse (Cameron 2006). CofP differs from these other concepts in having a more highly developed theory of how learning takes place, and a more developed notion of community. CofP is attractive to gender researchers because it offers strategies for investigating gender as a learned and thus mutable category, it foregrounds the likelihood of and reasons for differences among women and men (including crosscultural variability) and it suggests how gendered practices might vary across the life span, through participation in different practices (Mallinson and Childs 2007; Meyerhoff 2002, 539).

If the corporate literature has as its sharpest distinction the difference between the formality of departments, taskforces and formal workgroups and the relative informality of CofPs, in sociolinguistics CofP is distinguished from *speech communities* and *social networks* (Davies 2005; Meyerhoff 2002). Creese (2005) notes that both speech community and CofP share a resistance to the idea of a normative human subject, either as ideal speaker or a rational learner; as a consequence both share a commitment to ethnography. Miriam Meyerhoff succinctly summarizes the way most sociolinguists understand the notion of community of practice: it is a "recent addition to the sociolinguistic toolbox" (2002, 526) or a "novel perspective" (527), but not a novel social form, and not an analytic meant to replace others. The difference between speech community and CofP is sometimes said to be one of scale: CofP usually picks out a smaller group than that picked out by speech community. More critically, however, and probably more precisely, the use of CofP is meant to complicate some of the abstractions associated with groupings according to ethnicity, gender or shared place of living: it is not meant "to dispense with global categories, but to attach them to personal and community experience in such a way that the structure of variation makes everyday sense" (Eckert 2000, 222). CofPs offer a way of explaining, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2007, 35) note, apparently contradictory aggregated data. A CofP also does not focus exclusively on language, but looks at other semiotic practices by which speakers construct and maintain social categories. Social networks and CofPs are distinguished in part by degrees of agency (membership in a dense network can be by chance, but in a CofP is purposive) (Meyerhoff 2002, 531); Holmes and Meyerhoff (1991) argue that social networks are more role based, vs. practice based, and thus the links are more structurally understood.

There are a variety of ways of writing the intellectual history of the notion of "practice," each of which legitimates different political and analytic practices. Although many commentators start with Bourdieu, Klassen's (2008) particularly helpful and succinct account begins with Karl Marx's

notion of praxis as a way of centering critical analyses that consider the relative forms of power maintained by dominant and dominated classes, and strategies for transformation of social structures and practices that collude in oppression. She traces a genealogy forward through Pierre Bourdieu's work on practice, defined as taken for granted, habitual, common sense; Michel de Certeau's distinction between practices (of the powerful) and tactics (of the less powerful); and Henri Lefebvre's notion of inventive praxis (which attended to the habitual like Bourdieu, but also practices of transformation like Marx). Klassen (2008, 148) argues that practice serves to draw scholars away from doctrinal and official discourses of religions, states, and elites, and toward the "everyday" actions, movements and sensations of "ordinary" people in ways that reorient scholars from a focus on large-scale social and economic structures to the agency and action of people living within those structures.

Like other kinds of practice theory, the notion of CofP reacts against structural-determinist social theories (e.g., British-American structural-functionalism, determinist strands of Marxism and French structuralism) that did not incorporate a sufficient sense of how human actions make structure (cf. McElhinny 1998). In a general account of practice theory, Ortner (1996) points out that the practice-based approach moves beyond a view of social behavior as ordered by rules and norms, but that it also grants actors a great deal of agency, thus perhaps reproducing the hegemonic model of personhood (abstract individualism) of Western commodity-based societies. Davies (2005) too critiques what she sees as an implicit focus on choice in the notion of CofP. In the case of sociolinguistic theory, the sense of structure critiqued is that which was elaborated in some of the earliest and best-known large studies of sociolinguistic variation and change, where a tendency to view individual behavior as merely reproducing the structures of the group denied individual agency, collapsed the notion of social structure with the notion of style, and assumed static categories of class, gender and race that were presupposed as relevant, and understood as directly rather than indirectly indexed by speech (Davies 2005, 559). Notions of CofPs react against structural models, but these models, like the corporate models that Martin describes, may be already disappearing.

In critiquing the celebration of flexibility in many different realms, Martin (1994) asks whether the embrace of practice-based theory allows us to resist older systems, but not see emerging systems with new forms of repression. She herself notes that there is some delight in seeing changes in new corporations that eliminate some management–labor hierarchies, try to include women and minorities more, integrate mental and manual labor, and treat workers as whole people, while employing agile and innovative people. She is worried, however, that this ideal (like any other) presents a narrow ideal of the able person that will discriminate against many, underplays the physical and emotional effects of changes on downsized

workers, and passes over the loss of jobs with pensions, health insurance and unemployment insurance. Stability, security and stasis are also, she argues, valuable.

CONCLUSIONS: LINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES OF PERFORMANCE AND FLEXIBILITY

When I first presented this material at a conference, some questioners assumed I was looking at how corporations adopted CofP from social scientists as a new organizational buzzword and then "corrupted" it. A sophisticated version of this argument is that of Lave, who notes the ways the notion of CofP has traveled in ways that were sometimes generative, sometimes worrisome, and flags (using personalistic linguistic ideologies of meaning—Hill 2008) that the term was not intended to be normative or prescriptive but rather descriptive, and those who use it seem ignorant of these original intentions (2008, 283). She also asks why the notion of CofPs "migrated" into business and education—though arguably it was embedded in these from the start (294). The attempt to draw the boundary can itself be seen as trying to clearly separate zones corrupted by capitalist forces from those that are not so troubled. Indeed, studies of neoliberalism (defined here as market fundamentalism associated with globalization) have often focused on "the intrusion" or "penetration" of market forces into spheres where they are construed as having had little impact before, or have no business being. For instance, Gibson-Graham (1996) considers the ways that "globalization scripts" and "rape scripts" share not only a lexicon (the terminology of "penetration" and the opportunities to tap "virgin" markets) but also a narrative about how power works, as an act of nonreciprocal penetration, after which something is lost, never to be regained (see also Freeman 2001). Arguably, these studies sometimes develop their moral and critical edge by assuming a boundary between where market forces *should* reasonably go, and where they should not, in ways that may leave the study of the operation of market forces in certain settings (like corporations) understudied.

With the analytic unit of CofPs, however, we can see the tightening hold of market forces on previously unmonitored interactions, spaces and practices within corporations in ways that ultimately lead to more surveillance of workers. A focus on misuse or corruption assumes that academic and corporate spheres are distinct, unrelated and mutually uninfluential in order to cast the academic sphere as innocent of corporate or capitalist leanings. But we know that the academy is also, and increasingly, a site shaped by financial logics of accountability and productivity (Strathern 2000). Rather than asking if corporations influenced the academy or the academy influenced corporations, a more productive framework is to consider how, in these intertwined settings, we are all elaborating tools for working through seemingly

new forms of identity and community, in new economic situations—with potential for progressive and conservative uses in each setting. Thrift notes that most methods are no longer, if they ever were, the domain only of academic researchers, since there are thriving "methods communities in areas like market research and political consultancy" (2008, 106). Scholars, like corporations, are elaborating new ideologies of personhood, community and organizational structure. In this final section, I'd like to compare and contrast ideologies of *flexibility, power and scale*, and *community* in the corporate and sociolinguistic literatures because they address precisely these three domains, of personhood, community and organizational structure.

Flexibility

CofPs could be seen as marking the needs of, as they highlight the potential limitations of, the "knowledge economy." The Fordist model of industrial organization has been radically revised. Although the assembly line and machinery for mass production and mass marketing are not gone (their sites have shifted, from First World to Third World settings, from steel mills to call centers), ideologically, now, "the organization is a fleeting, fluid network of alliances, a highly decoupled and dynamic form with great organizational flexibility" (Martin 1994, 209). Corporations and individuals alike are told they need to become more agile and adaptable (18; see also the introduction to this volume). *Flexible specialization* refers both to the ways labor and products are changing: labor markets vary as workers move (or are moved) in and out of work, labor processes change (with workers taking on managerial tasks, and managers assembly tasks), and products change, customized in small batches for specific groups of customers with just-in-time processes (40). Flexible organizations and individuals are supposed to be able to respond quickly to changes in their environments, and initiate changes in innovative ways (144). For individuals, this might mean adapting to new work environments, or being able to take on a wide range of roles in a given organization. Martin (1994) asks how the social and economic formations of late capitalism are leading to transformations in ideas about the body and organizations in a large number of domains (immunology, economics, new age philosophy, government organizations, sports philosophy, psychology) to which the attribute of flexibility, or the ability to adapt to constant change, is now attributed, and the ways in which it is marked as a desirable trait. Progressive thought is not immune from these tendencies, even as it attempts to critique existing power structures. For instance, as Martin notes, feminist, antiracist scholars Sonia Johnson and Chela Sandoval celebrate the flexibility of the oppressed. Johnson imagines that those who are most outside the system are least constrained by it, and therefore may be most likely to challenge the system. Sandoval celebrates the flexibility required in the development of an oppositional consciousness among Third World feminists (Martin 1994, 157–158). Both are

elaborating a version of standpoint thought, familiar from Marxist, antiracist and feminist thought, which argues that those who most oppressed by a system can see its flaws most clearly; however, what is new is the elaboration of the possibility of resistance in terms of the idiom of flexibility.

But individuals are not as interchangeable as machines, and indeed some of the articles on CofPs note that people are often reluctant to participate in change or to share their ideas and expertise with others if they feel their own jobs are in jeopardy (Amidon 1997, 2). The question of which forms of intellectual social capital belongs to individuals and to workplaces is thus a contested one. In order to work towards interchangeability, companies must "capture" forms of knowledge previously linked with individuals and make them part of the institution; they thus embrace the contradiction of sponsoring or nurturing, recording and auditing, "informal" social interactions in the workplace. (This is in part what the new discourse of "best practices" also is linked to.) But to sponsor "informal" social interactions is also to monitor and marketize them. There is always, after all, the danger those innovative and informal social networks will spin off into their own start-up company. Paying attention to CofPs is necessitated by flexible specialization (40), but the need to do so also marks the edge of unease with it—too much flexibility takes the workers outside organizational control.

The focus on CofPs in corporations can be seen as a means to elaborate flexibility in organization and in communication. Yet flexibility has its limits, and its problems. As Martin notes, "[I]n their resistance, these people often embrace a vigorously emerging systems thinking that may embody entirely new forms of repression" (1994, 248). The focus on flexibility, as studies of training and retraining have shown (Dunk 1996), places the onus on individuals to deal with loss of jobs, or the inability to get the jobs they want. It obscures the larger political and economic trends that link flextime and the right to work at home with corporate downsizing, the greater use of part-time work (casualization), and the greater use of freelancers/consultants. Gaining flexibility, Martin argues, often means giving up security (1994, 146). The corporate literature on CofP is striking for the ways in which the economic and political forces that require employee mobility are described with agentless passives, nominalizations and independent clauses, when in fact it is companies which are delayering, downsizing, unstaffing—that is, firing—significant portions of the workforce (see Martin 1994, 221).

(a) "As employee mobility continues to increase across organizations. . . ." (Lesser and Storick 2001, 836)

(b) "Given the aging of the workforce population and the increased worker mobility that has been witnessed within the United States over the last several years. . . ." (838)

Corporations are constructed as dealing with, but not initiating, change. The notion of flexibility, as Martin (1994, 145) notes, is Janus-faced, as all keywords are. Who is free to initiate action? It also reflects some ambivalence: how does one run an organization that creates such freedom, and yet keep it under organizational control? This is an example of the tension between flexibilization and taylorism, described in the introduction. And when does the vaunted flexibility in a worker become acquiescence, passivity, compliance, accommodation? In an economy where many corporations have downsized, where key portions of intellectual and even service labor are increasingly also sent off shore, where workers do not experience lifelong employment or lifelong security, where companies are being reformulated for just-in-time production, companies must find a way of creating institutional memory that does not rely on the persistence of individuals in one place. This requires methods for capturing social and intellectual capital in the absence of workers.

If one agrees that feminist scholarship has as its primary goal the identification of inequitable social formations, with an aim to redressing them, one question we need to ask is where and how our current analytic concepts enable such critique. Such critique begins by attending fully to the historical conditions under which forms of analysis, and identity, are changing. Indeed, one of the central theoretical goals of materialist feminism is to understand "why representations of identity are changing. . . . and how these changes in identity are connected to historical shifts in the production of life under late capitalism" (Hennessey and Ingraham, 1997, 9). It is striking to note that a focus on elaborating these discourses of flexibility in feminist sociolinguistics emerges in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in such critical and influential books as *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self* (Hall and Bucholtz 1995). Many of us—and I decidedly include myself (see McElhinny 1995, 1998)—were imbricated in the elaboration of these ideas. To the extent that we saw such ideas as a scientific advance—a better way of understanding gender—we were not fully attending to the conditions that were leading to changes in the way identity was produced, and therefore not fully attentive to whether the elaboration of these new ways of thinking about gender were describing, or prescribing, the same forms of personhood prescribed in other settings. The focus on the development of a variety of new ways of conceptualizing gender in sociolinguistics and elsewhere—on gender as performance, activity, practice—could be seen as precisely spelling out what ideologies of personhood should be in these new economies (cf. McElhinny 2003). These approaches to gender are often prescribed by social scientists, as much as they are described.

There are differences in intellectual genealogical and methodological approach among feminist sociolinguists who focus on gender as activity, accomplishment, performance or practice, but all these approaches focus on gender as socially constructed. Social construction has increasingly come

under critique by progressive scholars as not sufficiently theorizing its own conditions of production. Historical anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes that "[c]onstructivism's dilemma is that while it can point to hundreds of stories that illustrate its general claim that narratives are produced, it cannot give a full account of the production of any narrative" (1995, 13). Constructivism is not, Trouillot argues, fully attentive to sociohistorical processes, and "tracking power requires a richer view of historical production than most theorists acknowledge" (1995, 25) (see also Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Hacking 1999; McElhinny 2007). We need to ask when, where and how these social scientific discourses themselves have a constitutive role in the processes of globalism, in the ways they help elaborate ideologies of flexible personhood as desirable, and indeed already achieved, in ways that naturalize dominant ideologies of what people should be and do. In *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse* Rosemary Hennessey argues, "A decentred, fragmented, porous subject is better equipped for the heightened alienation of late capitalism's refined divisions of labor, more readily disciplined by a pandemic corporate state, and more available to a broad nexus of ideological controls" (1993, 9) The elaboration of discourses of flexibility and fragmentation of subjectivities may therefore in and of themselves not be an adequate challenge to inequitable institutions and relationships, but they may instead be harnessed to them. So, how is power analyzed in institutional settings in the feminist linguistics and corporate literatures we have been examining here? How and where does it help to change our unit of analysis?

Power and Scale

Some of the questions about power and scale raised by Martin (1994) appear in recent articles in sociolinguistics assessing and critiquing at least some of the uses of CofP (see Barton and Tusting 2005 for one review). Numerous commentators argue that the notion of CofPs focuses on what is shared in a community, in a way which obscures questions of power, including such questions as how the community arose, how membership is defined, where and how differentiation occurs within the community, and challenges in moving from nonparticipation, or peripheral participation, to full participation (Creese 2005; Davies 2005; Duguid 2008b; Griffiths n.d.; Keating 2005; Lea 2005; Myers 2005). At stake here is a wider definition of how to understand power. Eckert and Wenger (2005) have argued that the notion of CofP does take into account notions of power, in studying the way definitions of legitimacy and competence (including how and who defines competence) are assessed within a CofP. They argue against a structuralist definition of power (i.e., one that assumes the existence of a structure that confers power according to position, and that assumes one can explain or predict who is seen as powerful by articulating the structure itself). They also, however, argue against notions of power that assume

stratification with a well-defined top or bottom (582). Other commentators however argue that the notions of speech community (Creese 2005), activity theory (Keating 2005; Martin 2005) or affinity spaces (Gee 2005) more effectively address questions of ambiguity and negotiation, power and conflict, by examining notions of learning that are focused not just on institutional reproduction but also transformation, and by explicitly attending to the historical formation of and changing shape of CofPs.

There is more consensus on the need to link CofPs to other forms of institutional and systemic analysis. A number of studies have called for studies that link microlevel analysis of CofP with macrolevel analysis (Bergvall 1999; Davies 2005; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2007). This is akin to Gertler's (2001) concerns about how the unit of analysis in the corporate CofP literature is assumed as the corporation, rather than linked to larger systems like national educational systems or state industrial policy. In the inaugural issue of *Gender and Language*, which has as its theme "unanswered questions and unquestioned assumptions in the study of language and gender," Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2007) argue the field of language and gender needs to (a) do more comparison of different but similar communities to explore generalizations about how practice contributes to the elaboration of identity, and (b) relate CofP to social networks, institutions and more global imagined communities. CofP, they emphasize, does not offer a new analytic unit, or replace other units, but offers fresh perspectives on familiar units.

Lave has also recently argued that the notions of legitimate peripheral participation needed to be unpacked more in *Situated Learning* in order to make "clearer that (and how) institutions, capital, and forces of production give people power over legitimacy, peripherality, and participation without dividing one from another" (2008, 285). In some recent articles, scholars have argued that because CofP is crucially tied up with the notion of learned social behavior, it might be better suited to the study of certain groups or certain periods in people's lives than others (see Bergvall 1999). Workplaces (Castellano 1996; Wenger 1998) and adolescent cultures and schools (cf. Bucholtz 1999; Castellano 1996; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008) have received particular scrutiny. Meyerhoff (2002) argues that this is an accident of how the framework has been used, and not an inherent limitation, and it is certain the concept can be applied to a very wide range of groups.

And yet, we might still want to try to explain why workplaces and youth have received particular scrutiny. Davies argues that perhaps it is easier to determine what counts as a common enterprise in a group whose activity arises in relation to an institution (even if opposition to it) rather than to self-constituted groups, and thus the notion retains some of the flavor of its development in the context of professional groups (2005, 562). Likewise, Keating (2005) notes that the notion of CofP suggests a flexible but nonetheless stable community that doesn't capture some of the mobile, ever-changing social formations of e.g. Portuguese migrant women in the UK. Gee (2000) argues that CofPs are a sociotechnical device of the new capitalism. Their elaboration in businesses is shaping their instantiation in schools that, in complex and class-linked ways, are retooling themselves to produce the new kinds of workers required in a knowledge economy. He argues there is class differentiation in the implementation of different organizational forms in schools, with peer-centered CofPs given more prominence in classrooms serving middle-class students, while more highly structured back-to-basics programs with more discipline and less flexibility are aimed at working class and poor youth. That the analytic notion of CofP is being used most commonly to describe precisely the same sites where it is often being prescribed (if not always in the same ways) suggests the ways that our analytic notions arise out of our research sites; it also suggests the need for caution in applying these same concepts without critique. And yet it is also the case that sometimes the contradictions within concepts, practices and institutions can also hold the seeds for their transformation. Does the focus on "community" in CofP challenge more individualized notions of self in neoliberal economics?

Community

Both corporate and sociolinguistic perspectives open up analytic space for thinking about flexible forms of community, not necessarily tied to or defined by place. Notions of speech community, though notably redefined to take into account diversity and difference (McElhinny and Patrick 1993) still often remain tied to a particular locale while the notion of CofP makes it possible to imagine a more dispersed community (Heller and Duchêne, this volume; Sharratt and Usoro 2003; Thomson et al. n.d.). CofP thus participates in what Thrift (2008) calls the explosion of a new set of research methods to think about space and place.

The elaborate focus on community discovery and construction in this corporate literature might indeed seem to challenge the individualization linked with neoliberal regimes of the self in a globalizing economy (Hennessey 1993, 6), especially given the discursive gap that opens between communities and producers/consumers as language is inscribed more in a language of profit rather than pride (see the introduction to this volume). These regimes of individualization have been described in some of the recent work on language, gender and neoliberalism (Inoue 2007, Kingfisher 2006; Yang 2010) which considers how neoliberal (or, market fundamentalist) structures affect, or attempt to affect, notions of personhood. Harvey has noted that neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2005, 2). Rose (1996) elaborates some of the new

regimes of self associated with neoliberalism, in which the ideal adult person is self-governing, responsible, autonomous, self-sufficient, independent, and entrepreneurial. This self is not incidentally or accidentally also the idealized Western masculine self (Kingfisher 2002), and thus has attracted significant feminist analysis (see McElhinny 2010 for further details). However, a focus on community does not necessarily challenge neoliberal ideologies of personhood as socially atomized, but may instead obscure, as we will see, some of the ways power works (Amin and Roberts 2008; Duguid 2008b; Harris and Shelswell 2005; Muehlmann 2008). In this it might be like the notion of family, which used to describe workplace settings can obscure the power relations between employers and employees (Bakan and Stasiulis 1997; Goldstein 1995). When, for instance, live-in domestic workers are construed as "one of the family," unpaid overtime is reframed not as exploitative but as part of a kinship obligation, and the families of domestic workers (from whom they may be separated because of the conditions of work) are erased from political and economic consideration.

In similar ways, a focus on community can also lend itself to addressing neoliberal dilemmas. A focus on CofP zeroes in on the governance and self-governance of face-to-face interaction, but it particularly focuses on the interstices of corporate life. It commodifies and captures knowledge previously understood as belonging to individuals because of their lives and histories in a corporation. It alienates social and intellectual capital. It makes previously "informal" spaces and interactions part of the company's business. Amin and Roberts (2008, 23) note this, even if in a way skewed to consider people only as workers or employees:

> Organizations are purposefully seeking to engineer informality, iterative purposefulness, and productive idleness, in order unlock new social energies and improvisations . . . After so many years of close corporate monitoring of employees and elaborate measures to eliminate idleness, autonomy and sociality, this re-evaluation of independent social energy is widely perceived as a progressive development of equal benefit to employees and employers. Yet it also comes with new risks. For example, as the social is nurtured in the workplace, work comes to dominate every aspect of the social, resulting in forms of premature employee burnout. (2008, 23)

What is striking about the use of CofP is the way that it is a form of regimentation of relationships within organizations previously understood as "informal" or even "counterproductive." "Consider," as one article has it,

> that the most widespread and pervasive learning in your organization may not be happening in training rooms, conference rooms, or boardrooms, but in the cafeteria, the hallways and the café across the street. Imagine that through e-mail exchanges, phone visits, and bull sessions with colleagues, people at all levels of the organization are sharing critical business knowledge. (Brown and Isaacs 1996–1997, 1)

There is an excitement, but also a nervousness, about what precisely the corporation is missing out on.

Gertler (2003, 88) notes that the ideologies of geography evident in discussions of *local* and *face-to-face* interaction conflate ideas about physical separation and cultural differences. Specifically, effective communities are said to rely on fairly high degrees of shared or similar norms, in ways that also however police who is deemed an acceptable participant. Similar ideologies are evident in many ideologies of nationalism. Anderson (2006) suggests that nationalism commands emotional legitimacy by creating bonds of fraternal solidarity; nonetheless recent works query whether Anderson's work conflates the trope of imagined community with the reality (see Bauman and Briggs 2003; Silverstein 2000) in their considerations of previously colonized nations defined by outmigration (Rafael 2000) or in settler colonial nations fractured by racism (Thobani 2007). Lave (2008, 291) notes that most CofP studies remain silent on how race, class, and ethnicity shape corporations and CofP. The application of the notion of CofP in the corporate literature seem unfettered by hierarchy, rather oblivious to difference, indeed, requiring and prescribing similarity. Only the occasional article (e.g., Swan, Scarbrough and Robertson 2002) suggests the need to offer more complicated notions of power.

This rather idealized focus on what is shared and similar may also be part of what makes CofPs attractive to some feminist scholars. In some academic studies of language and gender, a focus on CofPs seems to have replaced an earlier cultural feminist approach to talking about women's interactions as naturally more cooperative and consensual, or markedly different from men, as it makes some of the same arguments. Nonetheless, sociolinguistic studies of CofPs have also had a more critical edge to them, attentive to hierarchies of power within them (see, especially, work by Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008).

New knowledge, and new tools for managing knowledge, are never simply about "updating" the academy, or industrial practice (see also Hennessey 1993, 1); they are never simply about "progress." In both contexts, I argue, we are elaborating, and perhaps promoting, ideologies about the desirability of "flexible" people in a "flexible economy" that can have progressive but also conservative political impacts. In both contexts there is an emerging sense of disquiet linked to precisely this duality, as some academic researchers wonder whether the concept of CofPs gives them enough purchase on talking about inequalities of power and participation, while corporate ethnographers worry about whether CofPs might be introducing an unmanageably flexible, informal and egalitarian structure into the workplace. Miyako Inoue points out that "the study of neoliberal governmentality alerts us to the unstable political valence of all techniques and

practices of gender empowerment. None of the fundamental critical strategies in feminist theory . . . come with guarantees that they are essentially critical, liberating, or progressive in determinate contexts" (2007, 82). What we need, she argues, is a

> robust critical theory that enables us to discern the disquieting slippage between our key words and the marketed and market-rooted buzz words that mimic and deceptively take our critique and threaten to colonize it, and that have profound effects upon how all of us think and act in the globalized social formation in which we now live and work. (2006b, 89)

To these growing lists of critical strategies we can add the notions of *practice* and of *community*. Foregrounding these concerns may allow us to consider when and how the uses of CofPs contribute to the elaboration of ideologies linked to the new capitalism, and when and how they can serve to critique it.

Williams closed the first edition of *Keywords* with a reflexive, inclusive gesture, noting that the publishers had kindly agreed to include some blank pages at the end of the book, not only for making notes, but also as "a sign that the inquiry remains open and the author will welcome all amendments, corrections and editions towards the revised edition which it is hoped will be necessary" (1983, 23–24). Offering detailed accounts of conflicted and confusing histories and usages is not, according to Williams, meant to result in clarity, but in consciousness.

> I do not share the optimism, or the theories which underlie it, of that popular kind of inter-war and surviving semantics which supposed that clarification of difficult words would help in the resolution of disputes conducted in their terms and often evidently confused by them . . . the variations and confusions of meaning are not just faults in a system, or errors of feedback, or deficiencies of education . . . Indeed they have often, as variations, to be insisted upon, just because they embody different experiences and readings of experience, and this will continue to be true, in active relationships and conflicts, over and above the clarifying exercises of scholars or committees. What can really be contributed is not resolution but perhaps, at times, just that extra edge of consciousness . . . [This] is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical—subject to change as well as to continuity—if the millions of people in whom it is active are to see it as active; not a tradition to be learned, nor a consensus to be accepted, not a set of meanings which, because it is "our language", has a natural authority; but as a shaping and reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our language and history. (24–25)

Can we still use the notion of CofP? Like Martin, I want to say that "there is no vantage point from which I can say confidently that the developments that I have described are 'good' or 'bad'" (1994, 249). The challenge as progressive scholars is not to sort the conservative concepts from the progressive ones, the tainted from the pure. Indeed, many scholars note how progressive intellectuals often reproduce structures of inequality and domination (Bauman and Briggs 2003 xi; see also Amit 2000; Inoue 2007; Song 2009; Strathern 2000). We are asked, however, to consider the range of *uses* of concepts that can be harnessed to many ends. We can neither celebrate as liberatory, or condemn as contaminated, CofPs, or any of a range of other methods emerging from, as they study, changing social contexts. Instead, we need to be attentive to the romances linked with any such terms or methods—here, romances of community, flexibility, choice, consensus, local, individual, similarity, innovation—and ask whose interests are served, in given instances, by such terms.

NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at IGALA-4 in Valencia Spain (November 8–10, 2006), in a panel on "Language and Neoliberal Governmentality, co-organized by Miyako Inoue and Bonnie McElhinny, at AAA 2006, San Jose, California (November 15–19, 2006), at a workshop on language and neoliberalism at the University of Toronto (Feb. 16–17, 2007) organized as part of the FAS Year of Languages, as a plenary talk at the Conference on Language and Globalization: Policy, Education and Media sponsored by the Georgetown Linguistic Society, March 30- April 1, 2007, and at Alexandre Duchêne's workshop on language and the new economy in Fribourg, May 2009. Thanks to Eugenia Tsao for her work as a research assistant wading through this vast literature. My thanks to Kori Allan, Charles Briggs, Lisa Davidson, Alexandre Duchêne, Meric Gertler, Monica Heller, and Miyako Inoue for helpful conversations and thoughtful comments.
2. Note, though, that Chrysler, the multinational auto-maker, sometimes lays claim to coining the term—see Haas et al. n.d.
3. http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=142750.142991. Accessed Nov. 6, 2010.

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