

**Becoming a California Citizen:
Performances of Allegiance as Routinized Ritual in a U.S. Naturalization Class**

Jung-Eun Janie Lee
Department of Linguistics
University of California, Santa Barbara
jlee@umail.ucsb.edu
<http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~jlee>

*Bless yourself with holy water, have Masses said, and so on;
by a simple and natural process this will make you believe,
and will dull you - will quiet your proudly critical intellect.*

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1669)

Abstract

Building on work on language and national identity, this study examines the role of language and interaction in the construction of U.S. citizenship in California. I argue that U.S. citizenship, in the site of citizenship education, is collectively performed through the ritual recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance and the Oath of Allegiance to the United States. In addition, I highlight the decontextualized and routinized nature of the ritual and argue that this embodied and repeated action fosters immigrants' transition to citizenship.

The Ritual Texts of Citizenship

Pledge of Allegiance

“I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands: one Nation under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.”

Oath of Allegiance (recited at naturalization ceremonies)

“I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.”

Key Theoretical Concepts

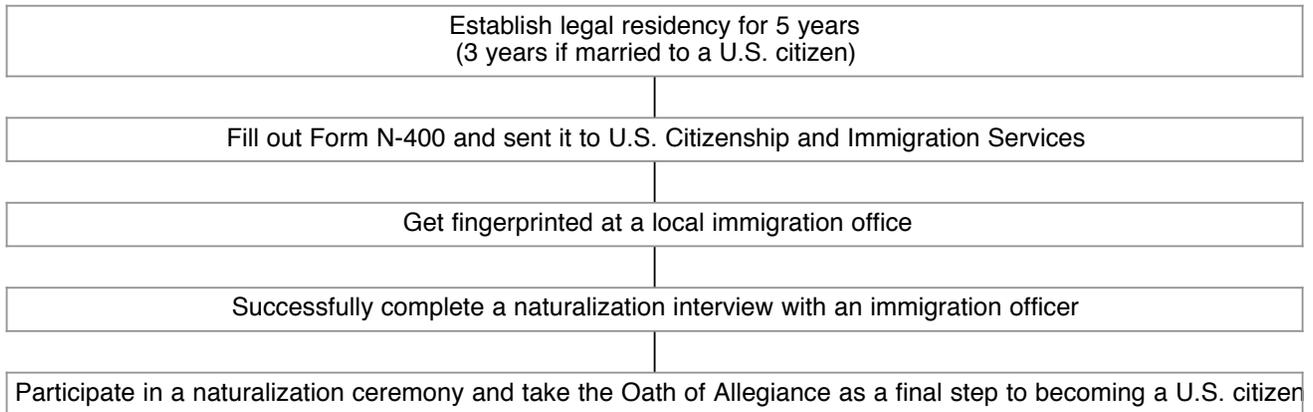
- Performativity (Austin 1962, cf. Butler 1997): speech performs action
- Ritual (Du Bois 2003): a set of repeated actions of a symbolic nature
- Hexis (Bourdieu 1977): the embodied enactment of habitus (socialized dispositions)

Ethnographic Context

- 4 months of ethnographic fieldwork in an adult education naturalization class in California
- Approximately 70 hours of video data
- Participants: middle-aged Latino immigrants; 29 women and 12 men

- Instructor: Mr. Castillo, a bilingual Mexican American

Figure 1: The process of obtaining U.S. citizenship



Embodied Ritual through Oath Taking

The ritual texts rehearsed in class are not those required in the naturalization ceremony

- Pledge: not required at all in the naturalization process
- Oath: performed noninteractively in the naturalization ceremony

(1) 080708 00:12:32-00:14:00

- 1 C: All right. Everyone please rise.
- 2 <students rise>
- 3 C: Right hand over your heart.
- 4 <students put right hands over hearts>
- 5 C: Please repeat after me. I pledge allegiance,
- 6 Ss: I pledge allegiance,
- 7 C: to the flag,
- 8 Ss: to the flag,
- 9 C: of the Uni[ted States,]
- 10 Ss: [of the United] States,
- 11 C: of America,
- 12 Ss: of America,
- 13 C: and to the repub[lic,]
- 14 Ss: [and to] the republic,
- 15 C: for which it [2 stands.]
- 16 Ss: [2 for which] it stands.
- 17 C: one nation,
- 18 Ss: one nation,
- 19 C: under God,
- 20 Ss: under God,
- 21 C: indivisi[ble,]
- 22 Ss: [indi]visible,
- 23 C: with liberty,
- 24 Ss: with liberty,
- 25 C: and jus[tice,]

- 26 Ss: [and] justice,
 27 C: for all.
 28 Ss: for all.
 29 C: <raises his right hand> Please raise your right hand.
 30 <students raise right hands>
 31 C: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?
 32 Ss: Yes I do.
33 C: Do you believe in the Constitution and form of government of the United States?
34 Ss: [Yes I am.]
35 Ss: [Yes I do.]
 36 C: Are you willing to take full oath of allegiance to the United States?
 37 Ss: Yes I am.
 38 C: If the law requires it, are you willing to bear arms on behalf of the US military?
 39 Ss: Yes I am.
 40 C: If the law requires it, are you willing to perform work of national importance under civilian direction?
 41 Ss: Yes I am.
 42 C: Do you swear to tell the truth?
 43 Ss: Yes I am.

- Mr. Castillo prompts bodily action (lines 1,3, 29)
- Students perform the action (lines 2, 4, 30)
- Students repeat the Pledge (lines 5-28), overlapping with Mr. Castillo at various points
- Question-and-answer sequence of the Oath of Allegiance (lines 31-43)
- Line 31 (*Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?*) not in the actual oath
- Varying uses of modals by students (lines 34 and 35)
- This interactional text does not in fact occur in the naturalization ceremony

(2) 080708 00:14:22-00:15:10

- 1 Paco: Quiero hacer una pregunta.
I would like to ask a question.
- 2 C: [Sí.]
Yes.
- 3 Paco: [En-] en- en la segunda- en la segunda donde dice eh: (.) de: do: eh: (.) muchos contestan con Yes [2 I am.] Yes I [3 do.]
On- on- on the second part- on the second where eh: of: do: eh: many answer with 'Yes I do.'
- 4 #: [2 Yes I] am.
- 5 C: [3 Yes I--]
- 6 Olívia: [3 Yes I do.]
- 7 C: Cuando digo- cuando digo yo-- por ejemplo, do you believe? (.) In the constitution and form of government?
When I say- when I say-- for example,
- 8 Ss: Yes I do.
- 9 C: [Yes I do.]
- 10 #: [Yes I] do.
- 11 #2: Cuando [2 #####]
When #####
- 12 C: [2 Yes I do.]

- 13 #3: [2 ## importante.]
important.
- 14 Paco: Esa en que están, la- la segunda?
The one that are, the- the second one?
- 15 C: En la segunda que viene siendo entonces a ver a:=
In the second that is then let's see ah:=
- 16 Melisa: =Yes I am.
- 17 C: Are you willing to take full oath of allegiance to the United States? [Yes I am.]
- 18 #: [Yes I am.]
- 19 Ss: Yes I am.
- 20 Yolanda: <to Melisa> #####
- 21 C: Sí. Porque si escucho: a-- (.) Bueno. A- la mayoría escucho que dicen correctamente 'Yes I am.'
Yes. Because I hear: uh-- Well. The- the majority I hear say it correctly 'Yes I am.'
- 22 Estrella: Mhm.
- 23 C: Uno que otro por allá dicen 'Yes I do.' Se equivocan o:-- (.) pero, hay- cuidado. Hay que escuchar bien, sí? Are you willing? (.) Yes. I [am.]
Others over there say 'Yes I do.' They get it wrong or:-- but, be- be careful. You have to listen well, okay?
- 24 Ss: [I am.]
- 25 Paco: Yes I am.
- 26 C: I am.
- 27 Melisa: Yeah.
- 28 C: Yes I am.
- 29 Melisa: Yes.
- 30 Estrella: Yes I am.
- 31 C: Do you? (.) Yes I do.

- Paco points out ungrammaticality of many students' response to the second question in the Oath (line 3)
- Mr. Castillo provides correct answers (lines 7, 9, 12, 15, 17, 21, 23)
- Other students participate (lines 6, 10, 16, 18, 19, 20)
- Mr. Castillo encourages students to be 'careful' and 'listen' (line 23)
- Mr. Castillo initiates rehearsal and puts prosodic emphasis on the modals in each question (lines 23, 31)
- Class repeats after Mr. Castillo (lines 24-31)

- Orientation to the linguistic form
- Misuse of the modal does not change the truth value of the question
- Embodiment: performing citizenship through bodily action

Discussion

- The symbolic act of the Pledge and the Oath is embodied and repeated in the class
- However, the act of saying the Pledge and the Oath is decontextualized
 - absence of the American flag in many cases
 - students' bodily orientation to the instructor rather than the flag
- The routinization contributes to the loss of performative power of the Pledge and Oath
 - Illocutionary force (Austin 1975) is lost even though the symbolism of the act still remains
- Through embodiment and repetition of the ritual, immigrants transition into citizenship

Conclusion

In the institutionalized setting of citizenship education, U.S. citizenship is performed through the ritual of saying the Pledge of Allegiance and making the Oath of Allegiance to the United States. The

decontextualization and routinization of these texts emphasizes the performative aspect of citizenship regardless of individual beliefs. By performing the action, even incorrectly, students participate in a symbolic form of American citizenship.

References

- Austin, John L. 1962. *How to Do Things With Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, Butler. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge.
- Du Bois, John W. 2003. Ritual language. William J. Frawley (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, 2nd edition, vol. 3 (pp. 463-465). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pascal, Blaise. 1958[1669]. *Pensées*. New York: E.P.Dutton.

Acknowledgments

I thank the participants of the study, Mary Bucholtz, Richard Harang, and my research assistants Kent Melendez and Leobardo Cano. I also thank the UC Office of the President Pacific Rim Research Program, UCSB Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, and UCSB Graduate Division for their financial support.