

Editorial

Roberta Piazza*, Birgul Yilmaz and Charlotte Taylor

‘Art as social practice: language and marginality’: Special Issue of *Applied Linguistics Review*

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The present collection of articles draws on the anthropological concept of art of the ordinary from Raymond Williams’ book *Culture is Ordinary* (1989). In this sense, art is like culture, both in terms of the meanings shared by society and in terms of those new ones that are created and tested. Therefore, art is integral to ‘the process of discovery and creative effort’ (1989: 93) of a culture. The notion of ordinary art is combined with that of a socially engaged community art, although the term has a radical ring to it, or resonates with ‘participatory’ art from Matarasso’s *A Restless Art* 2019. We are therefore talking about forms of art that live with us, are integral to our existence and come from within us. In all these cases, art is the product and the process that involves not necessarily professional artists but ordinary people and communities. More importantly, as this collection of essays has the additional focus of ‘marginality’, art can be the expression of people and groups who have suffered the effect of economic crisis and borne the consequences of social, ethnic or racial exclusion. As is well known, in art history many examples of art extol the ordinariness and the essentialness of life; an example being the Italian Arte Povera (Poor Art) movement of late 1960s which brought simple and humble materials to the viewers’ appreciation. In addition, the art we investigate here has a performative meaning in that it aims to create situations and contexts in which marginalised and powerless individuals take centre space and are heeded. In almost all the contributions, art is therefore ‘doing’ and carrying out actions. In this sense, it involves people and the artistic product emerges from the actions of the individuals and groups. These actions are not necessarily aimed to be exhibited to the public as they are integral part of that ordinary culture to which they belong or which they are trying to create.

***Corresponding author: Roberta Piazza**, English Language & Linguistics, University of Sussex, Arts Building B, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 9RH, UK, E-mail: R.Piazza@sussex.ac.uk

Birgul Yilmaz, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

Charlotte Taylor, English Language & Linguistics, University of Sussex, Arts Building B, Brighton, East Sussex, BN1 9RH, UK

Connected to the construct of performative art is the other notion of art as social practice; in this sense, art has the broadly political sense of being completely immersed in the community and resulting from that community's skills, interests, stories and sufferings.

This special issue on art and marginality investigates some of the different contexts in which individuals and groups at the periphery of society exist. Its specific focus is the expression of economic, social and cultural diversity in which art as social practice is harnessed as a means to favour self-reflection and, in some cases, emotional restoration (Haugh 2013). This special issue of *Applied Linguistics Review* takes into consideration the important debate about art and the social. The attention of the papers is on what the practice of art brings to the fore in a broad sense and the particular language use that such practice reveals. Three specific areas of social exclusion and diversity are investigated in the issue: migration, homelessness and incarceration. Within these areas, the investigation focuses on how the social actors construct themselves in these spheres of action. In other words, as the contributors explore what art can do to alleviate social isolation, at the same time they are sensitive to what happens to people who, for a limited time, put to one side their vulnerability to concentrate on a collective artistic practice.

There is one crucial aspect to the art explored in the contributions of this issue. It is totally dependent on, shaped, in fact, by language as a semiotic means. Therefore, the papers in the issue investigate the different ways in which language becomes an art form in particular communitarian contexts and ask how language can be the means to reflect on the marginal situation in which the individuals find themselves, how it makes possible for the people's subjectivities to enter into contact and speak to one another or how language transforms the memory of an original place into an art work. The issue focuses on what language reveals about the identity construction of the individuals involved in the artistic activities as well as suggesting how art as practice can encourage diverse forms of learning among the different marginalised people. Therefore, the artistic projects discussed here are political in the sense that the language of the actors involved echoes the social reality that made them marginal, excluded and disadvantaged. This association of art, in its broadest sense, with social exclusion and diversity is well established. Belfiore (2002) for instance, discusses how, since the 1970s, the art policy in the UK has attempted to support art that would be suitable to the many and not the very few. The Arts Council of England (ACE), the Regional Arts Boards and other bodies, therefore, tended to finance projects that had a social dimension and whose impact could foster a sense of inclusion. Similarly, the conviction that art can provide solace from marginality can be traced far back in time. Excellent results have been obtained by artists involving inmates as the example of the film *Cesare deve morire* (*Caesar Must Die*, 2012) brilliantly shows,

which was based on Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and shot at Rebibbia prison in Rome by the Taviani brothers.

In this special issue, ordinary art is interpreted in a broad sense, as entertainment, application, creativity, experimentalism, memory, reflection or imagination. The reflection on artistic practice is centred on the relationality of art, i.e. what it produces and does socially and linguistically, in other words, how art is used by different social actors as a medium and a resource in challenging contexts of social diversity to reach a variety of goals. In the creating writing in a jail project (Whitecross) therefore, each woman's page is not just hers, but stands in an intense dialogue with the production of all the other incarcerated writers. The creative writing as social practice in which the jailed women in Whitecross's paper engaged and the poetic and narrative texts they produced construct another form of art and a suspended or heterotopic (Foucault 1986) yet reassuring space. Similarly, as Mahmud's paper shows, in migratory settings, art is realised through material culture as a way to revitalise and bring to life the world migrants have left behind or create a new identity in the host country. In this interpretation, art constructs a third space, not the original not the new space, in which migrants can feel culturally stable and safe. Two sub-themes therefore emerge from this collection of essays centred on art among and by marginalised people: identity and space, both intersecting with art in performative ways that allow the construction of subjectivities and of a spatial context in which those subjectivities can exist. The incarcerated women's writing and the Kurdish-Turkish migrants' possessions become ways of encoding identities and creating a satisfying spatial reality, however heterotopic or imagined it may be. Similarly, in Futro's contribution, the interpretation of art in the book by professional artist Szydłowska explores multimodally her experience of migration. Also in this case, art is a way to construct a new identity that defies the hardship of moving to a host country, and it becomes social in terms of the ideological critique the book contains. Identity work as art or art to construct identities is the interpretation of art proposed in Bradley and Pöyhönen's contribution which capitalises on yet another theme, that of the ephemeral *quotidien* or the ordinariness in a situation of change. Both in the context of migration to Finland and Covid in England, the art projects which the authors in this issue reflect upon encourage an emotional and gratifying appreciation of ordinariness and the mundane. The Foucauldian third space in which new identities emerge is also present in the artistic project based on mime, writing, drawing and performing that Piazza describes. The *arte molto (very) povera* that the rough-sleeping participants produced in that project were made of cardboard and paper or simply of body movements; however, it was captured in a short film which brought their voices to the fore and offered a way to construct powerful

and aspirational identities in the heterotopic space of the day centre and the time of the workshops.

The issue combines art with peripheral or disadvantaged conditions that we have summarised under the umbrella term of ‘marginality’. Still an elusive concept in geography and the social sciences (Cullen and Pretes 2000), variously defined and generally associated with poverty (von Braun and Gatzweiler 2014), for Mehretu et al. (2000: 89), ‘[m]arginality is a complex condition of disadvantage that individuals and communities may experience because of vulnerabilities which may arise from unequal or inequitable environmental, ethnic, cultural, social, political and economic factors’. Marginality is the state or condition of being separated from the powerful and dominant core or centre of society (Cullen and Pretes 2019). This takes diverse shapes and is caused by a number of factors, such as the inequality resulting from the free liberal market and linked to unsuitable labour skills, an unfortunate location, lack of information about job opportunities and more, or the socioeconomic disadvantages associated with social construction in terms of age, ethnicity, gender discrimination (Cullen and Pretes 2019: 90–91). The marginalities described in this issue are many and associated with the structural and ideological types that Mehretu et al. (2000) discuss. The marginalised people who express themselves through art in this special issue are structurally excluded (hence are objects of marginality), but are also the victims of an exclusion that often derives from the fears and concerns of hegemonic society (thus they are objects of marginalisation as social construction) (cf. Pelc 2017).

Using the word ‘marginality’ in the title of this special issue was a risk of which we were well aware. It suggests an essentialisation of a condition that has endless facets and expressions and it is not and should not be seen as permanent. Defining people or groups as ‘marginal’ attributes power to the person who uses the definition. Cullen and Pretes (2019: 216) quote Ferguson on this point:

When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what? But this question is difficult to answer. The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always appears to be somewhere else. Yet we know that this phantom center, elusive as it is, exerts a real, undeniable power over the whole social framework of our culture, and over the ways we think about it. (Ferguson, 1990, p. 9).

Often associated with a deprived or denied space (Lefebvre 1991), whose privileged access is only for the few, marginality is always relative. A slum is marginal to the city in a developing country, but then the city is marginal to the fully ‘developed’ corporate west (Cullen and Pretes 2019: 217). However, by talking about ‘marginality’, our intention is to highlight the potential that the periphery has to offer of new and alternative points of view that the centre has ignored or overlooked (hooks 1990; Shields 1991). By giving voice to marginality, we wanted to talk about a number of

individuals who live and experience life in ways that are alternative and foreign to the hegemonic part of society. However, this collection of articles brings to the readers' attention many realities that are less known and under-explored and in this positive sense through the editors' decision to engage with the topic marginality we hope to signal our profound interest in the lives of those who are not, cannot or don't want to belong to an established powerful social core.

Our special issue is not interested in establishing how effective art can be in contexts of marginality, although as Belfiore (2002: 92) maintains, this issue remains largely underexplored. Rather, we take engagement with art as a particular type of social practice in which actors have the opportunity to reconsider all aspects of their self and negotiate new identities. The attention is also on how creative practice is collective and how it facilitates group identity. The papers in our issue approach the discourse of art from multiple perspectives: by relating to the material objects migrants bring with them to the new country that represent an extension of their identity (Chra Mahmud) and through visual diaries that recall and document their heritage in the diasporic reality in which they live (Dobrochna Futro). These contributions in the field of migration are accompanied by Rosalchen Whitecross's study on female inmates in two English prisons and the multiple functions of their creativity that emerge from their writing workshops, and Roberta Piazza's account of an experimental project of drama and creative writing at a day centre for the rough sleepers in the south of England. In all these cases, therefore, the various contributions do not just focus on what is produced, but on how the artistic experience offers an opportunity to renegotiate the actors' identity and functions as a tool to express their voice; this confirms how the arts and heritage can be pivotal to self-scrutiny and thus can alleviate the symptoms of exclusion. The last article by Jessica Bradley and Sari Pöyhönen picks up again the important topic of the exploration of the quotidian through the observation of two projects centred on creative practice. We hope that bringing together these papers from across the range of applied linguistics we can stimulate further research into the relationship between ordinary art, language and identity.

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