Temporality, stance ownership, and the constitution of subjectivity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the constitution of subjectivity through the analytic lens of John Du Bois’ notion of stance. Understanding subjectivity requires taking into account longer timescales in order to better capture 1) the embeddings of stances and 2) the play of stances one with another across time. Attending to these longer timescales points to a further trouble with Du Bois’ conception of stance and its relationship to subjectivity – what Du Bois calls stance ownership. Based on a consideration of an example in which a participant’s stance is transformed across time, I propose three means of characterizing stance ownership: intersubjective recognition, embodied indexical icons, and the stance of things.

1. Introduction

In this article, I take up one particularly well developed analytic for understanding how language entails evaluation, namely Du Bois’ notion of stance. I consider this notion of stance in order to develop it as an analytic for understanding the constitution of self and subjectivity in interactional practice. I start with the issue of timescale, considering how we might enrich our understanding of the relation of stance and subjectivity by expanding the timescale of our analyses beyond the handful of turns of talk based on which Du Bois conducts his analyses. This consideration of stance across longer timescales then opens a second concern regarding the linkage between stance and subjectivity, or what Du Bois calls stance ownership. Using an example from Du Bois work and one from my own work, I explore how attending to temporal processes across longer timescales can illustrate how this linkage between stance and subjectivity is accomplished through the interplay of stances across time. Through these examples, I show how “fashions of stancetaking” come to be implicated in the constitution of selves across interactional time.

2. Stance

Du Bois defines stance as a “triune act.” As Du Bois (2007) 1 puts it: “In taking a stance, the stancetaker (1) evaluates an object, (2) positions a subject (usually the self), and (3) aligns with other subjects.” The three key terms here are evaluating, positioning, and aligning. Du Bois defines evaluation as “the process whereby a stancetaker orients to an object of stance and characterizes it as having some specific quality or value” (p. 143). Positioning is defined by Du Bois as “the act of situating a
social actor with respect to responsibility for stance and for invoking sociocultural value” (p. 143). Finally, with regard to alignment Du Bois writes, “alignment can be defined provisionally as the act of calibrating the relationship between two stances, and by implication between two stancetakers” (p. 144). These three acts thus involve relating (1) objects to subjects (evaluation), (2) subjects to objects (positioning), and (3) via the mediating object, subjects to other subjects (alignment).

Some simple examples that Du Bois gives of the evaluative moment of stance include: “I’m amazed,” “that’s horrible,” “I’m glad,” “I know,” and “I don’t like those.” Although, the objects of these stances are not immediately present (more on that in a minute), these examples illustrate the basic act of evaluation that then positions a subject as having a particular relation to an object, and which can then become a moment of alignment with a subsequent speaker. Thus, taking the example of “I don’t like those,” we can see how subsequent speakers can align themselves with the first speaker by positioning themselves with respect to the object, as in the following exchange:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{SAM;} & \quad \text{I don’t like those.} \\
\text{(0.2)} \\
\text{ANGELA;} & \quad \text{I don’t either.}
\end{align*}
\]

As noted above, and as Du Bois notes, the object of a stance of being “amazed” or “glad” or “knowing” may not always be present in the stance utterance itself. In order to recover the object of these stances – i.e., the thing about which the stance subject is “amazed” or “glad” or “knowing” – one needs to look beyond the single turn utterance. Thus, with the example of “I’m just amazed,” Du Bois first offers the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(Lambada SBC002: 665.79-667.35)} \\
\text{MILES;} & \quad \text{I’m just amazed.}
\end{align*}
\]

With only this utterance to work with, one wonders what is it that Miles is amazed about? Du Bois points us to a few turns earlier where the speaker, Miles, first made mention of what will become the object of his “I’m amazed” stance:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(Lambada SBC002: 660.75-667.35)} \\
\text{660.75 663.35 MILES;} & \quad \text{Cause there’re a lot of women out there who apparently don’t believe in using condoms.} \\
\text{663.35 664.35} & \quad \text{(1.0)} \\
\text{664.35 665.19 PETE;} & \quad \text{Hm.} \\
\text{665.19 665.79} & \quad \text{(0.6)} \\
\text{665.79 667.35 MILES;} & \quad \text{I’m just amazed.}
\end{align*}
\]

As Du Bois writes, “Clearly, the stance act of affective self-positioning (as glad or amazed) is incomplete until we include the object of stance” (p. 155). In paraphrasing Miles’ stance, Du Bois writes “Miles’ stance amounts to something like ‘I’m just amazed (that) there’re a lot of women out there who (apparently) don’t believe in using condoms’” (p. 155). Du Bois’ reasonable conclusion following this example is rather simply put: “Subjectivity takes an object” (p. 156).

Importantly, in this elaboration of the stance analytic, Du Bois demonstrates how stance acts are not confined to the singular utterance. Du Bois quite effectively points out how stance acts are accomplished across multiple turns and often between different speakers. Moreover, the import of a given stance, as an act to which others can align or not align, often requires a consideration of more than just a singular turn of talk. From this perspective, the prototypical stance act often involves a timescale that stretches across at least three turns – a stance utterance, a prior utterance that includes the stance object, and a subsequent utterance that indicates how a second speaker is aligning (or not) with the stance utterance, or, as Du Bois writes, “There are no private stances” (171), and “From a dialogic perspective, no stance stands alone.” (p. 172). Thus, in this view of stance, stance is itself an intersubjective and dialogical phenomena that signals relations between people through the alignment (or not) of their relations to some object.

2.1. Stance, subjectivity, and some troubles of timescale

In Du Bois’ development of the concept, stance indexes subjectivity, first by the indicated relation (evaluation) to a stance object, and second by indexing a relation (alignment) to another subject via their relation to that object. It is in this sense that Du Bois appears to be seeking to outline a dialogical, relational, and intersubjective conception of subjectivity. As Du Bois writes: “Despite popular conceptions of subjectivity as purely internal, solipsistic state of the individual psyche, we see from the evidence of stancetaking that the presence of a subjective element in no way precludes the presence of an objective element as well. In the end, subjectivity proves meaningful only when subject and object are defined in relation to each other”

\footnote{This example, which will be treated in greater detail below, comes from a corpus of recordings that can be publicly accessed online (see Du Bois et al., 2000 for the website where the transcript and the recording can be accessed). In the analysis that follows, I draw from these materials in order to consider the broader context from which this example was taken.}
(p. 157). In this sense, this notion of stance and subjectivity provides a very effective counter to the often assumed (and in linguistic anthropological circles, much criticized) conception of subjectivity as an interior and individual psychological state that then is expressed or represented via language. In contrast to this view, in his conception of stance Du Bois seeks to cast subjectivity as relational, dialogical, and intersubjective. By implicating other subjects in the stancetaker’s stance, Du Bois appears to be questioning an overly internalistic and individualized view of subjectivity.

Yet, as I will argue below, this notion of subjectivity is dialogical only when we consider the constitution of an individual stance act. Furthermore, the subjectivity that is entailed by stances such as “amazed” or “glad” are rather simplistic and temporally quite fleeting. Even when we include a stance object, this gives a rather flat picture of subjectivity that tells us very little about the subjectivity of the speaker. For example, in the example just mentioned the speaker, Miles, is “amazed” that there are women out there who do not believe in using condoms. To this we might ask: What kind of amazement is this? Perhaps still more to the point, what kind of epistemic relation does Miles hold with regard to this knowledge and how did he come to this knowledge?

Exploring these questions will require an expansion of the timescale of the analysis beyond the single stance act and to considering multiple, sometimes embedded stance acts as they unfold across interactional time.

2.1.1. Stance across interactional time

Looking more closely at the Miles example we see a curious embedding of stance in the stance object that requires us to trace back and forth in time in order to make sense of Miles’ stance of “amazed.” Recall Du Bois’s description of Miles’ stance act, “Miles’ stance amounts to something like ‘I’m just amazed (that) there’re a lot of women out there who (apparently) don’t believe in using condoms’” (p. 155). In this stance object, we find a further stance in the epistemic modal adverb apparently that (curiously) appears in parentheses in Du Bois’ rendering of this stance object. As Kärkkäinen (2003) notes, the most commonly expressed semantic meaning of apparently is as an indicator of knowledge acquired by induction, similar in meaning to the words such as seems and must. Thus, Miles’ utterance appears to be indicating that he has some knowledge regarding women out there who don’t believe in using condoms, but he is also indicating that this is not first hand knowledge. If this were a simple case of presenting first hand knowledge, Miles likely would have just said, in indicative mood, “there’re a lot of women out there who don’t believe in using condoms.” Yet, in keeping with common usage, Miles’ apparently functions to indicate that some aspect of this knowledge is not first hand. So, we might ask, what aspect of this utterance is it that Miles is marking as inductive, and ostensibly not first hand knowledge? Or, in Du Bois’ terms, what is the stance object of Miles’ stance that is indexed by his apparently?

On the one hand, it could be that Miles’ apparently suggests that he is inducing knowledge about women’s condom usage practices. On the other hand, it could be the case that Miles’ apparently suggests that that the induced knowledge is knowledge about women’s beliefs about condom usage. The former would suggest that Miles himself does not have first hand knowledge of these practices. The latter would suggest that the knowledge being induced is the fact of women’s belief and that he may have first hand knowledge of these practices.

If the former were the case and Miles was indicating the uncertain and induced aspect of this knowledge were the entire phrase regarding women’s condom usage practices, then one would expect apparently to appear at the head of the entire sentence, closer to the copula “are,” as in: “Apparently there’re a lot of women out there who don’t believe in using condoms.” Or perhaps, “There’re apparently a lot of women out there who don’t believe in using condoms.” In this case, it would be clearer that the induced knowledge was the entire fact of women’s condom usage rather than more narrowly applying solely to their beliefs.

Yet, this utterance, as produced by Miles does not take either of these forms. Rather, the apparently is located close to the verb “believe.” This would suggest that Miles has inductively inferred is NOT the bare fact of women’s condom usage but rather is the fact that these women don’t believe in using condoms. Thus, with the utterance alone, it is quite possible that this stance utterance simply marks his induction of the fact of their belief. This would also mean that Miles’ knowledge about this practice may indeed be first hand knowledge.

And yet, Miles’ later comments suggest a different interpretation. At 696.01, just about 30 s after Miles’ utterances of apparently and amazed, during a lull in the conversation Miles offers the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lambada (SBC002: 688.27–705.94)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>688.27 688.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>688.74 690.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>690.25 691.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>691.30 693.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>693.29 695.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>694.61 695.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>695.14 695.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Kockelman (2012) has suggested that placement closer to the verbal head indicates a closer relation to the narrated event and that placement further from the verbal head indicates a closer relation to the speech event (or its relation to the narrated event). Using this language, we might note that the placement of apparently relatively closer to the verbal head “believe” indicates that it is more likely to be indicating a relation to the narrated event (i.e., women who don’t believe in using condoms), rather than the speech event (i.e., his act of reportage). This would have been more likely if apparently had appeared more distal to the verbal head.
He is offering evidence that his knowledge of women’s condom usage. Here, he is offering evidence that his knowledge of women’s condom usage comes not from his own personal experience but rather comes from “[these] guys in their twenties,” who are mentioned no less than three times (“talking with these guys in their twenties”, “these guys say”, and “these guys have been telling me”).

A few turns later, Miles revisits his earlier stance of amazement saying, “It is just amazing, that people in their twenties apparently a=rent’ at which point he trails off and the conversation moves on to a new although not entirely unrelated topic.

So here we have embeddings of stance that comprise a stance unit that extends across a timescale beyond just a few turns at talk. In order to make sense of this stance act, we had to take up this longer timescale. We began with Miles’ initial stance in the utterance “I’m just amazed.” As Du Bois noted, this stance points to a cataphorically referenced stance object “a lot of women out there who (apparently) don’t believe in using condoms.” But with Du Bois’ limitation to the timescale of just a few turns of talk, we were left with a very limited view of the character of Miles.

Returning to the original “amazed,” we can now return to the question: what kind of amazed is this? Is this a first hand amazement in which Miles is amazed that women he has been “with” don’t believe in using condoms? Or is it a more of an amazement at something that is happening at a distance, perhaps even with a tinge of moral judgment implied in it?

With Miles’ stance act entailed in his apparently, our answer has to be “both.” Based on the stance act utterance itself, we are led to believe that the knowledge that Miles was uncertain of was women’s beliefs and that Miles may have this first hand knowledge. But then, in his later utterance, Miles offers a second hand source for this knowledge. Further, extending the temporal scope of the analysis can help us to understand this ambiguity and the conversational salience of this ambiguous moment, particularly with regard to the implications of Miles’ heterosexuality.

Throughout earlier moments in this conversation Miles’ heterosexuality has been a recurrent theme: e.g., in Miles’ descriptions of dancing with “those Brazilian women” (890.12) whose “hips are beating up against you” (894.62); or the way that Jamie, Harold’s wife, seems to be playfully engaging with Miles, asking Miles at one point to take her lambada dancing sometime (896.09); or as noted by Harold’s comment “no wonder they forbid this dance” (implying that the dance provokes lascivious behavior). A full description of the manner in which Miles’ heterosexuality becomes thematized in this conversation is well beyond the scope of the present analysis, but a brief look at one moment in this conversation that got some of the biggest laughs is suggestive of the fact that the ambiguity of Miles earlier apparently may have been a salient feature of Miles’ subjectivity as it is being both revealed and built. The conversation comes to something of a climax when Miles describes yet another example of sexually suggestive encounters at “Bahia,” the club that he frequents:

(Lambada SBC002: 1341.10-1360.03)
1341.10 1342.40 JAMIE: All this stuff happens at [Bahia]
1341.87 1342.22 MILES: [Yeah].
1342.40 1342.75 JAMIE: Hunh?
1342.75 1345.00 MILES: … To %other people I mean.
1345.00 1354.92 MILES: ((H_M皓P_LAUGHING_8.0_SEC))
1354.92 1356.83 JAMIE: (H)=([Hx])
1356.83 1357.33 … [We=ll],
1357.08 1357.33 MILES: [X],
1357.33 1358.23 JAMIE: I mean maybe= –
1358.23 1360.03 HAROLD: .. That was @actually very profou=nd

Up to this point, Miles has been describing the sexualized nature of the encounters of other people at the club. It is at this point that the question is finally raised regarding Miles’ implication in these activities. Miles clarifies that these things happen “to other people.” In his rather dry-witted commentary “that was actually very profound,” Harold hints that there may be more to the story regarding Miles’ involvement in these sexual encounters.

Here we see a parallel to the earlier ambiguity of Miles’ apparently, only now the ambiguity is captured interactionally across Miles and Harold’s turns. Just as Miles’ earlier apparently suggested both that he did and perhaps didn’t have first hand
knowledge of women’s condom usage, there is a leakage here between Miles narration of things that happen to other people (and not him) and the event of speaking in which Harold’s response suggests that these things may, in fact, happen to Miles.

As a matter of Miles’ subjectivity, and more particularly his heterosexual masculinity, we see that Miles’ initial stance act of “amazed” is not nearly so simple as was described in the three turns that Du Bois presented in his analysis. The Du Boisian analysis of stance across just a handful of turns revealed nothing about the potential entailment of Miles’ heterosexual masculinity in his initial stance of amazed. By looking across longer timescales, particularly with regard to the embedded stance apparently, we find a much richer texture of Miles’ subjectivity having a particular quality of heterosexual masculinity.

Looking across a longer timescale, we can begin to see how stances interact one with another across time in ways that are consequential for the emerging subjectivities of interactional participants. Thus, we might say that a first important intervention in the conception of stance would be to extend the timescale of analysis beyond just a few turns at talk in order that we might be able to move beyond a simple understanding of subjectivity (here “amazed”) and better to grasp the rich and textured quality of subjectivities that emerge in conversation.

Yet, the above example also presented some difficulty with regard to the ambiguity in Miles’ embedded stance act indicated by his apparently, particularly with regard to the whether and how this stance is linked to Miles’ subjectivity. The ambiguity of Miles’ stance in his apparently utterance suggests that we need some further theoretical apparatus to understand how a stance act becomes consequential for the subjectivity of stance taker. In this case, we saw the moment of Harold’s recognition of Miles’ later comment for an important grounding for that stance. In the next section, I turn to this concern with recognition as an important concept for understanding the constitution of subjectivity as it happens in human interaction. To do so, I turn to Du Bois’ notion of stance ownership and consider a particularly privileged example for studying the link between stance and subjectivity, namely, an instance when a person’s stance is transformed across interactional time.

### 3. Stance ownership as the link between stance and subjectivity

Du Bois calls this linkage between stance and subjectivity “stance ownership.” Stance ownership describes how the speaking subject comes to be responsible for the utterance. Without ownership of the stance, the stance utterance is just a collection of words. When a stance is owned, that stance becomes a part of the stance-taker’s self. For Du Bois, responsibility for stance ownership is one of the critical elements of stance taking, or, as Du Bois writes: “In sum, ownership of stance is the glue that binds the stance act together with actor responsibility and sociocultural value, so that all is linked to a social actor with a name, a history, an identity” (p. 173). How then, we might ask, does a stance come to be owned in contexts such as the one above in which there is ambiguity about the stance? Answering this question, Du Bois rather straightforwardly writes, “In the dialogic shop of stances, there’s a rule: if you take it, you own it” (p. 173). In this view of stance ownership, stance ownership is grounded in the rather simple process of uttering the words of the stance.

Although Du Bois very effectively demonstrates the dialogical nature of stances themselves, when one considers the link between stance and subject, this relationalism and dialogism largely disappears. In comparison to his highly dialogical and intersubjective characterization of the meaning of stance, this characterization of stance ownership is surprisingly nondialogical.

### 4. Towards a dialogical and relational conception of stance ownership

In contrast to this non-dialogical means of establishing a link between stance and subject, in what follows I propose a dialogized and relational conception of stance ownership.

For this, I turn to some rather old thinking about ownership by the philosopher Fichte. Fichte long ago pointed out that the right of ownership is not a simple matter of “taking” (Williams, 1992, 1998). Rather, in order for an instance of ownership to be realized as such, the owner must be recognized by others as having the right of ownership (see also recognition in Hegel, 1977 [1807], 1967[1820]). Without this moment of recognition by others, a claim to ownership is just that, a claim. But, once recognized as such, the right of ownership is made real and thus becomes consequential for the subjectivity of the owners. Following this insight, we might add to Du Bois’ “you take it, you own it” approach that in the dialogic shop of stances, “buyer beware: ownership of stances will be determined by others.” The implications of this insight are far reaching.

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4. There is an existing literature that has taken up the analysis of stance and subjectivity across longer timescales, typically taking up subjectivity in the fashion of “style” (e.g., Jaffe, 2000; Johnstone, 2009; and Kiesling, 2005, 2009). This research has followed Du Bois’ rather simplistic approach to stance ownership that is being critiqued here.

5. See James on ownership and self-hood: “In its widest possible sense… a man’s Me is the sum total of all that he can call his” (James, 1985/1992: 44).

6. A number of linguistic anthropologists have criticized ownership-based views of meaning, Stroud (1992), Duranti (1988), and Holquist (1983). For example, Holquist writes, “This view holds that ‘I own meaning.’ A close bond is felt between the sense I have of myself as a unique being and the being of my language. Such a view, with its heavy investment in the personhood of individuals, is deeply implicated in the Western Humanist tradition” (Holquist, 1983: 2). Similarly, Duranti writes, “Rather than taking words as representations or privately owned meanings, Samoans practice interpretation as a way of publicly controlling social relationships rather than as a way of figuring out what a given person ‘meant to say’” (Duranti, 1988: 15). Although, Du Bois’ characterization of the meaning of stances is highly dialogical and intersubjective, his conception of stance ownership, i.e., the link between stance and subjectivity, is defined non-dialogically.

7. Fichte also developed a theory of the subject that was similarly dependent upon the recognition of other. Thus the present article can be thought of as an extension of this view of subjectivity.
In contrast to Du Bois’ simplistic “you take it, you own it” formulation of stance ownership, I propose that we attend closely to the interactional processes through which stance ownership is recognized intersubjectively by the tutor, by the speaker’s embodied response as realized through prosody, and by a non-human thing (i.e., the test). Using the extended example below, I illustrate how the ownership of stance requires a longer timescale in order to show how the others that constitute stance ownership are not only intersubjective but can also be bodies and things. The example below is taken from my own research on tutoring interactions. This example demonstrates the importance of attending to the uptake of stances in order to characterize the link between stance and subjectivity.

Of particular interest in this example is the way in which the student’s stance toward her own abilities is transformed across a relatively short amount of time. Because this example entails a change of stance across time, this example allows us to attend to the full complexity of how stances get linked to subjects. In other words, such a moment of transformation is surely a privileged kind of evidence for revealing exactly how some linkage between stance and subject actually happens. Thus, with regard to stance ownership, the critical question is: How does this student come to take ownership of a new stance?

4.1. An uncertain stance

I start with a particularly rich and reflexive moment of stance taking in which the student’s self is multiply implicated in a stance taken by the tutor. This moment happens early on in a tutoring session between a college tutor whom I will refer to as Joan and the student, a high school junior, I will call LaShawnda. Joan and LaShawnda are working on mathematics problems from a book full of practice questions taken from previous ACT tests.8 The following moment happens almost two and a half minutes into the tutoring session, after LaShawnda has successfully solved two problems dealing with percentages despite the fact that LaShawnda has already indicated that she had previously been unable to solve these problems when she had attempted them on her own.

Immediately after LaShawnda has successfully solved her second problem, the following exchange occurs:

| 2:26 Joan; | You’re smarter than you think You know? |
| 2:27 LaShawnda; | I think so |
| 2:28 Joan; | (Laughing) Ah-I know so Come in here telling me you’re so bad at math and you’re flying through these problems like it’s nothin’ |

When considering the stance act of Joan’s utterance at 2:26, we should first establish that this is indeed a stance act, i.e., an act of evaluation, and not simply a matter of mere description. If we were to simply look at the grammatical structure of Joan’s utterance at 2:26, we would find that this utterance is in the indicative mood. This alone might suggest that Joan’s utterance is not a stance but is rather a description of some state of affairs (and, as noted below, this may be important to the rhetorical force of Joan’s utterance). Yet, if we follow Kockelman’s (2012) suggestion to look to the speakers for deciding what is deliberative and what is evaluative and stance-like, we find that LaShawnda follows Joan’s statement with her own stance act that marks her own lessened epistemic commitment with her “I think so.” With this stance utterance, LaShawnda casts doubt on Joan’s statement and locates it solidly in the realm of stance. Here LaShawnda takes what appeared grammatically as a statement of fact and turns it into a matter of opinion, a stance. LaShawnda’s uncertain response suggests that Joan’s utterance is not merely a description of the way things are in the world, but is rather an act of evaluation.

Of further interest here is the fact that LaShawnda does not take up the more certain stance that Joan has invited her to take in her tag question “you know?” Rather, LaShawnda’s response of “I think so” ratchets down her epistemic commitment to Joan’s utterance about her despite Joan’s invitation to a higher degree of epistemic commitment.

It is worth noting here that in addition to the various moments of Du Boisian stance alignment at play here (e.g., LaShawnda’s “I think so” followed by Joan’s “I know so”), Joan’s initial utterance also embeds a further stance, namely, LaShawnda’s stance towards the test. By stating that LaShawnda is smarter than she thinks, Joan is taking a stance towards LaShawnda’s stance toward her own ability to perform on the test.

4.2. Stance transformed

If we now look just about six and a half minutes later, we see LaShawnda taking a different stance with regard to her own abilities that, in fact, aligns her with Joan’s earlier statement about her. After having solved five more of these percentage problems with only minimal help from Joan, LaShawnda notes:

| 9:03.5 LaShawnda; | I don’t know why I had such a hard time with this |
| 9:08.5 Joan; | Yeah but see now you gonna know. |

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8 The ACT is a college entrance exam used by many universities in the U.S. to help determine admittance to a given college or university. These scores are sometimes also used for allotting scholarship monies.
Whereas she previously indicated uncertainty with regard to her own abilities (her earlier “I think so”), now she seems to be aligning herself with Joan’s proposal that she is indeed smarter than she thinks. Whereas she was previously unwilling to commit to the stance toward the test that Joan had offered (“you’re smarter than you think”), now she finds herself taking a stance very much like that which Joan had offered. Now she is no longer aligned with her earlier self that did not know how to solve these problems (i.e., the self that “had such a hard time with this”), but is instead aligned with a self that now knows how to do these kinds of problems.

Here LaShawnda’s utterance closely parallels the structure of Joan’s earlier formulation – only this time she temporalizes a self of the past. In stance terms, the stance object in this case is “why I had such a hard time with this,” and the subject of her stance is her own self, particularly her own inability to solve these math problems. This stance suggests a rather substantial transformation of LaShawnda’s subjectivity.

What’s more, as with the initial stance in which Joan recognized LaShawnda as “smarter than [she] think[s],” LaShawnda’s stance here is also recognized as a temporal transformation by Joan, as indicated by Joan’s seconding LaShawnda’s assertion when she says, “Yeah, but now you gonna know.” Here again, we can see the grounding of the stance ownership in inter-subjective recognition.

Yet, notwithstanding the fact that LaShawnda’s utterance suggests a stance of greater certainty regarding her ability to competently solve these percentage problems, the casual observer might still say: Yes, she has uttered these stance-like words and yes the tutor has recognized her as having this stance, but is she really owning it? Or put slightly differently, considering that stance ownership is, in Du Bois’ words, the glue that binds the subject to the social value of the stance, is the social value of the stance binding to LaShawnda as a subject such that this stance is consequential who LaShawnda is? That is, does this transformation of stance also bring with it a transformation of LaShawnda’s subjectivity qua self?

In what follows, I address these questions by identifying two additional groundings of stance ownership that help to ground LaShawnda’s ownership of this stance and thus provide anchors for her subjectivity. These two additional groundings of stance ownership are: embodied indexical iconicity and the stances of things, or simply, interobjectivity.

4.3. Embodied indexical iconicity as grounding for stance ownership

As further evidence of LaShawda’s stance ownership, I first introduce two ways in which the grounding of stance moves can be located in embodied indexical iconicity. The first example comes in-between the two moments mentioned above. At this point, LaShawnda just discovered the answer to the third percentage problem, a problem that she was struggling to understand. When she finally figures it out, she says the following:

4:00.5 LaShawn: Oh. ((rising then falling intonation, duration of 1.2 seconds))
(1.2)
Okay
((0.8))
gotcha

The oh in LaShawnda’s utterance is remarkable for its prosodic features. It is realized across approximately 1.4 s and involves a dramatic pitch contour that goes up and then holds and then falls. Fig. 1 shows the pitch contour of this oh. The pitch contour of this oh begins at around 200 Hz, rises to a peak of just over 400 Hz where it is held for approximately 0.6 s, and then drops to just above 150 Hz. This oh appears to be relevant to precisely the stance that was at issue in Joan’s earlier utterance about LaShawnda being smarter than she thinks–i.e., the relation between LaShawnda and the test. The up and then down shape of the pitch contour of this oh is itself iconically suggestive of a not undramatic transformation, thus functioning precisely as an embodied indication of a stance that is in the act of being transformed.
As a second example, if we look at her production of speech prior to the first moment when Joan says “you’re smarter than you think” and the second moment when LaShawnda says “I don’t know why I had such a hard time with this,” we see that there is a change in the speech she produces as she approaches these percentage problems. I’ll give just one example of each point in time.

Here is an example of how she approached the first problem:

1:19.5 Joan; So how would you do that?
1:22.5 LaShawnda; Would you-
I don’t know ((high pitch))
il- it says
the number of fires
in 1992
which are 100

As she reads this first problem, LaShawnda has a couple of false starts and disfluencies. In addition to these, LaShawnda responds with a particularly high pitch that suggests uncertainty. Now compare this her approach less than five minutes later, just as she is giving the solution to a problem (at 6:08):

6:08 LaShawnda; <<vox/announcer’s voice>> It’s thirty percent <<vox>>
((0.4))
6:10 Joan; Exactly
See you good at pe’cents
((0.6))
6:12.5 LaShawnda; Cool
Okay.
So I’m a’ do this number forty nine
Okay
Twenty students attended Professor

In this passage, there are two rather notable features of LaShawnda’s stance toward these problems. First, in her approach to the next problem in her turn at 6:12.5 she unhesitatingly starts a new problem saying “So I’m a’ do this number forty nine.” Second, as she solves the prior problem in her turn at 6:08, she produces a very authoritative voicing when giving the answer to the problem. Here, her speech is produced at a slower rate and with a markedly lower pitch contour such that she sounds like a television announcer announcing the answer. This is a dramatic departure from just a few minutes prior when she would say the answers with rising pitch – as if asking a question.

These two examples of prosodically realized embodied voicing both further contribute to the establishment of stance ownership since it is not simply the case that a stance is constituted by merely uttering the words (i.e., you take it you own it). In these examples, LaShawnda actually enacts these stances as indexical icons. Taking her prosodic behavior as a kind of stance toward the test, we can see that, in this sense, whether as a prosodically marked pragmatic marker or as disfluencies and hesitations, her prosodic behavior embodies stance as an indexical icon, simultaneously pointing to and standing for a stance, and thus providing further grounding for her ownership of the later stance “I don’t know why I had such a hard time with this”.

Yet, even with this addition of stance embodiment through indexical iconicity, there is one remaining thing that we have not yet accounted for, namely the stance of the test itself.

4.4. The stance of things: interobjectivity as a ground for stance ownership

In the exchange relations of Western societies there are various non-trivial non-human agents that are critical to a person taking ownership of a particular item. There is a complex assemblage (cf. Kockelman’s [2013] “infrastructure”) of both human and non-human agents that is necessary in order for the buyer (or stance-taker) to be recognized as having taken ownership of an item (or stance). For example, in the case of “taking” vs. “owning” an item from a store, there is the matter of the physical money changing hands (whether it is actual paper money or encrypted on a credit card), there is the matter of the boundaries of the store, within which one can freely carry around the item but without which one cannot take the item unless one has paid for it, and there is the matter of the various paper documents (contracts and receipts) that indicate that the store rightfully had ownership of the item in the first place and that the customer now has rightful ownership. It is through the involvement of these non-human agents that ownership is made all the more real (e.g., we often ask for a receipt even when they serve no purpose).

To put this in the terms of what Joan and LaShawnda are facing, it would hardly be convincing to say that LaShawnda’s subjectivity has been transformed as a subject if she were still unable to answer the problems on the test. Were she to have simply changed her stance toward these test problems without having changed in her performance on the test, then in the local ethnometapragmatics we would say that she is “overconfident.” So then, to capture this dimension of the consequences
of stance for subjectivity, we need some way to incorporate the role of the test itself as a participant in this interaction. But can a thing like a test really take a stance towards a human subject?

To answer this, I briefly remind the reader of Du Bois’ definition of a stance and, by extension a stancetaker. The essential characteristics of stance are a stancetaker who (1) evaluates an object, (2) positions a subject, and (3) aligns with other subjects.

Taking each of these in turn, with regard to evaluation, it should be clear that the test is, by its very nature, evaluative. Recalling Du Bois definition of evaluation, we might say that the test “orients to an object of stance and characterizes it as having some specific quality or value” (p. 143). In this case, LaShawnda is the object of stance and there are multiple layerings of value that are being invoked by the test—as stancetaker. I’ll address just one of these layerings of value, namely, the quality of being either “right” or “wrong.” The test, here in the form of a single question in a book of practice test questions, functions to evaluate the student’s answer as either right or wrong. In this case, the physical manifestation of this evaluation is the answer key at the back of the book.9 But in terms of the social value that the test characterizes, it is more than just a matter of getting the answer on the test “right” or “wrong.” Rather, one’s cumulative score on the test goes on one’s “record” and plays an important role in determining the college(s) into which a student will be able to gain admission. As such, we might consider the test to be a “graphic artifact” (Hull, 2003).10 One of the crucial and distinctive features of the graphic artifact is its perduring nature. Just as the “files” that Hull (2003) studied endure beyond any individual interaction, one’s score on a standardized exam such as the ACT will stay on record for years following the few hours that one was actually interacting with the test itself. Because of this, the evaluative capacity of the test has a peculiar force that will have enduring consequences that we would not expect to find in the case of the other two modes of evaluation described above (intersubjective recognition and embodiment). This graphic artifactual nature of the test score means that it can potentially affect other kinds of decisions that are temporally displaced from the act of test taking such as future employment and income. These far reaching consequences strongly demonstrate that the test accomplishes the first criteria of a stance – it evaluates.

In the act of evaluating LaShawnda’s response as either right or wrong, the test also engages in an act of alignment. Recalling Du Bois’ definition of alignment, the test engages in “the act of calibrating the relationship between two stances, and by implication between two stancetakers” (p. 144). Most simply, the test takes a stance toward LaShawnda’s answers as right or wrong. This can then be calibrated (or not) with the stance that Joan takes toward LaShawnda. The test thus authorizes Joan’s assessment of LaShawnda as being “smarter than [she] thinks.” At the end of the day, if Joan’s answers are repeatedly evaluated by the test (or the answer key of the test) as “wrong,” then Joan’s words “you’re smarter than you think” will have been unrealized. In this sense, the test becomes a crucial authorizer of stance ownership and whether or not LaShawnda can come to own Joan’s proposal that LaShawnda is “smarter than she thinks.”

Finally, with regard to the third of Du Bois’ features of stance, positioning, there is good evidence in the transcript here that the test, in the broadest sense, is positioned in the act of evaluating others. Returning again to Du Bois’ definition, Du Bois defines positioning as “the act of situating a social actor with respect to responsibility for stance and for invoking sociocultural value” (p. 143). With regard to the invoking sociocultural value, we have already established that the test does this. But, we might ask, how does the test situate a social actor (the test?) with respect to responsibility for stance and for invoking sociocultural value? The critical question with regard to positioning is whether or not the test is situated as being “responsible” for the invocation of sociocultural value and for the stance that it has taken with regard to LaShawnda.

There is good evidence in this interaction that suggests that the test itself is infused with intentionality. At multiple points throughout this interaction, Joan and LaShawnda characterize the test as an agent, captured by the third person plural pronoun deictic “they.” Sometimes, this occurs when Joan or LaShawnda are simply describing what a question is asking. For example, at 5:30.5, after Joan asks LaShawnda what a particular problem is asking, LaShawnda says, “They wanna know what percent...” At other times, Joan and LaShawnda are referring to the test as a somewhat more nefarious “they.” For example, at 14:09, as they are working through a tricky problem, Joan says, “see they try to trick you with the way they/word the question/so you gotta read ‘em carefully.” At still other times, LaShawnda attributes an agentic power to the test. For example, at 2:33.5 LaShawnda says, “I take a look at the test/and just look at the numbers and my brain freeze,” or still more to the point is at 38:41 when she says, “cuz its like they – I for like/I be forgettin’ this – I don’t know/I think its just the test.” These examples demonstrate how, in response to its evaluation of LaShawnda, the test is positioned as an intentional and agentic actor.

Thus, the test can be seen to have accomplished the three basic criteria for a stance – evaluation, positioning, and alignment. What’s more, the test’s capacity for stance taking may perhaps be the most important grounding of LaShawnda’s stance ownership when compared to the other two grounds for LaShawnda’s stance ownership, namely, Joan’s recognition of LaShawnda and LaShawnda’s prosodic embodiment. In the case of Joan’s recognition of LaShawnda, in Joan’s initial utterance

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9 In most cases, Joan acts as a proxy for the answer key by indicating when Joan has gotten the answer right or wrong. But Joan does sometimes check the answer key to make sure that she has the “right” answer as determined by the answer key. Occasionally Joan is wrong and corrects herself.

10 For an interesting application of graphic artifacts, see Nozawa (2016). Nozawa’s examples of life-story writings as graphic artifacts interestingly contrasts with the example here of a standardized test score as a graphic artifact.

11 This issue points back to one of the core concerns with Du Bois’ notion of stance, and precisely the one that was raised with regard to stance ownership – namely, that it relies on an intentionalist (in the sense of “purposeful”) theory of meaning. As with Du Bois’ notion of stance ownership in which a stance taken is a stance owned, positioning, as it is described here, appears to be a matter of a subject intentionally positioning themselves – as captured in the phrases “situating with respect to responsibility” and “invoking sociocultural value.”
“you’re smarter than you think,” it is LaShawnda’s successful solving of the first two problems in the book that provides the anchor for Joan’s description/stance. Then, seven minutes later, when LaShawnda says “I don’t know why I had such a hard time with this,” her deictic “this” refers to the subsection of problems on the ACT that address percentages. Similarly, when LaShawnda produces the prosodically marked and embodied “oh,” this moment is also anchored in the test as authorizing graphic artifact since LaShawnda’s “oh” here comes after she appears to have just figured out how to solve a more difficult type of percentage problem.

With Du Bois’ approach to stance taking, although there is plenty of room for an intersubjective notion of the meaning of stance, there is little room for incorporating things as stance subjects. Grammatically speaking they are always relegated to the realm of stance objects. By placing things, such as the test, in the slot of grammatical subjects of the stance taking sentence (things as sentential subjects!), we can begin to offer an explanation for the grounding of stance ownership that moves beyond the merely intersubjective and gestures toward a grounding of the subject in an interobjective world (Latour, 1996).

Although, I have focused on a particularly peculiar type of thing here – a graphic artifact – other articles in this issue point to how things normally understood as proper “objects” could take stances towards people. For example, consider the marbles playing field upon which the Aymara boys that Smith (2016) studies realize their masculinity. The playing field could be said to be taking a stance toward the boys in as much as it: 1) serves to evaluate them (as masculine or not), 2) positions the playing field itself as a particular kind of subject (e.g., minimally as “easier” or “harder”), and 3) aligns the playing field with other subjects (e.g., an other playing field or potentially with other any other object/subject that evaluates a particular boy’s masculinity). Similarly, we might consider how the physical picture of the chicken and corn cobs in Haviland’s (2016) elicitation task serves minimally as an anchor for the evaluation of Jane by Frank and Will and maximally as having taken a stance regarding their claims about what is contained in the picture. In each of these cases, whether of the test, the marbles playing field, or the photograph, these things seem to hold a particular sway as a grounding for the constitution of subjectivity.

4.5. Discussion: timescales and the grounding of LaShawnda’s stance ownership

By looking across longer timescales than just the few turns of talk that Du Bois focuses on, we can begin to see how a grounding of subjectivity emerges from the play of stances across time. Looking across longer timescales enabled us to analyze a moment of transformation of stance ownership that I have introduced above.

With the “you take it, you own it” approach to stance ownership, stances appear to be very stable things – easily “taken” and easily “owned” (in a non-dialogical sense). One important implication for this is that the potential instability and uncertainty attendant to stance acts is missed entirely. By rejecting the “you take it, you own it” approach to stance ownership and adopting a position which locates stance ownership on such shaky ground as the recognition of others (whether human or not), the analyst is given leverage for understanding how stance ownership, and thus the link from stance to self, is constituted and stabilized (or de-stabilized) in interactional practice. This then opens up the means for understanding ambiguities and potential transformations that are attendant to the unstable and shaky nature of the recognition of the grounds of stance ownership that I have introduced above.

This form of grounding of stance ownership is unstable and shaky in contrast to the firm and simple grounding of stance ownership in the “you take it, you own it” approach. Rather, because the ground of stance ownership is not merely dialogical but multiply relational – i.e., intersubjective, embodied, and interobjective – stance ownership cannot be based on the simple individual act of choosing to take and thus own a stance. Instead, this form of grounding is rather like a three dimensional web in which each individual strand may be weak but taken together they can provide a robust anchoring of a subject to a position (as long as each relational strand holds the subject in roughly the same place).

Of further relevance, by locating the grounding of the relation of stance to subject in these relational processes, the notion of stance can better deal with the very real potential for ambiguity, uncertainty, and transformation of stances across time, as demonstrated in the example of LaShawnda and Joan.

I should add that the increasing concern for bodies and things is not a triumph of things over people – as some caricatured post-humanist philosophies would have it. In the case of LaShawnda and Joan, if there is a heroic thread (to remain with the metaphor above), that heroic thread is the intersubjective one. At the outset of the interaction, both the interobjective (i.e., LaShawnda’s failure to answer the test questions) and embodied threads (i.e., LaShawnda’s hesitations and false starts) are holding LaShawnda in a subject position of being incompetent at these math problems. It is the intersubjective recognition by Joan (i.e., “you’re smarter than you think/you know) that exerts a pull in a different direction altogether, and one that soon re-aligns the embodied and interobjective as LaShawnda actually becomes “smarter than [she] thinks.”

5. Conclusions: timescale, stance, and the constitution of subjectivity

The timescale considered in Du Bois’ conception of stance is the timescale of a handful of turns-at-talk, typically somewhere around five seconds of talk, that constitute a singular stance – what we might call a snapshot of stance. These snapshots of stance may have been precisely what was needed to hold in place the flux and flow of everyday life in order to synchronically see the structure of the dialogical relations that make a stance possible in the first place.
Yet, as a matter of informing the analyst about the subjectivity of the speaker, this practice of attending to the singular stance act leaves us with rather thin depictions of persons – mere snapshots of selves at various times: glad, knowing, amazed. In these snapshots of subjectivity we gain little sense of the richly characterizable persons with their quirks and dispositions, tendencies and habits, and political and personal commitments.

Likewise, when considered at this short timescale, the conception of stance ownership is overly simplistic. In place of the “you take it, you own it” approach, I have proposed that if we wish to determine how the stance is related to the speaker (i.e., stance ownership), we must look across longer timescales and towards the up-take of stances. When we do so we get a more complex picture of stance ownership that involves intersubjectivity (on longer timescales), embodiment, and interobjectivity.

Relatedly, when we limit the timescale of analysis to the individual stance act, stances appear to the analyst to be rather stable, perhaps even “atomistic,” units (Du Bois refers to them as “the building blocks of social life”). As a result, it can be difficult to see how those stances can themselves be unstable and changing across time. Similarly obscured are the constitutive powers of stances and our ability to understand what stances do and make in interaction, i.e., how they contribute to the constitution of the subjectivities of the persons involved in the interaction (cf. Hacking, 1999). The intersubjective, embodied, and interobjective approach to stance ownership described in this article can enable us to see not just the stable and determinate stances but can also shed light on stances that are ambiguous, unstable, and changing in time.

The key point of this analysis is that if we are interested in questions such as the constitution of subjectivity and self in time, we will need to consider stance across longer timescales. If we wish to understand how life is lived and how subjects are transformed and emergently constituted, we need to unfreeze these snapshots of self-hood and watch the play of stances as it happens across interactional time.

One further extension that I would propose of this analysis is that this kind of work can function as a bridge between different and often seemingly incommensurate timescaled analytics of subjectivity. Take for example, the analytic of stance ownership that has been developed in this article as a process that unfolds across the interactional timescale (i.e., minutes to tens of minutes). We might then consider how this shorter timescaled process might relate to an analytic such as Foucault’s (1982) subjectification – a process in which subjectivity emerges across timescales of decades to centuries. Although the present analysis did not explicitly point to such cross-timescaled connections, the astute reader will notice some very Foucauldian concerns raised by the examples offered above – of a particular form of masculinized heterosexuality, and of a particular form of disciplinary practice known as “standardized testing.” Interlacing these analytics can help us to understand the multiply scaled imbrications of longer timescaled processes as they are realized and, however minutely, sustained by the moment by moment stances of human agents.

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