

# Norton, Bonny

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Bonny Norton is Professor and Distinguished University Scholar in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada, where she has received both the Killam Teaching Award (2003) and the Killam Research Prize (2007) for her exemplary contributions to the field of applied linguistics. In 2011, Norton became the inaugural recipient of the “Second Language Leadership Through Research” Award from the American Educational Research Association.

Norton’s research addresses identity and language learning, applied linguistics and international development, and critical literacy. In addition to her scholarship, which includes her widely cited monograph, *Identity and Language Learning: Gender, Ethnicity and Educational Change* (2000), three edited books, and numerous research articles and book chapters, she has pursued her dedication to these areas as founding coeditor of the *Critical Language and Literacy Studies* book series, published by Multilingual Matters (with Alastair Pennycook and Vaidehi Ramanathan), and through her service to the field. She was teaching issues editor of the *TESOL Quarterly* from 1994 to 2007, and she is cofounder, with Sinfree Makoni and Pippa Stein, of the AILA Research Network on Applied Linguistics and Literacy in Africa and the Diaspora ([www.renafrica.org](http://www.renafrica.org)).

Born and raised in South Africa, Norton has long had an interest in critical approaches to language and literacy practices in multilingual contexts, and her first publication in the *TESOL Quarterly* (Norton Peirce, 1989) was a cowinner of the 1990 Malkemes Prize for “opening a new era in the profession” for integrating linguistics, politics, and pedagogy at a fundamental level. After earning degrees in education and applied linguistics at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits), and teaching at high school in Johannesburg, Norton earned her MA in theoretical linguistics at Reading University in the UK. She then joined the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey, where she worked as a TOEFL test developer from 1984 to 1987. Her interest in language assessment and social change arose from this work, with an early key publication in the *Harvard Educational Review* (Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995). Another publication on “Demystifying the TOEFL Reading Test” won the 1994 International Language Testing Association Award for the best article on language testing (Norton Peirce, 1992). After completing her PhD in language education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), at the University of Toronto, Norton was a visiting scholar at Wits University, a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow at OISE, and a USA Spencer postdoctoral fellow at McMaster University. She joined the faculty in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at UBC in 1996.

Norton is best known for her work on second language learning and identity, and for developing the sociological construct of *investment* to complement the psychological construct of *motivation* (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 1997, 2000). After researching immigrant second language learners in Canada, Norton found that learners could not be unproblematically defined as either motivated or unmotivated. Instead, she recognized that learners construct their identities as second language speakers in response to social and historical relations with their target language communities, and with reference to their cultural past and hopes for the future. Learners invest in a target language with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase the value of their social and cultural power. Access and privilege shape learners’ investments since they must navigate frequently inequitable social structures as well as their own human agency. In this view, while a learner may be highly motivated, he or she might not be invested in the language practices of a given classroom or community, which may, for example, be racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic. In Norton’s research, some ESL learners

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were able to claim legitimacy over time by negotiating “the right to speak,” but others did not experience such access, and hence, chose not to invest in the identity of the ESL learner/speaker. Such findings led Norton to more closely examine how gender plays a role in identity formation in language learning (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004), and to explore how critical pedagogies can open up new spaces for learners (Norton & Toohey, 2004). Since Norton’s seminal publications, the concept of investment has been taken up by many applied linguists in contexts ranging from academic language socialization (McKay & Wong, 1996) to heritage language learning (Potowski, 2004; Wong & Xiao, 2010) and the learning of English as an international language (Gu, 2008).

Other constructs related to investment that Norton has brought to the center of debates in applied linguistics are *imagined communities* and *imagined identities*. Second language learners can claim identities as legitimate speakers if they can forge connections with particular communities of language users. These communities are often imagined communities since they may be far removed from the learners, or they may simply be out of reach due to structural constraints. As an illustration, Norton (2000) shows how two adult immigrant language learners who were highly invested in imagined communities outside their adult ESL class eventually dropped out since their imagined identities were not validated by their ESL teachers. These topics are further explored in a thematic volume that Norton coedited with Yasuko Kanno in the *Journal of Language, Identity and Education* (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

While she continues to write about identity and English-language learning around the world, Norton has turned her attention more squarely back to sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, where she has combined her long-standing interest in identity with the role of critical literacies in international development (Mutonyi & Norton, 2007; Tembe & Norton, 2008). After serving as a plenary speaker at the third Pan-African Conference on Reading in Kampala, Uganda, in 2003, Norton began working closely with both Ugandan and UBC colleagues on major grant-funded projects on literacy and development. As much of this work has explored how learners’ literacy experiences relate to their social worlds, Norton has often focused on young people’s health literacies in the context of HIV/AIDS education and prevention. Her research has examined how peer education offers opportunities for critical responses to the threat of HIV (Norton & Mutonyi, 2007), and how the larger discourses in HIV/AIDS research govern official responses to the pandemic (Norton & Mutonyi, 2010). Her passion for working to promote deeper understandings of the links between literacy, education, and public health are clearly reflected in her latest edited volume, *Language and HIV/AIDS*, which she co-edited with Christina Higgins (Higgins & Norton, 2010). As one reviewer wrote, “Applied linguistics doesn’t get any better than this” (Fonken, 2011, p. 126).

Bonny Norton’s dedication to applied linguistics as a vehicle for social change and empowerment is inspiring, and her enthusiasm is tireless. Still, despite a long list of commitments and constant travel for research and invited talks, one of Norton’s best qualities is that she always finds time to give encouraging feedback to others, particularly emerging scholars who are finding their way in a complex and exciting field.

**SEE ALSO:** Critical Applied Linguistics; Critical Ethnography; Language and Identity; Subjectivity

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