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## RECONCILING THE POSITIVIST AND THE CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVES WITH THE NOTION OF *POSITIONING*

### GODZENIE PERSPEKTYWY POZYTYWISTYCZNEJ I KONSTRUKTYWISTYCZNEJ POPRZEZ POJĘCIE *POZYCJONOWANIA*

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł wprowadza pojęcie *pozycjonowania* jako ludzkiej cechy reprezentującej naturalne podejście do różnych problemów edukacyjnych. Analogicznie do pozycjonowania online, artykuł przedstawia dwie formy *pozycjonowania* – pierwszą, w ramach której ludzie umieszczają pojęcia na uniwersalnych skalach (w zależności od tego, jak bardzo cenią, lubią itp. rzeczy), oraz drugą, zgodnie z którą lokalizują te same aspekty w indywidualnych przestrzeniach wielowymiarowych (w zależności od różnych niestopniowalnych atrybutów). Tekst otwiera omówienie podstaw epistemologicznych przedmiotowego pojęcia w jego dwóch wariantach, po czym omawia implikacje metodologiczne i dydaktyczne wynikające z dwóch form *pozycjonowania*. *Pozycjonowanie* stanowi tu podstawę współczesnego paradygmatu edukacyjnego, odzwierciedlającego hybrydowy charakter ludzkiego podejścia i godzącego pozytywistyczne i konstruktywistyczne poglądy na edukację. W całym artykule kluczowe pojęcie odniesione zostaje do języka mówionego, do którego podejście łączy skalowalne aspekty i cechy

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niestopniowalne, i które to podejście determinuje cały nasz sukces edukacyjny (i zawodowy).

**Słowa kluczowe:** *pozycjonowanie*, perspektywa pozytywistyczna, perspektywa konstruktywistyczna, podejście ucznia

**Abstract:** The paper introduces the notion of *positioning* as a human characteristic representing natural treatment of different educational issues. By analogy to online positioning, the paper outlines two forms of *positioning* – first, whereby people place concepts on universal scales (depending on how much they value, like, etc. things) and, second, whereby people locate the same facets within individual multidimensional spaces (depending on different non-gradable attributes). The text opens with epistemological grounds of the notion in question in its two variants, and continues with methodological and instructional implications following from two forms of *positioning*. It proposes *positioning* as underlying a modern educational paradigm, reflecting the hybrid character of people's approach and reconciling positivist and constructivist views on education. Throughout the paper, the key notion is applied to spoken language, the approach to which combines scalable facets and non-gradable characteristics, and which has been shown to determine our entire educational (and professional) success.

**Key words:** *positioning*, positivist perspective, constructivist perspective, a student's approach

### **Two epistemological threads of *positioning***

In our lives we – deliberately or unconsciously – position things on a daily basis: we place various facets, phenomena, issues, people etc. on our own hierarchies as well as in self-defined spaces. This is to say that ordinary human *positioning* has a twofold character:

- on the one hand, we place various concepts on multiple scales (when, say, we consider something less or more important or likeable), and,
- on the other hand, we locate the same facets within multidimensional spaces, rendering them constructs that evade any form of hierarchisation (when we assign to these facets any non-gradable attributes)

Accordingly, when approaching, for instance, our education or work, we naturally combine two “sub-approaches”: we assign to it a particular degree of importance or enjoyment, and, at the same time, we view and refer to it through the prism of a number of non-gradable characteristics. Hence, in our approach, our education or work is both a (scalable) concept and (rather than or(sic)) a (non-scalable) construct.

Most importantly, the two processes co-occur and it is simply human to position things, people, and phenomena in these two ways, whilst separating them speaks against the very human nature. In other words, placing things on linear scales does not take place in our minds without locating things within our self-defined multidimensional spaces, and by the same token, it does not transpire as human to act conversely, that is to within individual spaces without the use of any scale.

Thus, the notion of *positioning* brings out the real character of the human approach. Paradoxically, it becomes clear through the analogy to how *positioning* works in the online world: when talking about *positioning* websites, we refer to how highly they appear on lists of pages. If they are positioned well enough, they top these lists, but if the *positioning* is not effective, the given web pages land low (as less visited). We position things on the basis of both explicit as well as implicit criteria similarly to how the online *positioning* works, where certain criteria are easily noticeable (be it a location, a discipline, a category – depending on what we are seeking), whilst others remain unknown to computer users. We keep positioning things - as relevant to one another – despite the fact that this process is highly unrecognisable and not spoken about – just like any search engine does. We do not remain constant in how we position things, with multiple facets of settings affecting the *positioning* of items on our mental list; similarly, the online *positioning* falls subject to change in such a degree that a search engine may yield a different list just after a few seconds.

The notion of *positioning* has been heavily exploited in many different fields, particularly marketing, where it refers to an overall strategy of making specific brands or products occupy a distinct position, relative to competing names or items – both objectively as well as subjectively in the mind of the customer. As Janiszewska & Insch note, brand *positioning* ‘determines the framework of visual and communication-related execution’ and ‘future brand development as [it is] the basis for gaining competitive advantage’ (Janiszewska & Insch 2012: 9). We can say that the notion of *positioning* itself is positioned highly in the field in question, which is marked by, for example, the fact that dictionary definitions mention this meaning as the first (or even only) meaning, be it “the position held by a product in the opinion of customers, in comparison with its competitors’ brands” (Collins 2024). Surprisingly, so far the notion of *positioning* has not been used in the realm of education, which this paper strives to change.

Example: the *positioning* of spoken language

Let's consider the twofold character of *positioning* with regard to spoken language and to our own speaking. Its two threads and their complementariness is manifested by two types of exemplary remarks:

- on the one hand, remarks such as, on the positive side, "I really like speaking/talking", "I find speaking important for my overall development", "I speak to myself a lot", etc., or, on the negative side, "Speaking tires me", "I prefer learning in silence, without anyone or myself speaking", "There's too much spoken language and too little action", etc., and
- on the other hand, comments made *without* any hierarchisation on the character of speech, be it "Speaking is a natural part of learning, just like listening, testing, asking questions", "It's hard to imagine schools without spoken language", "In our educational system spoken language is often replaced by graphics deprived of any words", etc.

The notion of *positioning* (of concepts or constructs) ensues from today's holistic treatment of people and their development. The traditional divisions have come to be questioned by many different fields as no dimension – be it cognition or affect – exists in isolation or in a vacuum, but, instead, various facets co-exist and call for their joint treatment. As such discoveries are made in the field of sciences which underlie education, today's learning and teaching methods need to comply. Most notably, this applies to neuroscience, which has shown, for example, that the link between cognition and affect is so strong that entirely rational decision-making process practically does not exist and remains affected (and initiated) by affect (Beck 2019: 177). Similar reasoning on the interdependence between dimensions previously treated separately occurs in the extensive pool of recent publications focused on a student's identity (e.g. Joseph 2004; Jenkins 2008; Fekete 2021), linguistic identity (Haugan 2020), or holistic approaches to identity construction (Fekete 2020).

### **Two ensuing methodological threads of *positioning***

The fact that we concurrently position the same things in two different ways – along linear scales and within multidimensional spaces – implies that their comprehensive examination reflecting our true human approach calls for the joint application of positivist and constructivist methodologies. In other words the notion of *positioning* serves to reconcile the

positivist and constructivist perspectives. Or conversely – either of the two perspectives requires the other in order to jointly provide a sufficiently holistic and genuine picture.

Let us consider more closely then the two threads of our approach and how they both generate the need for their respective methodologies:

- a) on the one hand, we treat things as CONCEPTS placeable on different spectra stretching between two extremes such as ‘unimportant-important’, ‘disliked-liked’, ‘rare-frequent’, etc; under this perspective people’s (students’) *positioning* can be hierarchised and easily compared against various criteria (presentable linearly).
- b) on the other hand, we approach things as CONSTRUCTS individually structured but *not* presentable hierarchically between on any scale; under this perspective people’s (students’) *positioning* cannot be objectively compared, with individuals categorising things and associating them differently.

As Table shows, our twofold approach can be juxtaposed on a number of strata (showing that depending on the status assigned, we apply radically different descriptors):

Table 1. Juxtaposition of the positivist and constructivist treatment of facets/issues

Status	CONCEPT	CONSTRUCT
Placement	linear	unsystematic
Character	hierarchised	structured
Descriptors	pre-determined /explicit	self-defined / implicit

Such epistemological oppositions transform to radically different – albeit complementary – methodologies, which we can juxtapose by referring to a selection of strata recognised by Guba & Lincoln in their updated version of the premises of alternative research paradigms (Guba & Lincoln 2014: 285-287) as well as their list of currently valid issues (Guba & Lincoln 2014: 285-287):

Table 2. *Positioning* on positivist vs. constructive grounds – methodological facets

Stratum	positivist grounds	constructivist grounds
epistemological foundations	<i>positioning</i> seen in <b>dualistic/objective</b> terms, whereby the position is <b>presentable on scales</b> stretching from one extreme to the other	<i>positioning</i> seen in <b>transactional/subjective</b> terms, whereby the position cannot be simply pinpointed as being <b>multi-faceted</b> and personal

nature of knowledge	<b>describable by fixed descriptors</b> falling within pre-classified particular domains (beliefs, affect, actions, or thinking)	<b>falling outside sets of predetermined descriptors</b> , hence less easily “graspable” and highly individual and flexible labels
educational treatment	<b>quantity</b> -oriented: standard-based, generalised	<b>quality</b> -oriented: ongoing, heavily contextualised
assessment criteria	conventional <b>standards</b> setting lower and higher positions	experience-based one-off <b>yardsticks</b>
methodological lenses	verification of the <i>positioning</i> viewed on the basis of <b>compliance</b> with pre-set features; validation of hypotheses	examination of the <i>positioning</i> view through the prism of the <b>character</b> assigned by particular people; reconstruction of stances

The two methodologies yield quantitative and qualitative data that – despite referring to the same subject matter – cannot be added up together by means of any objective measures (as the constructive methodology per se remains consistently subjective). Yet, the two sets of data are complementary and mutually supportive when it comes to forming a more complete (real) picture of, for example, how a particular person positions spoken language by means of both pre-set descriptors and self-specified ‘labels’.

Example: the *positioning* of spoken language

We can consider spoken language in terms of

- a concept, the position of which is scalable and comparable upon various criteria between different people: whilst one person may value and use spoken language a lot (i.e. position it highly on the level of beliefs and actions), another person may value it as well, but use only when required (i.e. position it highly on the level of beliefs, but lowly on the level of actions). Under this perspective, spoken language is seen as comparable to such concepts as income, education, age, etc. (cf. Measurement and Measurement Scales 2024), the common denominator of which is that they are generated by particular facts and can be presented on a scale

and/or

- a construct, the position of which is individual structured and not presentable hierarchically between any extremes or on any scale; under this perspective different people’s (students’) *positioning* of spoken language has a non-measurable multi-faceted character as, for instance, beauty, happiness, health, or justice (cf. Measurement and Measurement Scales 2024), which

means that one person's approach to spoken language cannot be directly comparable by viewing it as higher, better, wider, etc.
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It is only such research that assumes the form of a hybrid and takes into account the two perspectives above that will truly correspond to how students truly approach things. This is not to say that the two perspectives must be adopted concurrently, but either of them will invariably remain deficient without the other. Hence, the research in question needs to (alternately – not be confused with alternatively) comprise positivist study techniques employing repeatable patterns (Sławecki 2012: 79) as well as constructivist methods resting on the stance that there exist different social worlds, functioning predominantly in human minds (ibidem: 80). Such two-foldedness of a person's natural and internally consistent approach to spoken language consists in what Bryman refers to as the 'epistemological and ontological baggage' (Bryman 2012: 649) and simply necessitates the application of mixed research combining quantity and quality. In other words, the twofold notion of *positioning* supports the validity of Creswell's formulation that 'mixed methods research has come of age' (Creswell 2003: 4) and that the inclusion of only qualitative or quantitative methods would fall short of the very human and social nature.

### **Two ensuing instructional threads of *positioning***

Whether we consider *positioning* in positivist or constructivist terms, in education we need this notion most badly. We can view it as occurring after the process of knowledge construction missing in educational science and practice. Most detrimentally, whilst many educators will think of the early stage of development during which different concepts and constructs are assigned meanings, far fewer will consider what occurs to these concepts and constructs later, as if they were assigned their meanings and place in the mental structure once and for all. Each concept and each construct is subject to personal ongoing evaluation and to change and therefore the *positioning* continues. This leads to two different ways in which the notions/processes of constructing and *positioning* can be juxtaposed:

- first, as noted above, chronologically, with the latter essentially following the former; perhaps the simplest way of clarifying this point is to say that first we form concepts/constructs individually but in the course of social negotiation, we come to relate them to other concepts/constructs. In other words, we position concepts which we have recognised as belonging to our everyday reality;

- second, with regard to scope: whilst (knowledge) construction has come to be generally understood in cognitive terms only, the *positioning* of concepts/constructs has a broader appeal and may relate to various dimensions of our functioning –beliefs, actions, affects, or thinking, which is a solid argument in favour of placing emphasis on *positioning* throughout all stages of education.

The extensiveness of twofold *positioning* across various educational domains can be best appreciated if we consider what follows from the epistemological and methodological observations for instructional practice. Namely, the following reasoning ensues:

- if, as follows from the epistemological considerations, our *positioning* of things occurs both along **specific scales** as well as within **multidimensional spaces**, and
- if, as follows from the methodological considerations, it needs to be accordingly studied concurrently by means of **pre-determined categories** and **flexible facets**,

then

instructional practices relating to any particular issues need to be conceptualised and oriented towards two categories:

(A) the **intensity** of *positioning* in different universal educational domains, and

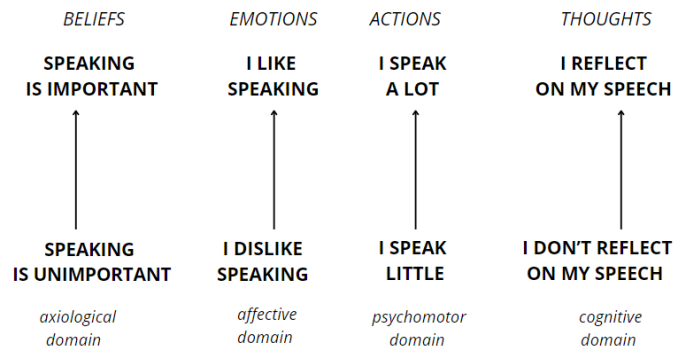
(B) the **diversity** of *positioning* across different individual spheres and dimensions, which I am going to clarify and exemplify below.

(A) we position what we learn on the scale of our beliefs (as less or more important), affect (as less or more liked), actions (as less or more performed), and thoughts (as less or more undertaken). These four placements vary, and a high placement in one dimension does not imply an equally high *positioning* on the other, although there *do* occur some regularities across the dimensions (such as valuing higher the things we like or low activity and intended reflection with regard to things we strongly dislike). When considered (added) together, the four placements (degrees) yield – on the individual level – the overall *positioning* of an issue and – on the level of a group of people (students) different configurations (*personal positioning profiles*), with, for instance, one person scoring higher on the axiological scale but lower on the cognitive scale (i.e. strongly valuing an issue, but reflecting little about it), and another – the other way round (thus viewing an issue as minor, yet pondering over it a lot). In educational settings there occurs a student's ideal approach: such *positioning* that involves four top scores on the scales mentioned, meaning a situation in which a student assigns to a given issue uppermost importance, has thoroughly positive emotions to it, employs it a lot, and keeps thinking about it. We can also envisage a student whose *positioning* is the least desired with the four lowest possible scores. Normally, though,



students are not that extreme and their *positioning* “lands” somewhere in between, or, at the very best, scores the highest in only one of the four dimensions.

Example: the *positioning* of spoken language



(B) Parallel to the “disciplined” *positioning* occurring within the universal dimensions and along the scales mentioned in the previous section, there proceeds the more “undisciplined” form of *positioning*: placing the very same issues within one’s own personal dimensions. The ensuing individual character makes *positioning* far less graspable (although its status can be regarded as equal and complementary to the former one): as one person’s mental structure remains unique, the linguistic description of this form of *positioning* rests on the verbal categories applied by an individual. Yet, for instructional purposes it pays to “tame” this inevitable diversity by applying lenses common to all people and their holistic functioning, namely:

- semantic lenses: the *positioning* of any given issue by an individual rests on associations determined by her/his biography, setting, private circumstances, educational situation, etc.;
- structural lenses: the *positioning* of any particular issue by an individual involves some form of categorisation and seeing the issue as a component of a bigger whole or, conversely, an entity divisible into smaller parts;
- pragmatic lenses: the *positioning* of any given issue by an individual entails the assignment of particular applications, that is relating the position to any possible function(s); and
- evaluative lenses: the *positioning* of any particular issue by an individual also implies its judgments carried out by different criteria determined by her/his particular circumstances.

Considered together, these lenses show that every person will position things (issues, phenomena, people, etc.) within one’s personal space depending on what that person relates a given issue/item to, how that person sees that issue/item within a wider structure, how that

person envisages is practical edge, and how that person evaluates the issue in question through the prism of personal (and frequently unique) criteria. The four types of lenses listed move here from the essentially internal qualities (i.e. what attributes “belong” to a particular issue), through the intermediary stage of structures and uses, to the most external qualities (i.e. facets enabling one to assume an outsider’s perspective).

Example: the *positioning* of spoken language

Considering a person’s (a student’s) approach to spoken language and its ensuing position from the multidimensional (“undisciplined”) perspective, it can be viewed as an amalgam of different facets falling into (a) the semantic stratum: what s/he associates spoken language with; (b) the structural stratum: what s/he sees speech a part of and how s/he categorises it; (c) the pragmatic stratum: what functions s/he applies to speech and (d) the evaluative stratum: through what criteria s/he assesses one’s own speech in different contexts.

This implies that *speech-positioning*-conscious or – ideally – *speech-positioning*-oriented education could foster emphasis on such questions relating to speech that do not impose any benchmarks or boundaries with regard to the said strata such as *what fields/aspects of life do students relate spoken language to?*, *where (or how high) do students position spoken language?*, *what role(s) do students assign to spoken language*, or *what qualities of spoken language do students assess well?* etc.

For educational purposes, the following very general rules can be formulated within and across the two forms of *positioning*:

**Rule 1.** (positivist perspective) The higher the (four-tier) *positioning* of any given issue, the higher the students’ involvement in education and the higher their potential results. This rule applies to both how students themselves position an issue as well as to how it is positioned by educational systems which can prompt a specific approach on the parts of students.

**Rule 2.** (constructivist perspective) The *positioning* of any given issue remains largely unbound by any pre-determined categories, classifications, contexts, or measures. Any student’s *positioning* will thus depend on that student’s personal narration and the use of one’s structure of meanings and personally significant categories.

**Rule 3.** (positivist-cum-constructivist perspective) For a student’s comprehensive approach to any issue to be well recognised, both the positivist and the constructivist lenses need to work. To appreciate the sense of joining them, we can consider two opposite situations in which only one perspective is taken into account: (a) if only positive lenses are applied, we know the overall picture of how a given issue is positioned by a student, but we lack awareness as

to why, or, in other words, what (construction) specifically underlies the approach; (b) if only constructivist lenses are employed, we know little on how to put this knowledge into practice if not knowing how a particular student's *positioning* of an issue compares to that of others.

**Rule 4.** (positivist-cum-constructivist perspective) The *positioning* of an issue by an individual is neither too dynamic nor stable, which in practice means that it is subject to change, but its alteration is a slow gradual process – similarly to major educational changes. This can be accounted for on both positivist grounds (e.g. by saying that one's approach entails beliefs, and beliefs take time to change by definition) as well as constructivist grounds (e.g. by the argument that the more multi-faceted an issue is, the less likely rapid changes on one's approach becomes).

With regard to all the four rules, it must be observed that the *positioning* occurs both on the part of students and teachers, thus serving two functions: first, it is a psycholinguistic notion applied internally by students themselves, and, second, it is a didactic notion applied externally by teachers making decisions as to how things are positioned in their classrooms.

### **The *positioning*-based educational paradigm**

Notwithstanding the differences between the two forms of *positioning*, they are both most **real** – which is a solid argument in favour of resting entire education upon it. On the one hand we summarise our approach to issues in simple linear / binary (i.e. positivist) terms (*I don't like ... too much, I reflect a lot on ..., .... is highly important for learning effectively*, etc.). On the other hand, we develop our own (essentially constructivist) ways of referring to the same issues, which we place in completely different contexts are not as along simple binary lines *like-dislike, rare-frequent, petty-significant*, etc. Although life is too complex for simple rules to operate, people *do* tend to reduce their approach to issues to linear and binary terms, too. Hence, when *positioning*, for example, the concept of a family, people both confine their approach with spectra-based statements as *My family is most important for me* or *I concentrate too little on my family's happiness*, but also position their families within their own self-defined spaces.

The reality of the twofold *positioning* implies that if educational systems are to remain consistent with the human nature, they must not tilt to “one side of the coin” only. Instead, in the case of each issue being studied and taught, they need to combine its “disciplined” scale-based positivist treatment with the “undisciplined” multi-dimensional constructivist perspective. The complementary character of *positioning* speaks in favour of adopting the notion as grounds for a new reconciliatory educational **paradigm**, which may halt ongoing

debates between educators representing the two sides of the positivist-constructivist divide. One crucial advantage of the notion of *positioning* is that, despite having solid theoretical grounding, it remains largely intuitive and can quickly be grasped by educators of all levels. Technically speaking, combining the “two sides of the coin” may take various courses. One at-hand solution is to view the positivist form of *positioning* as providing **general** information and its constructivist form as informing them on the **specifics**, with the two forms alternating each other. In other words, whatever educational issue happens to be at stake, its general positioning by students and teachers can be considered (on the strata of beliefs, affect, actions, and thinking), and then this *positioning* can be examined in greater detail by an analysis of what specific criteria determine it.

The paradigmatic character of *positioning* also lies in that it sheds a lot of light on a key human characteristic – our natural **bias**. We remain conceptually unfair, so to speak, in that we do not assign concepts the same status, but, instead, we tend to be judgmental and emotional about them. We differ from machines and robots here and this feature of ours – both a weakness as well as our strength – must be taken into account in education by allowing something of a – cognitive, axiological, psychomotor, or emotional – partiality.

### Conclusions

The exact nature of this bias is a question of what educational systems we were shaped in, which – in the case of apparent differences – can lead to less or more easily observable **national inclinations**. Hence, the *positioning* of spoken language differs from one country to another, with, say, Spaniards speaking a lot and liking it, but with lots of fillers (thus spoken language being positioned high in the psychomotor and affective domains, but lower on the cognitive spectrum). And conversely – Japanese people, speaking less, but paying attention to every single word they choose to articulate (thus positioning speech lower on the spectrum of actions, but higher on the cognitive one).

What follows from all the considerations above is that the notion of *positioning* does not only reconcile the positivist and constructivist perspectives, but it puts the learner where s/he belongs, so to speak, that is *over* the subject matter, rather than *under*: the application of *positioning* in educational science reveals the fact that each learner will naturally assign any issue a particular position and that issue is never learnt as ‘bare’, universal, or unrelated (compared, juxtaposed, added, etc.) to other issues. Mistakenly, in educational science such an approach to learning has thus far been associated with the constructivist approach only – specifically with how the learner assumes control over education by constructing their own

meanings. The notion of *positioning* works wider here in that the control over learning also occurs on the positivist “side of the coin”, with there being no one-and-only position of any given educational issue, but, instead, with learners dominating the process and specifying that position by themselves. Hence, the notion of *positioning* “gives back” the learner their proper **status** as the controller, the driving force of learning,

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