Linguistic persona.

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Consistent with its view of language as universal, abstract systems, the more

traditional ‘linguistics applied’ approach to the study of language use views

individual language users as stable, coherent, internally uniform beings

in whose heads the systems reside. Because of their universal nature, the

systems themselves are considered self-contained, independent entities,

extractable from individual minds. That is, while language systems reside

in individual minds, they have a separate existence and thus remain detached

from their users.

Although individuals play no role in shaping their systems, they can

use them as they wish in their expression of personal meaning since the

more traditional view considers individuals to be agents of free will, and

thus, autonomous decision-makers. Moreover, since this view considers

all individual action to be driven by internally motivated states, individual

language use is seen as involving a high degree of unpredictability and

creativity in both form and message as individuals strive to make personal

connections to their surrounding contexts. As for the notion of identity, a

‘linguistics applied’ perspective views it as a set of essential characteristics unique to individuals, independent of language, and unchanging across contexts. Language users can display their identities, but they cannot affect them in any way. Language use and identity are conceptualised rather differently in a sociocultural perspective on human action. Here, identity is not seen as singular, fixed, and intrinsic to the individual. Rather, it is viewed as socially constituted, a reflexive, dynamic product of the social, historical and political contexts of an individual’s lived experiences. This view has helped to set innovative directions for research in applied linguistics. The purpose of this article is to lay out some of the more significant assumptions embodied in contemporary understandings of identity and its connection to culture and language use. Included is a discussion of some of the routes current research on language, culture and identity is taking.

When we use language, we do so as individuals with social histories. Our

histories are defined in part by our membership in a range of social groups

into which we are born such as gender, social class, religion and race. For

example, we are born as female or male and into a distinct income level that

defines us as poor, middle class or well-to-do. Likewise, we may be born

as Christians, Jews, Muslims or with some other religious affiliation, and

thus take on individual identities ascribed to us by our particular religious

association. Even the geographical region in which we are born provides

us with a particular group membership and upon our birth we assume

specific identities such as, for example, Italian, Chinese, Canadian, or

South African, and so on. Within national boundaries, we are defined by

membership in regional groups, and we take on identities such as, for

example, northerners or southerners.

In addition to the assorted group memberships we acquire by virtue of

our birth, we appropriate a second layer of group memberships developed

through our involvement in the various activities of the social institutions

that comprise our communities, such as school, church, family and the

workplace. These institutions give shape to the kinds of groups to which

we have access and to the role-relationships we can establish with others.

When we approach activities associated with the family, for example, we

take on roles as parents, children, siblings or cousins and through these roles

fashion particular relationships with others such as mother and daughter,

brother and sister, and husband and wife. Likewise, in our workplace, we

assume roles as supervisors, managers, subordinates or colleagues. These

roles afford us access to particular activities and to particular role-defined

relationships. As company executives, for example, we have access to and can participate in board meetings, business deals and job interviews that are closed to other company employees, and thus are able to establish role relationships that are unique to these positions. Our various group memberships, along with the values, beliefs and attitudes associated with them, are significant to the development of our social identities in that they define in part the kinds of communicative activities and the particular linguistic resources for realising them to which we have access. That is to say, as with the linguistic resources we use in our activities, our various **social identities** are not simply labels that we fill with our own intentions. Rather, they embody particular histories that have been developed over time by other group members enacting similar roles. In their histories of enactments, these identities become associated with particular sets of linguistic actions for realising the activities, and with attitudes and beliefs about them.

Social identity encompasses participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations, and other dimensions of social personae, which are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stances. Ochs [1996: 424]

The sociocultural activities constituting the public world of a white

male born into a working-class family in a rural area in northeastern

United States, for example, will present different opportunities for group

identification and language use from those constituting the community

of a white male born into an affluent family residing in the same geographical

region. Likewise, the kinds of identity enactments afforded to middle-class women in one region of the world, for example, China, will be quite different from those available to women of a similar socioeconomic class in other geographical regions of the world such as Italy or Russia [Cameron, 2005].

The historically grounded, socially constituted knowledge, skills, beliefs

and attitudes comprising our various social identities – predisposing us to

act, think and feel in particular ways and to perceive the involvement of

others in certain ways – constitute what social theorist Pierre Bourdieu calls

our **habitus** [Bourdieu, 1977]. We approach our activities with the perceptions

and evaluations we have come to associate with both our ascribed and

appropriated social identities and those of our interlocutors, and we use

them to make sense of each other’s involvement in our encounters. That

is to say, when we come together in a communicative event we perceive

ourselves and others in the manner in which we have been socialised. We carry expectations, built up over time through socialisation into our own social groups, about what we can and cannot do as members of our various groups. We hold similar expectations about what others are likely to do and not do as members of their particular groups. The linguistic resources we use to communicate, and our interpretations of those used by others, are shaped by these mutually held perceptions. In short, who we are, who we think others are, and who others think we are, mediate in important ways our individual uses and evaluations of our linguistic actions in any communicative encounter.

Even though we each have multiple, intersecting social identities, it is not

the case that all of our identities are always relevant. As with the meanings

of our linguistic resources, their relevance is dynamic and responsive to

contextual conditions. In other words, while we approach our communicative

encounters as constellations of various identities, the particular identity

or set of identities that becomes significant depends on the activity itself,

our goals, and the identities of the other participants. Let us assume, for

example, that we are travelling abroad as tourists. In our interactions with

others from different geographical regions it is likely that our national

identity will be more relevant than, say, our gender or social class. Thus, we

are likely to interact with each other as, for example, Americans, Spaniards,

Australians or Italians. On the other hand, if we were to interact with these

same individuals in schooling events such as parent–teacher conferences,

we are likely to find that certain social roles take on more relevance than

our nationalities, and we will interact with each other as parents, teachers

or school administrators. Likewise, in workplace events, we are likely to

orient to each other’s professional identity, and interact as, for example,

employers, colleagues or clients, rather than as parents and teachers, or

Americans and Canadians.

*How* we enact any particular identity is also responsive to contextual

conditions. Philipsen’s (1992) study of the ways in which a group of men

enacted their identities as ‘men’ in a town he called Teamsterville is a compelling

illustration of the fluid, contextual nature of identity. According

to Philipsen, when the relationships between the men of Teamsterville

were symmetrical in terms of age, ethnicity or occupational status, the

men considered it highly appropriate to engage in a good deal of talk

with each other. However, when they considered the relationship to be

asymmetrical, that is, when the event included men of different ages, ethnic

groups or occupations, little talk was expected. To do otherwise was considered

inappropriate.

It is important to remember that our perceptions and evaluations of our

own and each other’s identities are tied to the groups and communities of which we are members. Expectations for what we, in our role as parent, can

say to a child, for example, are shaped by what our social groups consider

acceptable and appropriate parental actions. Some groups, for example, do

not consider it appropriate for a parent to tell a child how to do something.

Instead, the child is expected to observe and then take action [Heath, 1983].

Other groups consider it important to discuss the task with the child before

the child is allowed to attempt it [Harkness *et al*., 1992]. Our linguistic

resources then can perform an action in a communicative event only to the

extent to which their expected meanings are shared among the participants.

Given the diversity of group memberships we hold, we can expect our

linguistic actions and the values attached to them to be equally varied.

As we have discussed in this article, a sociocultural perspective on identity

and language use is based on several key premises. One of the more

signifcant premises replaces the traditional understanding of language

users as unitary, unique and internally motivated individuals with a view of

language users as social actors whose identities are multiple, varied and

emergent from their everyday lived experiences. Through involvement in

their socioculturally significant activities, individuals take on or inhabit

particular social identities, and use their understandings of their social roles

and relationships to others to mediate their involvement and the involvement

of others in their practices. These identities are not stable or held

constant across contexts, but rather are emergent, locally situated and at the

same time historically constituted, and thus are ‘precarious, contradictory

and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we

think or speak’ [Weedon, 1997: 32].

In the contexts of our experience we use language not as solitary, isolated

individuals giving voice to personal intentions. Rather, we ‘take up a position

in a social field in which all positions are moving and defined relative to

one another’ [Hanks, 1996: 201]. Social action becomes a site of dialogue,

in some cases of consensus, in others of struggle where, in choosing among

the various linguistic resources available (and not so available) to us in our

roles, we attempt to mould them for our own purposes, and thereby become

authors of those moments.

Finally, this view recognizes that culture does not exist apart from language

or apart from us, as language users. It sees culture, instead, as reflexive,

made and remade in our language games, our lived experiences, and ‘exist[ing]

through routinized action that includes the material (and physical) conditions

as well as the social actors’ experience in using their bodies while

moving through a familiar space’ [Duranti, 1997: 45]. On this view, no use

of language, no individual language user, is considered to be ‘culture-free’.

Rather, in our every communicative encounter we are always at the same

time carriers and agents of culture.

On the dialogic relationship between language, culture and identity.

In this view as well, while language is a socio-historical product, language

is also an instrument for forming and transforming social order. Interlocutors

actively use language as a semiotic tool [Vygotsky, 1978] to either reproduce

social forms and meanings or produce novel ones. In reproducing historically

accomplished structures, interlocutors may use conventional forms in conventional

ways to constitute the local social situation. For example, they may

use a conventional form in a conventional way to call into play a particular

gender identity. In other cases, interlocutors may bring novel forms to this end

or use existing forms in innovative ways. In both cases, interlocutors wield

language to (re)constitute their interlocutory environment. Every social interaction

in this sense has the potential for both cultural persistence and change,

and past and future are manifest in the interactional present. Ochs [1996: 416]

Such a view of language, culture and identity leads to concerns with

articulating ‘the relationship between the structures of society and culture

on the one hand and the nature of human action on the other’ [Ortner,

1989: 11]; a central focus of research becomes the identification of ways we

as individuals use the cues available to us in our communicative encounters

in the (re)constitution of our social identities and those of others.

Literature:

1. Block, D. (2007) *Second Language Identities*, London: Continuum. Drawing on a wide

range of social theory, the author provides a comprehensive, insightful overview of

research on second language identities in three learning contexts: adult migration,

foreign-language classrooms and study-abroad programmes.

2. Buhrig, K. and Thije, J. (2006) *Beyond Misunderstanding: Linguistic Analyses of Intercultural Communication*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins. The twelve chapters inthis volume examine intercultural communication in a variety of settings and froma variety of theoretical frameworks to demonstrate how individuals draw on a rangeof linguistic resources to construct mutual understandings in their interactions.

3. De Fina, A., Schiffrin, D. and Bamberg, M. (eds) (2006) *Discourse and Identity*,

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The studies in this volume explore the

dynamic relationship between identity and social context. Using a variety of methods

to investigate numerous settings including the workplace, medical interviews

and education, across different communities, the studies demonstrate in revealing

ways how our social practices help to shape our identities.

4. Hall, C., Slembrouck, S. and Sarangi, S. (2006) *Language Practice in Social Work: Categorisation and Accountability in Child Welfare*, London: Routledge. This bookexamines the language practices of social workers, their clients and other professionalsto uncover ways in which the doing of social work is managed. It includesthe study of such key practices as interviews, case conferences and home visits. Itspurpose is to increase the profession’s awareness of how language is used to createand sustain professional contexts of interaction, identities and relationships so thatthey may better serve their clients.

5. Maybin, J. (2006) *Children’s Voices: Talk, Knowledge and Identity*, London: Palgrave Macmillan. Drawing on ethnographic data from inside and outside of the classroom, the author examines in great detail the various strategies used by young

children, ages 10 –12, to construct their knowledge and identities in their encounters with each other.