Discourse and identity

Key words: discourse, identity, Internet, idiolect, self, network, language, interaction

Glossary entries:
1. *Genderlects*: systems of linguistic features linked to one of the sexes.
2. *Speech community*: any human collectivity characterized by regular and frequent interactions through language.
3. *Idiolect*: particular combination of accent and dialect that is specific of an individual.
4. *Face*: the social value that speakers effectively claim for themselves in the course of a conversational interaction.
5. *Positioning*: the discursive process through or within which people’s selves are foregrounded in conversations.

Synopsis
In this entry the relationship between discourse and identity is pictured as an inverted triangle with a broad section at the top for ‘inherited’ sources of identity (sex, race/ethnicity, nationality) that have discursive correlates. The section in the middle represents ‘optional’ social groups to which the individual chooses to belong (and which often involve jargons that create barriers of discursive specificity). Finally, the bottom vortex of the triangle represents the individual as a specific holder of identity, discursively exhibited as the person’s idiolect. Finally, in this entry it is argued that the Internet alters this triangle by re-inverting it and that it alters the extent and influence of some traditional discursive sources of identity.

The human being is inextricably tied to language. As soon as children are born, a biologically rooted, built-in discourse-developing mechanism is activated enabling them to become communicatively competent, to interact with the world and to become aware of their role and specificity in society. However, not all discursive sources of identity have the same quality and strength. In Yus (2001), three major discursive sources of identity were schematized as an inverted triangle in which the broad section at the top represented ‘inherited’ sources such as national identity, sex, and race/ethnicity. A narrower section in the middle of the triangle represented ‘optional’ identity sources, mainly social groups to which the human being chooses to belong (often with group-specific jargons). And finally, a very narrow section at the bottom of the inverted triangle represented the human self as it is developed and shaped through everyday face-to-face conversations. These layers are still valid today. However, in that article a fourth section was suggested that deals with contemporary communication through the Internet, which actually *inverts the inverted triangle*, providing surprising options for identity shaping. Nowadays, on the contrary, since we no longer log onto the Net but mostly live inside it, Internet sources of identity now tend to mesh and imbricate with offline counterparts, making it difficult to address discourse and identity as represented by two non-touching triangles.

1. ‘Inherited’ Sources of Identity

When a child is born, it inherits several distinctive discursive features such as belonging to a community (e.g., a nation), being male or female, and having distinctive racial or ethnic features. All of these inherited qualities have closely related discursive features (consolidated as the child grows up) ranging from living in a speech community to particular sex- or race-related features.
The role which discourse plays in the community (i.e., the nation in a broad sense) as a source of identity varies depending on its current sociopolitical state, but in all cases it is one of the clearest sources of social identification: “Groups of people who occupy contiguous territory and see themselves as having common interests tend to develop, over long stretches of time, ways of speaking that are distinctive to them, marking them out from groups who either are not geographically adjacent to them or else are perceived as having different, probably rival, interests” (Joseph 2006). This level of identity relates to Turner’s (1987, p. 45) intermediate level of ingroup–outgroup categorizations between the broad superordinate level of being human and the subordinate level of personal attributes.

Needless to say, the sense of belonging to a community and sharing the same language, a major source of identity, goes beyond the political lines as drawn on maps. This is why the speech community, defined as ‘any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use’ (Gumperz 1971, p. 114) is a much better term, since it goes beyond the reductionist view of society as a clear-cut physical space with members speaking the very same language, even if the notion of “place” has traditionally been regarded essential to foster feelings of community membership (Walker 2007).

On the other hand, places in which a shared language is embraced as part of a broader resistance against other imposed languages, as is the case of Quebec in Canada or Catalonia in Spain, tend to originate very tight links between discourse and identity, whereas in more politically stable linguistic areas this source of identity may not be felt so explicitly.

Another major identity marker is sex. There is now a huge amount of bibliography dealing with (non)-verbal speech differences of men and women in same-sex and cross-sex conversational interactions. To a certain extent, fitting the expected discursive attributes of one’s sex may reinforce personal identity as a sense of belonging to a social group. General areas of research include vocabulary differences (including the traditional coining of male-connoted words) and the analysis of conversational genderlects (systems of linguistic features linked to one of the sexes).

Finally, the relationship between race, discourse, and identity is important since one’s race may be a strong link to society as a multifaceted experience covering such aspects as the recognition of biological origins and, on some occasions, also a deep reinforcement of personality against oppressive, racist attitudes. A related issue has to do with (inherited) ethnic differences within the same community. A clear example is the United Kingdom, in which we can find a great deal of variation between standard and nonstandard forms of the English language, several indigenous languages (Welsh, Scots, Gaelic), and non-English languages brought to Britain by immigrants mainly from countries in the Commonwealth. In all cases, language is raised to a basic source of personal specificity against ‘default’ speaking correctness.

2. ‘Optional’ Sources of Identity

Next in the inverted triangle of identity sources, a middle section of optional sources may be isolated. As human beings grow up, they tend to get together in medium-sized social groups providing an essential sense of belonging and often involving particular discursive features which work as inherent sources of intragroup identity and also as intergroup differentiation (the so-called jargons). A typical example is scientific discourse. Adolescents also display explicitly narrow codes of vocabulary choices and nonstandard pronunciations only available to those ‘in the gang’ or the group of peers. Furthermore, laughing is considered to be an important source of identity display in this age group through reducing the ‘others’ to some
laughable characterization that makes them different to adults (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, p. 283); and insulting one another is also typical (Mateo and Yus forthcoming), both strategies intended to enhance a deeper bonding between group members.

An important term in this medium-sized area of optional group membership is social network (Milroy 1978), a way of representing people’s social transactions within a speech community. This term is related to the importance of everyday interactions (especially with peers) for identity shaping. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) stress this with their relationality principle, i.e. identities as ‘produced through contextually situated and ideologically informed configurations of self and other’ (p. 605). Kiesling (2006) stresses that a person has no single fixed identity because identities are relational, they are constructed and contextualized in interaction. Also from constructivist approaches, identity has been regarded as a non-stable but inherently interactive phenomenon, since it takes place in specific interactional occasions, yields an array of identities instead of unitary selves, and mainly results from processes of negotiation that are eminently social (De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006, p. 2).

Closely related to this issue are Le Page’s (1986) acts of identity, a term which stresses the individual’s tendency to try and resemble the linguistic attributes of those groups of people which he or she aims to identify with: ‘when we talk we project the universe as we see it on to others as on to a cinema screen in our own images, expressed in the language we consider appropriate at that moment, and we invite others by these acts to share our universe’ (p. 23).

3. Discourse, Identity, and the Self

The speaker’s interactional self would be placed at the bottom vertex of the inverted triangle. In this case, as suggested above, self-identity is shaped and modified by daily and ordinary conversational interactions. Interlocutors continuously negotiate a relational identity with and through others. Consequently, one’s current (and past) conversational exchanges will shape or affect the relationship between participants and speakers’ relational self-identity. Far from being a stable, unitary identity, one’s identities change according to conversational roles and situations. This is why De Fina et al. (2006, p. 14) distinguish discourse identities (mainly the individual’s roles during an interaction) from situated identities, which are instantiated in particular types of situations. But individuals also acquire a personal discourse-related identity in the shape of personal idiolect, defined as a ‘particular combination of accent and dialect, that particular assemblage of formal and informal registers, that particular pattern of stress and intonation which, if we were to look closely and cleverly enough, we would find unique to the individual’ (Edwards 2009, p.21).

Analysis of the self as developed and affirmed through daily interactions and situations goes back as far as the 1950s, with interactional sociolinguists (Schiffrin 1994), with Goffman (1959) as one of the main contributors to this trend of research. Goffman argues that the self is a social construction (specifically, an interactive construction). This is clearly exemplified by the identity-related notion of face, defined as the social value that speakers effectively claim for themselves in the course of a conversational interaction. What Goffman focuses on is the social value of conversational involvement, the way different social and conversational settings involve specific expectations and display of this involvement, which normally entails the use of certain ritualized forms of address. Schiffrin (1994) also includes Gumperz in the label of interactional sociolinguistics because of his view of language as a culturally constructed system and which can be used either in order to reflect macrolevel social meanings or to create microsocial meanings at the level of ordinary conversational exchanges.
Another trend of research which focuses on the social implications of daily conversational interactions is ethnomethodology, with Garfinkel as one of its main representatives. This trend focuses on the cognitive rules by which members of a society assess the significance of actions in everyday life. People’s previous experience and their knowledge of the institutions and practices of the world around them act to constrain their interpretations of what they see and hear. Under ethnomethodology, conversational scenes acquire an essential importance in the display and shaping of self-identities, which are only knowable through the understandings displayed by the interlocutors themselves: ‘membership of a category is ascribed (and rejected), avowed (and disavowed), displayed (and ignored) in local places and at certain times, and it does these things as part of the interactional work that constitutes people’s lives’ (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998, p. 1).

The main conclusion of this research is that people’s self-identity is not a fixed feature of their lives, but a dynamic attribute continuously under negotiation, reshaping, transformation, as people engage in daily ordinary communication with others. When some social or cultural aspects are continuously brought into conversations, they tend to become attached to the identity of interlocutors as part of their background of group membership. For example, Georgakopolou (1999) focuses on identities of the young and how peer networks are created in the conversational repetition of specific elements in the discursive (sub)culture of the young. For them, symbolic cultural associations such as dress styles and others such as music preferences, activity patterns, etc. are firmly located in their conversational interactions, especially in the unfolding of conversational narratives.

On the other hand, self-identity is also achieved in the feeling of personal specificity when contrasted with others in the course of a conversation. In this case, Davies and Harre’s (1990) term positioning as ‘discursive production of selves’ is very interesting. They agree that self-identity is not fixed but constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which people participate. Positioning would be the discursive process through or within which people’s selves are foregrounded in conversations. There can be interactive positioning in the sense that what one person says positions another, and reflexive positioning, when one simply positions oneself.

Markus and Nurius’ (1986) theory of possible selves also deals with the way people acquire a sense of self-identity through the conversational interactions in which they participate. These possible selves represent the picture that all interactants have about what they are and what they would like to become. In this sense, possible selves influence people’s future behavior and are a constant evaluation of people’s current state of their self-identity. People’s social and cultural contexts play an important role in this shaping, since the range of possible selves derives not only from people’s personal experiences (e.g., prior conversational interactions), but also from categories which acquire prominence in a specific sociocultural and historic context, together with images and symbols provided by (highly influential) media discourses constraining the personal choices of self-identity.

4. Inverting the Inverted: Discourse and Identity on the Internet

In Yus (2001) it was argued that the inverted triangle of broad top (macrosocial issues), middle section (optional linguistic groups) and the vertex at the bottom of the triangle (personal self) was affected by the global village. In this environment, identity is viewed as ‘the process of construction of meaning on the basis of cultural attribute, or related set of cultural attributes, that is are given priority over other sources of meaning’ (Castells 1997, p. 6). The important conclusion is that people tend to react by reaffirming their historical, cultural, ethnic, and religious roots as a reaction against networked globalization.

The most paradigmatic example of a global communicative network is the Internet,
which is so pervasive nowadays that it actually *inverts the inverted triangle*. First, the formerly broad section of inherited attributes at the top of the triangle is narrowed as a consequence of increasing transnational communication and depersonalization of networked transactions. Hence, national attributes may become blurred and their identity-shaping effect be weakened or invalidated; and other inherited features such as race and sex are suppressed in text-based interactions.

Second, the middle section of optional sources of identity, normally through self-socialization through interactions within groups shaped by specific linguistic patterns, remains more or less in the same medium-sized section of the triangle. On the Internet, these specific discourse groups with their limited-access jargons are reproduced in parallel forms of organization: the so-called *discussion forums* and (now almost extinct) *distribution lists* via e-mail, which also exploit the same sense of group-membership language specificity that we can find in real-life social instances.

Third, the former narrow vertex of personal self in the inverted triangle has now become very broad due to the multiplicity of selves (often anonymous) that may be used in conversational exchanges through various forms of Internet communication such as *chats* or avatars in 3D virtual worlds. In the physical world, the body provides explicit (and stable) clues of inherited and personal qualities shaping the person’s identity. On the Internet, however, these attributes are not explicitly conveyed, and one can have as many electronic identities and selves as one is willing and or able to create, all of which are presented with no corporeality. As Mitchell (1995) correctly states, the process of mutual construction of identities on the Internet usually gives very little away. Because communication often takes place without bodily presence or the sound of users’ voices, others who ‘know’ a user quite well may not realize how he or she looks, and thus may be unable to make the usual inferences from that. On the Internet people can very easily conceal, leave carefully ambiguous, or falsely signal gender, race, age, body shape, and economic status.

A good example of these three layers in the ‘re-inverted’ triangle is social networking profiles (e.g., in *Facebook*). The visual list of contacts exhibits broad community membership. The comments and posts area is where users put their relational identity into practice, often with peers (sometimes also in specific professional profiles). Finally, the personal photo and information is the locus of self-identity, the user as a unique person in the network of friends.

More recent research (Yus 2007, 2010, 2011) acknowledges the fact that this picture of discursive sources of identity as triangles (inverted for physical identity; re-inverted for virtual identity) clashes with today’s tendency to hybridization of personal networks in physical and virtual settings and with the users as nodes in their intersecting networks. Therefore, it would not be a picture of ‘either’ physical ‘or’ virtual sources of identity, as can be deduced from two triangles that do not touch, but a picture of several sources of identity that get mixed and imbricated in a time when the dividing line between physical and virtual realms is increasingly blurred.

Indeed, today’s Internet users have developed an ability to switch from offline to online networks of friends with different degrees of commitment and intensity depending on what portion of their identities is shaped discursively on the Net, ranging from those who rarely log on, to those who reject their physical identities entirely and can only ‘be themselves’ on the Net. And environments such as social networking sites and, more recently, 3D virtual worlds are suitable environments for discursively shaped identities. Specifically, social networking sites are typically used by people who already know one another offline, e.g. students or relatives (Mallan and Giardina 2009; Wang et al. 2010, p. 227). In general, then, people do not turn into different people in either of the environments (offline/online), but provide a different image, divide their identities into physical and virtual
sides of the self. The virtual self may exhibit attributes that the user does not want to show in physical settings, without losing the core identity. As Zhao et al. (2008, p. 1819-1820) correctly state, ‘users regard their online presentations as an integral part of their overall identity production and seek to coordinate their online identity claims with their offline self-performance.’

However, in my opinion it is interesting to preserve a three-fold division of identity and then analyse the extent to which discourse (in its broad sense of textual, visual and multimodal quality) plays a part in its identity shaping. Needless to say, there is some degree of overlapping among the three. For example, in virtual worlds the users shape their identities by devising an avatar, but the choice of body and clothing is often biased by cultural (i.e. collective) information about sex roles, masculinity, femininity and beauty.

First, the collective identity is shaped by discursive markers that indicate membership to broad (online/offline) collectivities and communities. ‘It is through our membership into various social groups that we discover and experiment with social identities in the hope of creating an image of ourselves that is acceptable to the social realities we are invested in’ (Crabill 2010, p. 316). As stated in Yus (2011), people store a number of commonsense assumptions that emanate from the human environment and our trust in these assumptions is not easily altered by other incoming stimuli. The fact that we belong to a specific speech community entails the creation and storage of certain archetypical assumptions that we accept as normal or default in the ordinary life of the community (Yus 2007; Parks 2011, p. 106-111). And conversations are a good means to determine this area of mutuality. Besides, the reiterative assessment of this area generates community stereotypes, made up of highly accessible stereotypical schemas.

Secondly, the group identity is shaped through interactions with other users and by choosing to belong to certain groups and collectivities that exhibit certain patterns and jargons that create barriers of discursive specificity. By receiving comments and engaging in interactions, that is, by being present in the network and being commented upon by others, users mould their position and prestige within the group.

Finally, self-identity reflects the fact that the user is a unique person discursively shaped on the Net according to specific parameters. It is related to the self-concept, but also shaped in a public process that involves both the identity announcement made by the individual claiming an identity and the identity placement made by others who endorse the claimed identity (Zhao et al., 2008, p. 1817). The user’s body is essential for the foundation of this self identity, even if only part (or none) of it is actually exhibited on the Net. Of course, one can also avoid the body completely and play with other selves and corporeal fabrications (as happens with 3D avatars) that might also play a part in the overall self-identity shaping. But other users will probably try to make connections between the persona exhibited online and the physical self typing on a keyboard (Walther et al. 2009, p. 232).

In some extreme cases, though, real-life and virtual-life selves may overlap, creating, in extreme cases, problems of self-identity when one is unable to dissociate the physical and the virtual. In normal circumstances, though, our on-line selves become just one more series of selves in our everyday lives that we create in order to deal with a variety of situations.

Specifically on the relationship between discourse and identity, identity construction on the Internet is still text-based on many occasions, normally through a hybrid between the permanence and fixed quality of written texts, and the spontaneity and ephemeral status of oral utterances (Baron 2000, Tella 1992). Beyond the evident problems that text-based interlocutors face in the course of a conversation due to the lack of contextual support, the increasing appeal that chats and other interactive online phenomena have nowadays should make us think twice before claiming that the oral medium is undoubtedly superior to the written medium. The profusion of written messages that people exchange through mobile
phones nowadays, for instance, is a clue suggesting that, perhaps, people are still willing to construct and communicate identities through language, but perhaps not so much through face-to-face encounters, even though today there are more and more options for synchronous face-to-face interactions involving visual and vocal channels.

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Cross-references
Discourse, Anthropology of; Ethnomethodology: General; Identity in Anthropology; Identity: Social; Metaphor and its Role in Social Thought: History of the Concept; Narrative, Sociology of; Narratives and Accounts, in the Social and Behavioral Sciences; Networks and Linkages: Cultural Aspects; Self: History of the Concept; Semiotics