Discerning and 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, as will be discussed in this article, to become aware of their role and specificity in society; that is, of their identity. However, not all discursive sources of identity have the same quality and strength. In general, three major discursive sources of identity may be schematized as an inverted triangle in which a broad section at the top represents ‘inherited’ sources such as nationality, sex, and race/ethnicity. A narrower section in the middle of the triangle would represent ‘optional’ identity sources, mainly social groups to which the human being chooses to belong. Finally, a very narrow section at the bottom of the inverted triangle would represent the human self as it is developed and shaped through everyday face-to-face conversations.

In the following three sections these three major identity sources will be discussed. A fourth section will deal with contemporary, transnational communication through the Internet, which actually inverts the inverted triangle, providing surprising sources of identity.

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: experiences within our culture(s) and our community shape human beings and their role in society (see Lanehart 1996). 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 political lines as drawn on maps.
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 (see West and Zimmerman 1985 for a general overview of the topic). 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 us (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, p. 283), normally to enhance a deeper bonding between group members. Finally, in adolescence the strict code of group membership is extended to other codes such as clothing, so that very fixed combinations define ‘urban tribes’ and provide a supplementive visual channel of intragroup identity.

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 essential for understanding the role that discourse plays in the shaping and developing of one’s identity. For example, a key issue in the theory of networks is that social groups with tight links of solidarity (tight-knit networks) favor the preservation of their vernacular language, a major identity source as commented upon above. In this sense, it should be stressed that there is a difference between vernacular languages, which are learned at home (thus belonging to the broad ‘inherited’ source of identity) and argots or special parlances, learned after childhood and typically used on those occasions in which group membership is worth stressing. 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 which has been suggested to describe different-sized discursive sources of identity. In this case we refer to the person’s identity as shaped and modified by daily and ordinary conversational interactions. It is commonly assumed in research on the pragmatics of language use that interlocutors continuously realign their conversational role and either explicitly display their identity or negotiate a relational identity with and through others (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997, p. 282). Consequently, one’s current (and past) conversational exchanges will shape or affect the relationship between participants and speakers’ relational self-identity.

Analysis of the self as developed and affirmed through daily interactions goes back as far as the 1950s, with analyses by researchers of the social attributes of exchanges, the so-called 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 exchanges at the level of ordinary conversational interactions.

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, in somewhat the same way that grammatical rules constrain their perception of sound sequences (Gumperz 1972, p. 215). It is clear that daily interactions play an important role in the shaping of personal identities within a social background. Under ethnomethodology, conversational exchanges 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, Georgakopoulou (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. As mentioned above, for young people, 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 not only achieved through the blending with others through conversational interactions, but also 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 on the interactive formation of self-identity, and that self-identity is not fixed but constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which people participate. They symbolize this by saying that the human being is an open question with a shifting answer depending on the positions made available by one’s own and others’ discursive practices and within those practices. Positioning would be the discursive process through or within which people’s selves are foregrounded in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines. There can be interactive positioning in the sense that what one person says positions another, and there can also be 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 (Lanehart 1996, p. 323).

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

So far, three sources of links between discourse and identity have been isolated and represented as an inverted triangle: at the broad top, macrosocial issues such as the speech community, one’s sex, and race provide general inherited factors shaping identity from childhood. A middle section of the triangle dealt with optional linguistic groups whose special argots, paralances, and jargons act as a major source of intragroup identification. Finally, the vertex at the bottom of the triangle addressed the personal self as acquiring identity through conversational interactions.

However, these are far from clear-cut, stable features of human identity, but are subject to constant change depending on the current state of sociopolitical relations among people. Specifically, we are now in a global village dominated by an increasing quantity and quality of international communications which affect the way the self is viewed and located in an interconnected (i.e., networked) world beyond physical or political boundaries. Castells (1997) specifically deals with this self/net dichotomy and how it influences personal identity. The network is inherent to modern, economically advanced societies. The self is a symbol of human activities oriented towards the reaffirmation
of identities in a world like today’s, subject to the constant change and instability of networks. 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 prior 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 communicative network is the Internet. It is a centerless network linking people from all over the world by an intricate system of (mostly telephonic) wires. It was initially used for military purposes and exploited by academic researchers, but nowadays is has become an inherent source of identity for millions of people. Actually, due to the ubiquity of the Internet, a tendency towards ‘inverting the inverted triangle’ can be observed nowadays.

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. Nowadays, it is easy to exchange messages with people in different parts of the world simultaneously, and therefore national attributes may become blurred and their identity-shaping effect be weakened or invalidated. Other inherited features such as race and sex may be suppressed from daily communicative exchanges through the Internet and may no longer affect the way people are viewed and shaped as interactants in the network. As Meyrowitz (1985, pp. 143–4) points out, ‘many categories of people… were once “naturally” restricted from much social information by being isolated in particular places. The identity and cohesion of national affiliations were fostered by the fact that members were “isolated together” in the same or similar locations….’

Now, however, electronic messages… democratize and homogenize places by allowing people to experience and interact with others in spite of physical isolation. As a result, physical location now creates only one type of information system, only one type of shared but special group experience.”

Second, the middle section of optional sources of identity, mainly through self-socialization in 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 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. The sense of sharing in this type of community also requires that the participants agree on the ideas around which the group is based; even if they disagree, there needs to be some fundamental common ground. Trust in the shared motivations and beliefs of the other participants—in other words, their social identity—is essential to the sense of community (Donath 1999).

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 multiuser domains (see Turkle 1995). 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 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. ‘People’s representation on the Net is not an inevitability of biology, birth, and social circumstance, but a highly manipulable, completely disembodied intellectual fabrication’ (Mitchell 1995).

In some cases, 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. The difference between a cyberspace persona and an ordinary workplace persona is that, unlike a workplace persona, the cyber-space persona does not exist in a direct relationship to survival on any level. It is a surplus personality (Newitz 1995) but which might occasionally take over from our real-life self.

The medium of identity construction on the Internet is a special kind of text, 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.
Discourse and Identity

See also: 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

Bibliography

Baron N S 2000 Alphabet to Email. Routledge, London
Markus H, Nurius P 1986 Possible selves. American Psychologist 41: 954–69
Milroy L 1978 Language and Social Networks. Blackwell, Oxford, UK

Discourse, Anthropology of

Anthropology has been shaped at various points by what has often been referred to as a 'linguistic turn,' reliance on models of language for theories of culture and society. Franz Boas, for example, used phonetics as a model for cultural processes; he suggested that just as each language selected a small range of sounds from a practically unlimited array and arranged them in unique ways, so culture mapped the infinitely varied range of personal experience onto a limited range of categories. This line of reasoning was extended by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf. In the 1960s and 1970s, Claude Lévi-Strauss drew on Roman Jakobson's and Morris Halle's distinctive feature model of phonology in creating a variety of structuralism that revolutionized anthropology, literary criticism, and other fields.

At first glance, the centrality of the concept of 'discourse' to the work of many anthropologists and other scholars in the 1980s and 1990s might seem to represent another linguistic turn, a new convergence of linguistic and social/cultural models. Nevertheless, the situation, at least until recently, has been the opposite. Practitioners influenced by poststructuralist and postmodern theories have generally followed Michel Foucault in 'treating discourse [not] as groups of signs ... but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (1972, p. 49). Invoking the term thus signaled rejecting semiotic and structuralist analyses that identified formal patterns immanent in cultural codes in favor of discerning the power relations that shaped them. Many linguists, on the other hand, were trying to overcome the formalism of structuralism by seeking a more rigorous empiricism, and the concept of discourse was appealing as a rallying cry for going beyond decontextualized analysis of isolated signs to the analysis of communicative acts as they are embodied in concrete contexts. Although the latter practitioners defined discourse—generally implicitly—in a variety of ways, most associated the term with particular texts, conversations, and electronically mediated messages, and analyses generally focused on details of form, content, and context. The result has been the creation of divergent bodies of literature, both of which carry the banner of discourse, that have had relatively little to say to one another until recently.

This article outlines these opposing approaches at the same time that it points to recent research trends that are not only narrowing the gap between the two...