

Language and identity

This chapter:

- describes current perspectives on the concept of identity and its connection to culture and language use;
- explores some of the more relevant theoretical insights and empirical findings on which current understandings are based;
- offers a list of additional readings on the topics covered in this chapter.

2.1 Introduction

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 socio-cultural 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 chapter 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.

2.2 Social identity

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 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.

Quote 2.1 Social identity

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.

2.2.1 Contextual relevancy of social identity

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.

2.3 Agency, identity and language use

While our social identities and roles are to a great extent shaped by the groups and communities to which we belong, we as individual agents also play a role in shaping them. However, unlike the more traditional ‘linguistics applied’ view, which views **agency** as an inherent motivation of individuals, a sociocultural perspective views it as the ‘socioculturally mediated capacity to act’ (Ahearn, 2001: 112), and thus locates it in the discursive spaces between individual users and the conditions of the moment. In our use of language we represent a particular identity at the same time that we construct it. The degree of individual effort we can exert in shaping our identities, however, is not always equal. Rather, it is ‘an aspect of the action’ (Altieri, 1994: 4) negotiable in and arising from specific social and cultural circumstances constituting local contexts of action.

Quote 2.2 Individual identity from a sociocultural perspective

[Individual identity is] the situated outcome of a rhetorical and interpretive process in which interactants make situationally motivated selections from socially constituted repertoires of identificational and affiliational resources and craft these semiotic resources into identity claims for presentation to others.

Bauman (2000: 1)

From this perspective, individual identity is always in production, an outcome of agentive moves rather than a given. When we enter a communicative event, we do so as individuals with particular constellations of historically laden social identities. While these social identities influence our linguistic actions, they do not determine them. Rather, they predispose

us to participate in our activities and perceive the involvement of others in certain ways. At any communicative moment there exists the possibility of taking up a unique stance towards our own identity and those of others, and of using language in unexpected ways towards unexpected goals.

As with the meanings of our linguistic actions, however, how linguistically pliable our identities are depends to a large extent on the historical and sociopolitical forces embodied in them. Thus, while we have some choice in the ways we choose to create ourselves, our every action takes place within a social context, and thus can never be understood apart from it. Therefore individual agency is neither inherent in nor separate from individual action. Rather ‘it exists 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).

Quote 2.3 The relationship between individual identity and language use

Identity is constantly interactively constructed on a microlevel, where an individual’s identity is claimed, contested and re-constructed in interaction and in relation to the other participants.

Norris (2007: 657)

2.3.1 Giddens’s theory of structuration

While current conceptualisations of agency and language use in applied linguistics draw from several sources, one of the more significant is Anthony Giddens’s (1984) **theory of structuration**. According to Giddens, individual agency is a semiotic activity, a social construction, ‘something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual’ (Giddens, 1991: 52). In our locally occasioned social actions, we, as individual agents, shape and at the same time are given shape by what Giddens refers to as **social structures** – conventionalised, established ways of doing things. In our actions we draw on these structures and in so doing recreate them and ourselves as social actors. Our social structures do not, indeed cannot, exist outside action but rather can only exist in their continued reproduction across time and space. Their repeated use in recurring social practices, in turn, leads to the development of larger social systems, ‘patterns of relations in groupings of all kinds, from small, intimate groups, to social networks, to large organizations’ (*ibid.*). The mutually constituted act of ‘going on’ in the contexts of our everyday experiences – the process of creating and being created by our social structures – is what Giddens refers to as the process of structuration.

While Giddens is not particularly concerned with identity and language use *per se*, his ideas are useful in that, by locating individual action in the mutually constituted, continual production of our everyday lives – the dialogue (Bakhtin, 1986) between structure and action – Giddens’s social theory provides us with a framework for understanding the inextricable link between human agency and social institutions.

Quote 2.4 Theory of structuration

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors. In and through their activities agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible.

Giddens (1984: 2; emphasis in the original)

2.3.2 Bourdieu’s notion of habitus

Also influential to current understandings is the notion of **habitus**, as popularised by social theorist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu (1977, 2000), habitus is a set of bodily dispositions acquired through extended engagement in our everyday activities that dispose us to act in certain ways. We bring them with us to our social experiences, and are inclined to make sense of our experiences, and coordinate our actions with others in particular ways. It is through our lived experiences as individual actors that our habitus is continually being reconstituted.

Quote 2.5 Definition of habitus

Habitus as a system of dispositions to be and to do is a potentiality, a desire to be which, in a certain way, seeks to create the conditions most favourable to what it is. In the absence of any major upheaval (a change of position, for example), the conditions of its formation are also the conditions of its realisation.

Bourdieu (2000: 150)

For both Giddens and Bourdieu, individual identity is not a precondition of social action but rather arises from it. Moreover, in the recursive process of identity production, individuals are constituted ‘neither free agents nor completely socially determined products’ (Ahearn, 2000: 120). How free or constrained we are by our habitus depends on ‘the historically and socially situated conditions of its production’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 95). The empirical concern is then to identify the actions that individual actors take in their lived experiences that lead, on the one hand, to the reproduction of their larger social worlds and, on the other, to their transformation.

Quote 2.6 On the mutually constituted relationship between individual agency and habitus

The notion of habitus restores to the agent a generating, unifying, constructing, classifying power, while recalling that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but of a socialised body, investing in its practice socially constructed organising principles that are acquired in the course of a situated and dated social experience.

Bourdieu (2000: 136–137)

2.4 Research on language use and identity

2.4.1 Interactional sociolinguistics

One approach to the study of language use and identity that has had great impact on much research in applied linguistics is **interactional socio-linguistics** (IS), an approach that, to a large extent, is based on the work of linguistic anthropologist John Gumperz (1981, 1982a, 1982b). At the heart of IS is the notion of **contextualisation cues**. Gumperz (1999: 461) defines these cues as

any verbal sign which when processed in co-occurrence with symbolic grammatical and lexical signs serves to construct the contextual ground for situated interpretations, and thereby affects how constituent messages are understood.

The cues encompass various forms of speech production including the lexical, syntactic, pragmatic and paralinguistic. They also include turn-taking patterns, and even the language code itself. The cues provide individual interlocutors with recognisable markers for signalling and interpreting **contextual presuppositions**. Such signals, in turn, allow for the mutual adjustment of perspectives as the communicative event unfolds.

Quote 2.7 The function of contextualisation cues

How do contextualization cues work communicatively? They serve to highlight, foreground or make salient certain phonological or lexical strings *vis-à-vis* other similar units, that is, they function relationally and cannot be assigned context-independent, stable, core lexical meanings. Foregrounding processes, moreover, do not rest on any one single cue. Rather, assessments depend on cooccurrence judgments that simultaneously evaluate a variety of different cues. When interpreted with reference to lexical and grammatical knowledge, structural position within a clause and sequential location within a stretch of discourse, foregrounding becomes an input to implicatures, yielding situated interpretations. Situated interpretations are intrinsically context-bound and cannot be analyzed apart from the verbal sequences in which they are embedded.

Gumperz (1992: 232)

This approach to the study of language use assumes that individuals enter into communicative activities with others as **cooperative agents**, that is, as individuals interested in working towards a common end. The specific analytic focus is on the particular cues these individuals use to index or signal an aspect of the situational context in which the sign is being used. Any misuse or misinterpretation of cues is assumed to be due to a lack of shared knowledge of cue meanings.

Early studies investigated intercultural and interethnic communicative events, with the aim of uncovering differences in use of cues to signal and interpret meaning and revealing the subtle but significant communicative outcomes resulting from these differences. Gumperz (1982b), for example, examined the misunderstanding resulting from the particular use of cues by a Filipino English-speaking doctor while being interrogated by FBI agents. While the cues the doctor used were familiar to Filipino English speakers, they were not familiar to the American English-speaking FBI agents. Thus, Gumperz argued, the use of the cues by the doctor led to the agents' misreading of his motives. Similarly, in their study of counselling sessions at two community advice centres in the UK, Gumperz and Roberts (1991) found that differences in cue use between British and Punjabi participants in intercultural counselling sessions led to misunderstandings and ultimately negative evaluations of the Punjabi participants. As a final example, Erickson and Shultz (1982) looked at how differences in the rhythmic organisation of discourse, including, for example, the timing of turns, between counsellors and individual students in advising interviews affected the counsellors' evaluation of the students' abilities.

As noted earlier, a basic assumption of much of this early research is that participants are mutually interested in the successful accomplishment of the interaction and that their success is basically a matter of shared understandings

on the use of cues. Thus, any miscommunication occurring in interactions is explainable in terms of differences in this knowledge. Several critiques, however, point to the overly simplistic view on communication embedded in this assumption.

Kandiah (1991), for example, noted that such a view could not account fully for those cases of miscommunication between participants who share knowledge of the use and interpretation of cues. Nor could it account for those interactions occurring between participants who do not share cue knowledge but do not break down. He argued that something other than shared knowledge of cues must account for these kinds of communicative interactions. To make his case, Kandiah examined a job interview from the film *Crosstalk*, developed by Gumperz and his colleagues (1979) to illustrate difficulties in cross-cultural communication. In the film, communication difficulties arising between an English interviewer and the interviewee, an Indian immigrant to England, were attributed to differences in the individuals' communicative styles. One difference, for example, was found in the individuals' use of prosodic cues used to draw attention to particular bits of information in their presentation of the information. Kandiah argued that attributing the difficulties to a lack of shared knowledge ignores several crucial factors such as the length of time and experience the interviewee had had in the country before the interview and thus is inadequate for explaining the miscommunication. Instead, there are other possible explanations not accounted for in an analysis of cue use, such as each participant's degree of willingness to accommodate to the other. For example, individuals can knowingly use different cues or misunderstand those used by others to *create* a lack of shared knowledge and thereby distance themselves from each other. Kandiah further contended that research on intercultural communication needed to do more than simply mention these matters; it is, he stated, 'necessary to draw out with care and sophistication the highly complex issues they involve and to examine their close and integral interaction with the communicative behavior under investigation' (Kandiah, 1991: 371). Kandiah concluded that by focusing only on differences in cue use to explain troubles in interaction, interactional sociolinguistics runs the risk of

divert[ing] attention away from the real, underlying issues that often render communicative exchanges at these points of contact unsuccessful in a fundamental sense to surface issues . . . the diversion of attention from the real issues has the unwelcome effect of legitimizing the behavior that is so destructive of real communicative interaction.

(*ibid.*: 372)

Shea's (1994) study is a compelling example of how lack of interactional cooperation rather than lack of shared knowledge can lead to communication difficulties. Shea examined the interactions occurring in two advising sessions in which a non-native English-speaking student requested a letter

of recommendation from two native English-speaking academic advisers. With one, his request was successful; with the other it was not. Shea argued that the different outcomes resulted not from a difference in shared knowledge of contextualisation cue use between the advisers and the student, but rather from the advisers' use of different structuring strategies. In the successful session, the adviser attempted to move past communicative difficulties with the student to construct a shared understanding of what the student was requesting by using affiliating strategies like amplification, requests for clarification and agreement markers. In the unsuccessful interaction, the adviser treated the different cues as obstacles to achieving understanding, using distancing strategies such as interruptions, and exclusions to control the interaction and thereby position the student as 'a disfluent, inappropriate outsider' (Shea, 1994: 25). The different strategies used by the advisers, Shea argued, are rooted not in communicative styles, but in ideological orientations towards the non-native speaker of English. Roberts and her colleagues (Roberts *et al.*, 1992; Roberts and Sarangi, 1999; Roberts and Sayers, 1998) have made similar arguments about ideological influences on judgements about cue use in intercultural interactions.

A related criticism has to do with the view of culture embodied in many of the earlier studies in IS. It is argued that by focusing only on cultural cue use, the studies treat individuals as cultural dupes who reside in well-defined cultural worlds separated by immutable, clear boundaries, and within which they are compelled to act in particular ways. Sarangi (1994: 414) notes the analytic burden of such a view:

If we define, prior to analysis, an intercultural context in terms of cultural attributes of the participants, then it is very likely that any miscommunication which takes place in the discourse is identified and subsequently explained on the basis of 'cultural differences'.

Locating communication difficulties in cultural norms then ascribes a deterministic role to culture, and thus renders invisible the role of individual agency in shaping social action.

Alongside this deterministic view of culture is the assumption of culture as a one-dimensional, stable, homogeneous and consensual entity, with easily identifiable markers, and whose members share equally in the knowledge of and ability to use its norms. Such a view, it is argued, renders invisible the varied lived experiences of individuals *within* groups. We can only see in our analyses how culture is reflected in communicative encounters. What we cannot see is how it can also be a 'site of social struggle or producer of social relations' (Pratt, 1987: 56).

These criticisms notwithstanding, most agree that IS approaches to the study of language use have made significant contributions to a sociocultural perspective on human action. The concept of contextualisation cues, for

example, draws our attention to detailed ways in which language use is tied to individual identities and provides a window into the microprocesses by which such cues are used in the accomplishment of communicative events. Relatedly, in focusing on the moment-to-moment unfolding of interaction, this approach draws our attention to the reflexive nature of context. Context is not a prior condition of interaction, but it is something that is ‘both *brought along* and *brought about* in a situated encounter’ (Sarangi and Roberts, 1999: 30; emphasis in the original).

2.4.2 Co-construction of identity

Drawing on the strengths of interactional sociolinguistics and incorporating insights from such social theorists as Bourdieu (1977, 1980, 2000), Giddens (1984, 1991) and others (e.g. Butler, 2006; de Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1972; Weedon, 1999), current research on language, culture and identity is concerned with the ways in which individuals use language to **co-construct** their everyday worlds and, in particular, their own social roles and identities and those of others. The studies assume that identity is multiple and varied, individual representations of which embody particular social histories that are built up through and continually recreated in one’s everyday experiences (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). Moreover, it is acknowledged that individuals belong to varied groups and so take on a variety of identities defined by their memberships in these groups. These identities, however, are not fixed but rather are ‘multifaceted in complex and contradictory ways; tied to social practice and interaction as flexible and contextually contingent resources; and tied to processes of differentiation from other identified groups’ (Miller, 2000: 72). These studies often draw on a variety of data sources such as field notes, interviews, written documents and observations in the analysis in addition to taped versions of naturally occurring talk to uncover more macro patterns, including institutional and other ideologies, exerting influence on the processes of identity construction.

One particularly productive area of focus has been on identity construction of second language learners. One early influential study is that by Norton (Norton, 2000; Pierce, 1995) on immigrant women learning English in Canada. Using data sources such as personal diaries and interviews, Norton illustrates how these women’s identities were differentially constructed in their interactions with others in and out of the classroom. She argues that these different constructions had a significant influence on the women’s interest in language learning, making some more willing than others to invest the time and effort needed to learn English.

Another study (Roberts and Sarangi, 1995) takes a more micro-analytic perspective, examining how learner identities are differentially constructed in the interactional strategies employed by teachers in their interactions with the learners. As one example, Roberts and Sarangi examined a teacher’s

use of 'hyper-questioning' in her interactions with students she perceived to be problematic. Hyper-questioning is repeated questioning within a turn, leaving no opportunity for student response, and an intense rate of questioning across turns. They showed how the teacher's repeated use of this interactional strategy served to create increasingly disengaged learners. Such strategies, they argued, 'appear to disrupt learning not in any creative way but by contribution to the formation of social conditions which are a barrier to learning (p. 373). Similar findings emerged from the study by McKay and Wong (1996), in which they examined the identity construction of four Mandarin-speaking adolescents in the contexts of their schools. Their specific focus was on documenting the many ways in which the learners attempted to negotiate the shaping of their identities as English language learners and users, and the consequences of their attempts relative to the development of their academic skills in English. They concluded that

learners' historically specific needs, desires, and negotiations are not simply distractions from the proper task of language learning or accidental deviations from a 'pure' or 'ideal' language learning situation. Rather, they must be regarded as constituting the very fabric of students' lives and as determining their investment in learning the target language.

(McKay and Wong, 1996: 603)

In a more recent study, Nguyen and Kellogg (2005) investigated the postings of a group of adult L2 learners of English to an electronic bulletin board and found that the course topics influenced the kinds of identities the learners constructed in their postings and ultimately, the kinds of social relationships they developed among themselves. Those learners whose postings highlighted their personal, negative feelings and experiences on the assigned topics were found to participate less frequently in the online discussions, and this limited not only their language learning opportunities but also their opportunities to develop social relationships with their peers.

In terms of teacher–student relationships, a study by Richards (2006) shows how even slight changes to interactions between teachers and students can afford opportunities for classroom members to construct other identities and role relationships in addition to institutional identities as teachers and students. One example provided by Richards shows how a discussion about the meaning of an English idiom provided multiple opportunities for a teacher and her group of Japanese learners of English to create informal, interpersonal relationships among themselves that differed quite substantially from the standard teacher–student relationship.

Also garnering a great deal of research attention is the examination of professional, social and personal identity construction in other institutional settings such as the workplace. In such settings, individuals have been shown to construct and manage a number of different aspects of their professional and social roles and role relationships. As one example, Holmes (2005)

examined workplace narratives and, specifically, the linguistic and interactional resources used by individuals to negotiate aspects of their professional and personal identities in the stories they told each other.

Other studies have been concerned with the interactional construction of professional competence or expertise in health care and other institutional settings. Candlin (2002), for example, compared interactions between two nurses, one trained and one untrained, and a patient and found that the more expert nurse used specific strategies such as topic expansion to gather enough pertinent information from the patient so that health advice could be given. The untrained nurse, in contrast, exerted more control over the topic and thus limited opportunities to gather useful information. Also taking place in a health care setting, a study by Sarangi and Clarke (2002) examined the complex interactional strategies used by a counsellor in a genetic counselling session to negotiate the delicate balance between meeting the client's desire for a definitive risk assessment in an area defined by uncertainty while maintaining the counsellor's authority as expert adviser and, at the same time, her nondirective stance towards the advice-giving. Together, these and other studies exemplify in compelling ways the dynamic, contingent and co-constructed character of a range of identities including culture and ethnicity (e.g. Bucholtz, 2004; Day, 1998; Kiesling, 2005), educational identities (e.g. Dagenais *et al.*, 2006; Higgins, 2009), gender (e.g. Huffaker and Calvert, 2005; Ford, 2008), geographical identity (e.g. Johnstone, 1999, 2007; Waugh, 2010), non-native-speaking status (e.g. Wong, 2000a, 2000b; Park, 2007), professional roles and role relationships (e.g. Campbell and Roberts, 2007; Clarke, 2008; Cotter and Marschall, 2006), interpersonal associations such as friendship (e.g. Goodwin, 2006; Kyratzis, 2004), and other more locally contingent identities such as bystanders and law-breakers (e.g. Smith, 2010; Woolard, 2007).

A related, and growing, focus of attention in research on language use and identity is on the creative formation of hybrid social identities through **speech stylisation** and **language crossing**. This emerging focus is due in part to the rise in global migration, which has brought individuals and groups from different homelands into sustained contact with each other. As defined by Rampton (2009: 149), stylisation involves 'reflexive communicative action in which speakers produce specially marked and often exaggerated representations of languages, dialects, and styles that lie outside their own habitual repertoire. . . . Crossing . . . involves a stronger sense of social or ethnic boundary transgression'.

Rampton's (2005) study is a compelling example of these phenomena. His central concern was with the ways in which youths from mixed-race peer groups in Britain used language to construct hybrid identities. The groups were ethnically mixed, and included not only Anglos but also youths from Caribbean, Indian and Pakistani descent. Using observations and interviews in addition to audio-tapes as his primary sources of data,

Rampton found that the youngsters often used the languages associated with each other's ethnic and racial identities in creative, unexpected ways. For example, Afro-Caribbean youths often made use of Punjabi in their interactions with others. Rampton calls such uses 'crossing' and found that they occurred most often when individuals wanted to mark their stances towards particular social relationships. Asian adolescents, for example, often used stylised Asian English with teachers in their schools to feign a minimal level of English language competence and thus playfully resist teacher attempts to involve them in class activities. The youths also 'crossed' when playing games with their peers, or when they interacted with members of the opposite sex.

Chun (2001) revealed similar language stylisations and crossings in her analysis of Korean American discourse. Specifically, she found that in a discussion among young adult Korean Americans, one frequently incorporated lexical elements of African American English (AAE) into his otherwise mainstream American English speech. Chun argues that through his use of AAE, and his interlocutors' appreciative responses, the young men projected a male identity for themselves that challenged the dominant view of Korean American men as 'passive, feminine, and desirous of whiteness' (p. 61). Findings from these and other such studies (e.g. Auer, 2007; Rajadurai, 2007; Stroud and Wee, 2007; Tetreault, 2009), make visible the multiple, permeable, hybrid and contextualised nature of identity, and thereby 'subvert essentialist preconceptions of linguistic ownership' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 588). The pedagogical significance of the various strands of research highlighted in this chapter is discussed in Section II.

2.5 Summary

As we have discussed in this chapter, a sociocultural perspective on identity and language use is based on several key premises. One of the more significant 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 recognises 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.

Quote 2.8 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.

Further reading

- 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.
- Bührig, K. and Thijs, J. (2006) *Beyond Misunderstanding: Linguistic Analyses of Intercultural Communication*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins. The twelve chapters in this volume examine intercultural communication in a variety of settings and from a variety of theoretical frameworks to demonstrate how individuals draw on a range of linguistic resources to construct mutual understandings in their interactions.
- 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.
- Hall, C., Slembrouck, S. and Sarangi, S. (2006) *Language Practice in Social Work: Categorisation and Accountability in Child Welfare*, London: Routledge. This book examines the language practices of social workers, their clients and other professionals to uncover ways in which the doing of social work is managed. It includes the study of such key practices as interviews, case conferences and home visits. Its purpose is to increase the profession's awareness of how language is used to create and sustain professional contexts of interaction, identities and relationships so that they may better serve their clients.
- 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.