

# Identity and naturally occurring interaction: An interview with Elizabeth Stokoe

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# Identity and naturally occurring interaction: An interview with Elizabeth Stokoe

## Keywords

identity, discourse, gender, membership categories, discursive psychology

Dr. Elizabeth Stokoe is one of Europe's foremost authorities on identity-in-interaction. Although her work does not focus on foreign language learning contexts per se, many scholars and students of identity in Japan are familiar with her 2006 book *Discourse and Identity*, co-authored with Dr. Bethan Benwell, and her qualitative yet strongly empirical approach to documenting identity-in-interaction through Conversation Analysis (CA) and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA). Dr. Stokoe is Professor of Social Interaction in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University. She was interviewed by Keiko Ikeda.

Elizabeth Stokoeは、ヨーロッパのディスコース研究界において、様々な形態の自然発生のインタラクションのアイデンティティ研究で最もよく知られた研究者の1人である。外国語学習におけるアイデンティティに焦点を当てているわけではないが、日本の多くのアイデンティティを研究する研究者や学生にとって2006年に発刊された著書 *Discourse and Identity* (共著 Bethan Benwell) と会話分析 (CA) や、メンバーシップカテゴリー分析 (MCA) を通じてインタラクションにおけるアイデンティティを記録するための質的かつ極めて実証的なアプローチは馴染みが深い。StokoeはLoughborough University社会科学学部の社会インタラクションの教授である。池田佳子がインタビューを行った。

Keiko Ikeda

Kansai University

Moments of interculturality can be defined as times during interaction when speakers accept their *inter-cultural selves*. For example, a person may present themselves as Japanese, Korean, Thai, or someone from another culture when speaking English. The emergent social identity produced from these moments of interculturality raises some basic questions for researchers: What is identity?

To what extent do such interactionally produced identities facilitate or constrain everyday communication? As the two papers in this special issue illustrate, it is important to challenge the belief that identities are always fixed and static across social situations.

**Keiko Ikeda (KI):** First of all, can you tell us about your research interests and some of your recent (and upcoming) activities?

**Elizabeth Stokoe (ES):** I'm currently researching *speed-dating*<sup>1</sup>. I started out looking at how people elicit or volunteer relation-



1 Speed-dating is a formalized matchmaking process or dating system whose purpose is to encourage people to meet a large number of new people. Most speed dating events match people at random, and participants will meet different "types" that they might not normally talk to in a club, a bar, or a discotheque.

ship histories. I'm writing a book for Cambridge on the whole project, which partly aims to speak to a sociological-psychological audience about the importance of studying relationships (here, relationship initiation) in their naturally occurring contexts – something psychologists often fail to do.

Apart from that, I am still studying *neighbor disputes* and *mediation processes*, focusing much more now on the practical applications of my work and producing lots of training workshops for mediators. I'm developing a new type of role-play, using CA and various bits of technology to do this.

I'm also still working with Bethan Benwell on our education project. We recently presented a plenary talk at the British Association for Applied Linguistics, looking at *the educational in the social and the social in the educational*. We developed our earlier work on the way students resist academic identity in educational settings to consider how students in domestic settings also produce their identities as students.

**KI:** Can you tell us in detail about some of your most recent work on identity?

**ES:** Well in one of the chapters I am working on at the moment (Stokoe, forthcoming c), I consider *positioning theory* (PT) as an empirical approach to the analysis of identity categories alongside a conversation analytic alternative. Polemic in tone, I address questions including:

- Does PT have a clear methodology that researchers can be accountable to?
- Does the body of PT studies make a case for robust positioning practices that members construct and orient to?
- What are the differences between PT and a CA approach to the study of positions or categories?
- How best should analysts work with identity topics?
- I discuss these questions alongside empirical illustrations, drawing on a range of domestic and institutional interactive materials.

Meanwhile in some of my recent work on conversation and gender (Stokoe, 2010), I examine how speakers make and repair consecu-

tive references to third parties using the gender categories *girl*, *woman*, and *lady* within the context of debates about when and how gender is relevant in talk. The chapter starts with a brief summary of language and gender research before moving on to explain the practices of *repair* and *person reference* in CA. The analysis focuses on instances of *same-turn* or *self-initiated self-repair* (Schegloff, 1979; Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977), in which a speaker marks some aspect of their ongoing talk as problematic and repairs it within the same turn (e.g., “that girl over—that woman over there”). This is in contrast to other types of repair in which recipients initiate and produce repair. Four analytic sections focus on a particular format of XY repairs, in which X is a first gender category and Y is another. The first section examines canonical XY repairs, and the second focuses on cases in which the repair segment contains a marked orientation to the repairable. The third section examines cases in which *or* is a feature of the repair segment. The final section focuses on instances of consecutive alternative reference where no features of repair are present. Both the third and fourth sections therefore consider cases of probable non-repair, or *doing* non-repair. Overall, the chapter considers how different formats for producing consecutive, alternate gender categories show speakers' commitment to one category, and their relevance to evidencing speakers' orientation to gender.

**KI:** How did you become involved in this sort of research?

**ES:** In various ways. Some projects (like the role-play training project discussed above) emerge after years spending time analyzing materials for other purposes. Some projects develop by design, by which I mean I purposefully collect material that will help me explore questions I already have about social life. For instance, I collected mediation and other materials because I developed an interest in *neighbor relationships*. But, as with all CA work, you end up working inductively, studying phenomena you don't know you'll be interested in when you start out.

**KI:** How is your approach to identity different from commonly held understandings of identity?

**ES:** I don't think there's anything unique to my approach to identity – it's now a fairly standard *discursive psychological position* I take, rooted in Antaki and Widdicombe's (1998) collection on Identities in Talk. What I've done differently from their work is to examine *membership categories* in particular ways, trying to study more robustly the way categories crop up systematically in particular conversational practices.

**KI:** How do you think micro discursive analytic research on identity could be of relevance to educators at various levels in Japan?

**ES:** I can't say anything about Japan in particular, as it is an unfamiliar context and educational system. But certainly my work with Bethan, looking at what it means to be a student, and the constraints and affordances of that identity, hopefully can help educators in Japan think through their expectations when setting up educational tasks and activities.

**KI:** I was particularly drawn to the claim that someone can be classified into a particular identity category (e.g., language learner/novice speaker) of the language in use. Yet unless the registering of visible identity indicators takes place through the participants' behavior vis-a-vis each other, we should not draw upon such an identity category. Many hold a belief that foreign accents, mis-pronounced words, and ungrammatical or unusual sentence construction may send out indicators of this category regardless of the speaker's identity work in interaction. Are you inclined to agree?

**ES:** Possibly, but it would still be up to members to orient to and make relevant such an aspect of a person's identity in courses of action. Like other categories, we can't assume they are relevant ahead of examining interaction – otherwise the list of possibly relevant categories is infinite.

## References

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## Appendix: A Selective list of Elizabeth Stokoe's forthcoming publications

### Books

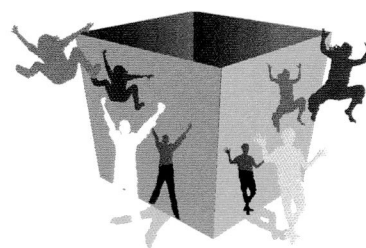
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Stokoe, E. (forthcoming c). A conversation analytic approach to 'positioning theory': The sequential anatomy of categorical practices. In A. Deppermann & L. Moissinac (Eds.), *Positioning in interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

**Keiko Ikeda** obtained her Ph.D. at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She is currently an Associate Professor at Kansai University. Her research interests include second language studies, language education, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, conversation analysis, and media and politics in Japan.



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