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## Language and Identity: A Critique

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### Abstract

Due to the exponential growth of immigration to the developed countries, various speech communities have been created in those countries. This surge of macro-communities has instigated abundant research on the nature of the linguistic identity of these communities and its potential influence on the micro-communities. There is a seamless interaction between language and social identity, and this interaction is multi-faceted and renders myriads of ramifications. Correspondingly, many researchers or theoreticians have proposed various models for the mechanism of this interaction. Even though there is a consensus on the strong intercourse between language and identity, there are still debates on the causal direction of this interaction. Building upon sociocultural and sociolinguistic theories, the related literature mostly views the causal direction from social to linguistic. However, this paper argues against any unilateral interpretations and discuss how the notions of language and identity have bilateral connections. Finally, the elemental stages of the development of linguistic identity from a semiotic outlook are discussed.

**Keywords:** identity, language, linguistic, social identity, sociolinguistic

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### Introduction

The word *identity* stems from the Latin word *idem*, which means *sameness*. In the social sciences, the notion of identity has been widely used in different contexts and for distinct purposes. Identity, in these sciences, may refer to the instinctive perception of self or a badge enlightening group memberships (Holland, 2001; Norton, 2010). Additionally, Identity can “refer to an individual’s own subjective sense of self, to personal classification ‘markers’ that appear as important, both to oneself and to others, and also to those markers that delineate group membership(s)” (Edwards, 2009, p.16).

From an ecological perspective, identities are specific mindsets representing themselves in divergent ways of talking, behaving, writing, eating and dressing (Stibbe, 2015). Identity can be formed through a variety of linguistic means and variations. The central to the concept of identity from a psychosocial perspective is the fact that identity is not something you *have*, it is something you *do* (Sovet, DiMillo & Samson 2016; Vertuyken, 2018). For example, the use of

an especial lexical term or accent or dialect can impart the identity of a language speaker in the society. However, philosophers have long discussed identity as something you *have* and something that is *internal* (Strauss, 2017). It is also noteworthy to mention that there is no consensus among philosophers, sociolinguists, and sociologists on the causal direction between identity and language. That is, whether identity leads to a specific kind of linguistic behavior (language use) or use of language characterizes adoption of an identity is still under debate (David & Govindasamy, 2017; Schreiber, 2015). The present review aims to compare and contrast the predominant theoretical paradigms within which linguistic identity has been conceptualized and discussed. Additionally, the effects of digital era on the redefinition of linguistic identity have been debated. Finally, the limitations of each theoretical paradigm are highlighted followed by suggestions for future research.

## Theoretical Background

**Sociolinguistics and sociocultural theory.** Through analyses of linguistic variations, sociolinguistics is concerned with the effects of societal factors on linguistic behavior. One significant dimension of sociolinguistic research is the investigation of the impact of social norms and roles on linguistic identity (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). Accordingly, sociolinguists are interested in the interactions between the identity of the speaker and the social context within which the speaking happens (Carranza, 2017). The pioneer of sociolinguistic studies William Labov (1972) conducted a series of studies regarding the confluence of American vernacular and social identity. He concluded that divergent use of language is the reflection of identities people adopt as a result of their membership in the different groups characterized by their race, ethnicity, gender and social class (Labov, 1972; Moore, 2004).

The way people use a variety of languages leads to their *social identity* identification. People may greet differently, request differently or use their speech intonation differently and these varieties are reflections of their identity. Speakers define their positions with other individuals by using a specific linguistic variety that conveys more than what is said (**Jacewicz, Fox, & Wei, 2010**). Linguistic variation is not merely originated from various geographical territories. People may use a variety of language to show multiple group allegiances. This inclination exists because using that linguistic variety is a sign of detaching yourself from the groups that *do not* speak that way (Blommaert & Backus, 2013; Kramsch, 1998; Sterling, 2000). This phenomenon is what Edwards (2007) has called “ethnonational solidarity” (p. 9): speakers construct and develop their linguistic identities by informed selection of the proper language varieties.

The speakers' identity is reflected by the use of similar verbal and nonverbal communicative acts (Bodomo & Teixeira-E-Silva, 2012). A speech community then is formed, which is a large group of people with a shared repertoire of verbal communication habits (Gumperz, 2009). Furthermore, single individuals' language variety (also called idiolect), is not detached from the variety of a language used by a community or group (also called dialect). A crucial point here is that the mechanism of the relationships between idiolect and dialect is variable and is majorly unconscious (Kraljic, Brennan & Samuel, 2008).

Sometimes, individual speakers maintain dual identities by use of two linguistic varieties to communicate in double speech communities. It is not true in any sense to conclude that social identity is the sum of every single individual's identities. In other words, both *intra and interlinguistic* identity may change in different ways through time. Within the speech community, speakers continuously adjust their identities and contribute to the group's identity. Language is a pillar of identity *undertaking*. Thus, the way you talk is part of the speech

community's identity; and how you speak reflects your appreciation of the community's identity (Gumperz, 2009). The sociolinguistic research mainly addresses this issue. The speech accommodation theory, which is discussed in details below, states that "the accommodation through speech can be regarded as an attempt on the part of the speaker to modify or disguise his persona in order to make it more acceptable to the person addressed" (Giles & Powesland, 1975, p. 158). This aspect of language identity is the main fodder for critical literacy researchers and theorists. They believe that solidification of social bonds by use of language may pave the way for the ruling or mainstream group to use linguistic identity for inciting their ideology to a society for their majorly politically- or geographically-motivated objectives (Miller, 2000; Ssentongo, 2015). Accordingly "the linguistic minority must achieve self-representation in the dominant language if they are to participate in mainstream social and academic contexts, renegotiate their identities in new places, and accrue the necessary symbolic capital to integrate successfully into school and the wider society" (Miller, 2003, p. 4). Another informative discussion about the sources of identity formation is provided by Benwell and Stokoe (2006). The authors argue about the agency of intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributing to the construction of identity. Accordingly, we should demarcate two different processes: the formation of identity by individuals themselves according to their wishes and will or the unconscious creation of identity by the mainstream power.

Non-solidarity linguistic manifestations denote detachment and reserve, while solidarity manifestations mean affinity and rapport. In other words, "to speak of someone's social identity is to speak, at the very least, of what attaches them in virtue of their membership of a category" (Antaki, et al. 1996, p. 473). For example, graduates from the same class, members of a family and players of a football team use a linguistic variety to identify themselves as intimate. This argument is corroborated by the proponents of *speech accommodation theory* maintaining that speakers shift and modify their speech in different situations, which require these changes (Giles & Powesland, 1997; Street & Giles, 1982). One of the prime examples of situational identity is the use of *religious language* within a religious group. Edwards (2009) has a compelling discussion on how missionaries have used language to influence the emotions and perceptions of so-called morally ignorant people. Language has been one of the rudimentary assets the ministers have embarked on establishing strong connections between people of different dialects, languages, and locations on the basis of their shared religious identity. There is a similar discussion on the issue of *in-group favoritism* (see Dasgupta, 2004). Accordingly, people tend to favor and support those whom they share the same values, cause, expectation, etc.

Sociocultural theory of learning considers human learning, in general, being decided by social factors. Then, the sociocultural theory is aligned with sociolinguistics in that both view society as the creator of the style, mechanism and purpose of language use. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the sociocultural theory is a macro-theory discussing the role of society on various non-linguistic behaviors as well. From a sociocultural perspective, the linguistic identity can be regarded as "an emergent construction, 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, p. 1). The Figure 1 below depicts the relationship between language and identity through a sociolinguistic lens.

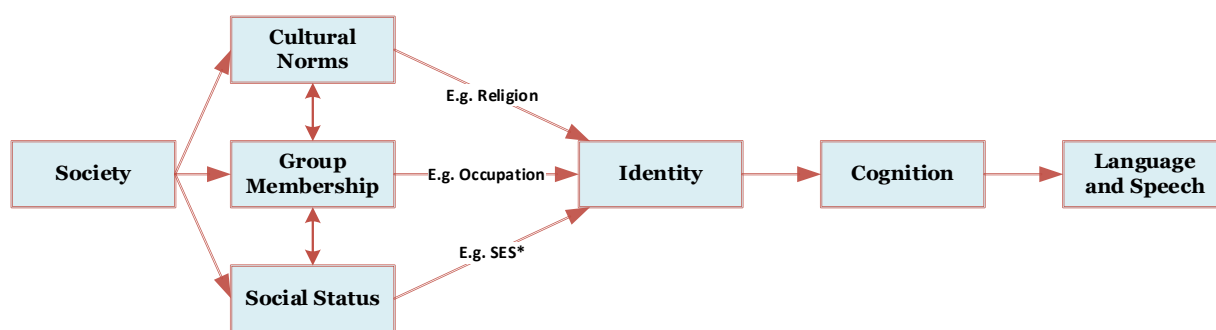


Figure 1. Relationship between language and identity from a sociolinguistic perspective

\*Socioeconomic Status

**Social Constructivism Theory.** Rooted mainly in the works of Vygotsky (1967), Social Constructivism Theory views the relationship between human behavior and societal factors mutually constitutive. While sociolinguistics and sociocultural theory posit that society decides the linguistic identity, social constructivists keep an interactive perspective on the correlations between language and identity. Correspondingly, the social constructivist theories assert that:

Although the social world appears to human beings as an objective reality, it is in fact constituted through human action and interaction and is not independent of it. From this perspective, people continuously create and recreate social reality and in turn, are shaped by it in a dialectical process. Thus, identity is not seen as a concept that resides in the mind of the individual self, but rather as a process of construction, that has its locus in social interaction. (Fina, 2012. p. 1)

Furthermore, the social constructivist perspective rejects the idea of identity being a stable *cognitive representation of self-existing* in the mind of individuals (constructors); rather, identity is constructed as a response the necessities required by the nature of social interactions and social norms (Kiraly, 2014). Nonetheless, the social constructivist theories do not dismiss the prominent role of cognition and memory in the formation of identities. According to Riley (2007), the recognition of cognition by the social constructivists:

“has important implications for any kind of constructivist approach, where cognition is seen as a socially mediated activity, since it provides a bridge between interpersonal and intrapersonal, showing that 'social' and 'individual' aspects of cognition and the identity formation processes, far from being unrelated or even contradictory, are the distal and proximal motions of one and the same mechanism.” (p. 83).

In sum, research on language and identity has its root in three man philosophies, namely, social constructivism, sociolinguistic theories and sociocultural theories of language learning. Sociocultural theories and sociolinguistics investigate the potential effects of social factors and societal structure on the development and use of language. However, social constructivist theories posit that human learning and behavior are constantly interacting with the social, environmental and ecological variables in a mutually constitutive process. That is, while sociolinguists and proponents of sociocultural theories assert that social factors decide language, identity and behavior as a one- directional process, social constructivist consider this

process bi-directional, reciprocal and interactive. The Figure 2 below illustrates the relationship between language and identity within a social constructive framework.

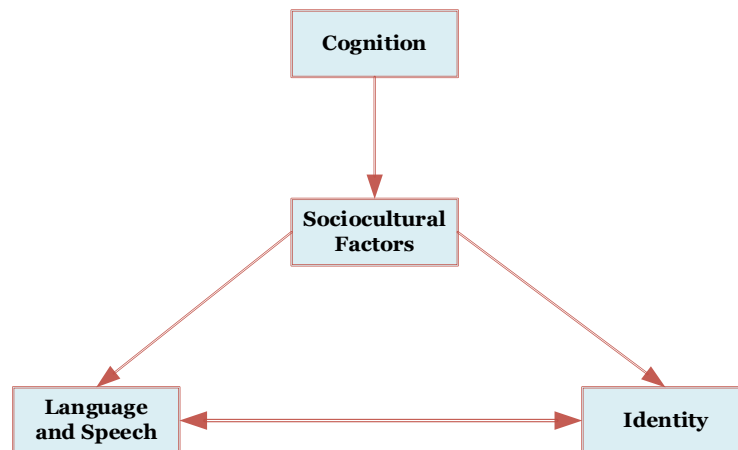


Figure 2. Relationship between language and identity from a social constructive perspective

### Identity Formation and Development

The language we learn as children at home is formative of our identity; we cannot quickly change it or replace it. Owing to the fact that language learning serves as a tool for the realization of one's identity in varying social environments, it is a reflection of our socioeconomic status (SES), race, ethnicity, gender, nationality and so many other aspects of speakers' identities. Given the influence of one's language on one's identity, people learn to be male, or female, or English, or Chinese, or Hispanic, or Jewish, or Christian. And this is the main reason for us judging people's race, ethnicity or gender based on their speech. Psychology theorist Gordon Allport (1961) sees the analysis of identity more difficult as a child grows up and forms a unique personality. This view is aligned with the Freudian theorists who believe that early years acquired (fossilized more extremely) behaviors linger on as the chief insignia of our personality. This argument is also aligned with the *psychological primacy effect*, which asserts that early life experiences which are resistant to change, have a stronger effect on one's personality in life (Bickhard & Christopher, 1994; Zajonc, 1984).

However, it should be stressed once more that identity formation or construction of a sense of 'self' is not a disjointed process devoid of any meaningful connection to the environment. The linguistic identity is grown from the intersection between language, environment, and psychobiography (Block, 2013). This growth is systematic, continuous and flexible. Wetherell (2007) calls self-identity a *personal order* adding that:

“personal order is derived from social order but is not isomorphic with it. A person . . . is a site, like institutions or social interaction, where flows of meaning-making practices or semiosis . . . become organized. Over time particular routines, repetitions, procedures and modes of practice build up to form personal style, psycho-biography, and life history, and become a guide for how to go on in the present . . . In the case of personal order, the relevant practices could be described as ‘psycho-discursive’ . . . those which among the sum of social practices constitute psychology, formulate a mental life and have consequences for the formation and representation of the person”. (p.668).

Benwell and Stokoe, (2006) propose that the research on how identity is formed and developed does not agree on identity being instigated by individualized agents or structural agents. That is, for reaching a robust identity theory, we must delineate if identity is induced by an individual or a society (structure) (Riley, 2008).

### **Linguistic Identity in the Digital Era**

The emergence of new literacy modes accompanied by multimedia communicative devices has transformed the processes, shapes, and speed of linguistic communications. Moreover, the proliferation of social media platforms has made communications simpler, cheaper and free of geographical and temporal limitations. It goes without saying that our linguistic identity has been affected by the surge of digital and electronic assets. As Norton (2013) cogently noted, identity is “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relation is constructed across time and space and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 5). The multimodal digital life has spawned new forms of communication and social interaction through online and offline environments, and individuals may take multiple identities due to the flexibility of digital communication regarding temporal and spatial factors. The shift from a local domain of social interaction to a global domain of interaction has given life to mobility producing “a networked individualism, where people are connected while paradoxically controlled by scheduling, monitoring, surveillance and regulation” (Darvin, 2016, p. 526).

Given the explosive growth of the digital world, language users also need an additional level of literacy called digital literacy. Digital literacy refers to “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.” (Visser, 2012, para. 2). Several studies have demonstrated that language speakers take different identities in different online social forums while interacting with others (e.g., Black, 2006; Thorne, Sauro & Smith, 2015). As Darvin (2016) notes in digital and online environments “are able to perform multiple identities, such as blogger, photographer, gamer or designer, and to document and display their lives through various modalities” (p. 529). Therefore, the multiple forms people can use to communicate with plenty of audiences very fast and widespread and the diversity of audience accompanied by digital communication, has changed our perception of *self* and *others*. Through online platforms, individuals can start a public discussion and be part of a public discussion, and in either case, the digital media mediates the effects of personal choice and communicative act (Spengler, 2015; Spilioti, 2015). In addition, these contextual functions have provided fertile learning settings for language learners within which they can engross themselves in different issues that may interest them, and this involvement necessitates bringing new identities to these settings (Darvin, 2016). In sum, the digital world has paved the way for taking multiple identities in various semiotic forms and for different purposes through the multimodal environments. The result of these readjustments is more flexibility and complexity of linguistic identity as a multifaceted variable.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past two decades, linguistics researchers and theoreticians have considered the topic of *identity* a pivotal stream for research. Nevertheless, the main setback has been over-reliance to the older views on identity that consider identity as an immutable entity already existent, not an entity in the continuous flow of change. In order to overcome this conundrum, the linguists should consider “how language functions to define and regulate the role of the individual within the social unit at the same time as it helps to constitute that unit” (Joseph, 2016, p. 22).

Conventionally, studies on language identity have been merely circulating how the use of language influences people identity formation and growth (Rovira, 2008). However, these studies, which have been mostly conducted within a sociolinguistic framework, have not adequately deemed the strong potentials social identities have for influencing the use of language by individuals (Dyer, 2007; Norton, 2010). There might be several reasons for this negligence. Primarily, studying identity and its ramifications from a linguistic perspective use is more “feasible” in a sense that comparing and contrasting linguistic behaviors by different groups of people is a simpler and straightforward endeavor than examining how identities are different and what is the pattern for identity growth or change within the same language. In other words, demarcating identities for the investigation of their formation and growth mechanism requires consideration of many “latent variables” let alone investigation of how identities in different language contexts produce different types of language departments (Mahmoodi-Shahreabaki, 2015). Hence, the interaction between language and identity is “never fixed but always open to change; multifaceted in complex, contradictory ways; tied to social practice and interaction as a flexible and contextually contingent resource; and tied to processes of differentiation from other identified groups” (Miller, 2000, p, 72).

Second, the studies, mainly conducted via ethnographic linguists, have considered language identity theoretically “compartmentalized” in lieu of grasping a macro view including the reciprocal relations between individuals and society. The linguistic identity of individuals can be studied outside the context of social practice as the specific amalgamations shared values within a society influence both the individual and social identities.

Finally, the expansion of technological and digital tools requires intensive attention as the interactions between language and identity have been under the influence of the prorogation of digital and multimodal environments. Researchers have access to more observational and analytical tools to study and evaluate those interactions. On the other hand, the recruitment of numerous identities by a larger sample of people who are active online may open new windows for more representative insights into the nature of linguistic identity formation and development.

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