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**Categorisation and the negotiation of similarity and difference**
Identity construction in expatriate blogs

Linda Walz

*Abstract*

Expatriates are individuals who have moved abroad and settled into a new sociocultural environment. Many keep a personal blog, in which they reflect on their experiences and in the process engage in identity construction. Whilst online directories list a multitude of expatriate blogs, little research has examined how identity is linguistically produced in such sites. Adopting a sociocultural linguistic approach, this paper investigates identity construction in twelve expatriate blogs written in English through membership categorisation analysis (Sacks 1992) and the similarity dimension of tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall 2004a,b). Key features are being a person in transition, adopting English practises and portraying relocation as a shared experience.

## 1. Introduction

A person's identity can be understood to encompass the way they construct and portray themselves in relation to and in interaction with others. It is therefore an inherently relational domain. Whilst individuals may think of their identity as a stable core residing within themselves, changes to their environment or living situation may result in the self being perceived as changed, and in the need to express their thoughts and experiences. One site where such identity construction and negotiation happens is blogging. A personal blog is a space which can serve individuals to express their own reflections (Technorati 2010). This may take any aspect of identity as its focus, such as illness (Page 2012; De Boer & Slatman 2014), weight-loss (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain 2012), national identity (Rulyova & Zagibalov 2012), or the aspiration to cosmopolitanism (Snee 2014). The type of personal bloggers that this research focuses on are individuals living in a foreign country, who self-identify as *expatriates* or *expats* by having their blog included in an online expatriate blog directory. They have moved away from their country of origin and are living abroad for an extended period of time or potentially indefinitely. Such individuals can be thought of as people in transition, moving not only physically from one country to another, but also making a transition in terms of their cultural and linguistic surroundings, as well as their social group

and stage of life. This research examines how in such a phase of transition a person's identity is linguistically constructed and expressed.

Expatriate blogging is a widespread phenomenon, with online directories listing a multitude of such sites. Nevertheless, little research has examined how identity is linguistically constructed in blogs written by foreign nationals about living abroad. This study addresses this issue by investigating expatriate blogs through an exploratory application of two different approaches: membership categorisation analysis (henceforth MCA; Sacks 1992) and one element of tactics of intersubjectivity (henceforth Tactics; Bucholtz & Hall 2004a,b). This promises new insights into expatriate identity construction from a linguistic point of view, contributing to recent research on identity construction in various social media (Page 2012) and thus furthering an understanding of how online identity is linguistically produced. Furthermore, an examination of expatriate identity as negotiated through personal blogs can inspire participants and their audiences to see their own practices in a new light, which may promote self-reflection as well as engender mutual appreciation of expatriates and locals. At the same time, this study may broaden the understanding of identity in transition more generally, both within and beyond academia. Finally, the application of two different frameworks explores their compatibility and potential for expansion and thus aims to contribute to discussions of how identity can be theorised and investigated.

This paper is structured as follows. In section 2, an overview of the expatriate blogosphere will be provided. Section 3 will then discuss the sociocultural linguistic understanding of identity that is adopted in this research, as well as prevalent studies on expatriates and blogging in relation to the linguistic construction of identity. In section 4, this discussion of the research background will be succeeded by an outline of the methodologies employed in this research, MCA and Tactics, including reflections on their suitability and compatibility. Section 5 describes the data for this research, how it was collected and where the focus for the analysis lies. The final two sections provide an analysis and discussion of categorisations pertaining to being a person in transition and linguistic means employed to construct identity through establishing similarity and difference in the blog posts.

## 2. The expatriate blogosphere

Moving and living abroad for a longer period of time is a common phenomenon nowadays. According to the UK Office for National Statistics, in the year ending in March 2016 633,000 people immigrated to the UK, of whom 282,000 were non-EU citizens. There are several reasons why a person may relocate abroad long-term. In the above time frame, the most commonly stated reason was work-related (303,000 people), followed by study (164,000), and accompanying or joining others (80,000) in third place (Office for National Statistics 2016). These migration statistics apply to who the United Nations define as a *long-term international migrant*: 'A person who moves to a country other than that of his or her usual residence for a period of at least a year (12 months), so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence' (United Nations 1998:10). However, given the prevalence of migration and the various reasons for which it is undertaken, it is not surprising that there exist a number of different terms to describe people who move abroad long-term, one of them being *expatriate*. Expatriates tend to fall into the first or third category discussed above, moving either for work or to accompany or join others. However, some individuals are not easily categorised in terms of their motivations, as they may relocate for instance in order to join another person as well as further their studies.

In this research, then, *expatriate* or the short form *expat* is used synonymously to *long-term international migrant* to refer to a foreign national who has moved to a different country for the purpose of living there for an unspecified amount of time, but extending beyond one year. Two elements are thus crucial: rather than being born abroad, the person has moved there in the course of their life; and whilst the length of time spent abroad may not be clear to individuals themselves, it is certainly more extensive than a few months or a year spent on an exchange programme or work placement, with individuals living abroad for several years, and potentially indefinitely.[1]

The term *expatriate* denotes a form of privileged migration, and as such it is occasionally associated with negative connotations and seen to encompass the superiority of certain types of foreign nationals as opposed to terms like *migrant* or *immigrant* (Koutonin 2015). However, through the inclusion of their blogs in so-called expatriate directories the participants of this study can be seen as either self-identifying with the term *expatriate*, or at least not opposing it. Other terminology pertaining to global mobility, such as *migrant* or *immigrant* is scarcely used on such sites, and *expatriate* is adopted in the blogosphere and on social network sites such as *InterNations*[2] to refer to individuals of any nationality living in any other country. In this study, then, *expatriate* is taken to apply to any foreign national living abroad for longer than one year and is as such free of negative connotations.

The extent of this phenomenon becomes clear when examining resources on the Internet. There is a wealth of websites dedicated to giving advice and support to people who are planning to move abroad or have already done so. Several of those websites however provide much more than just information: they are community-building. For instance, websites allow users to sign up and engage in discussion via forums or private messaging with other users living abroad. A specific type of engagement is reading blogs, as will be explained below.

Upon moving abroad, several individuals have been found to begin a blog, with a declared purpose of documenting their experiences abroad and keeping friends and family informed. They have the option to include their blog in a directory, a website which lists blogs according to certain criteria, adding some descriptive information and linking to the blog, so that interested readers can find and access it. For blogs written by foreign nationals living abroad there exist a number of expatriate blog directories that provide lists of similar blogs. These are usually ordered according to country of residence, and sometimes also provide information about a blogger's home country. This then makes it possible for interested readers to identify blogs that are relevant to them and to do so by searching by country. Bloggers listed in the directories in turn display a badge on their blog that links back to the directory. It can thus be argued that they self-identify as expatriates, associating their blogging with the practice found in several blogs written by foreign nationals.

Indeed, the expatriate blogosphere can be regarded as an online community of mutual readers who share their blog and thus virtually partake in the blogger's everyday life. Not only do they include links to other expatriate blogs in the sideline of their blog, the blogroll, but statements in the blog posts as well as in the comments section show that bloggers mutually read each other's blogs and may choose to leave a comment.[3] There is thus a notion of going through a shared experience when moving and settling in abroad, regardless of one's

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[1] It can be argued that the uncertainty regarding the extent of time spent abroad is a feature common to many expatriates' experiences.

[2] Available at: https://www.internations.org. Accessed on: 02/06/2016.

[3] This potential of blogs to function as a community was equally identified by Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain (2012) in the case of the weight-loss blogosphere.

origin and even across different countries of residence and entirely different reasons for having moved abroad.

The size of the directories and the fact that they add an ever increasing number of blogs to their site indicates that keeping a blog when living abroad is a common phenomenon. Why this may be the case will be examined below.

Several expatriate bloggers mention their reason for blogging in their first post, or in their introductory statement, the *about* section. Upon moving abroad, many aim to stay in touch with their family and friends by sharing their life abroad with them and document their thoughts and experiences. However, several bloggers at a later stage comment that they have found a community in the blogosphere and have made new friends. An example of this is the following extract from a bloggers' reflections after one year of blogging.

(1)    I began my blog with a specific goal of keeping my family and friends updated on my travels last year while I was going back and forth across the ocean primarily between England and America. What began as a way to stay in touch with folks in the U.S. evolved very quickly into something more to me. […] If you've been reading my blog for any length of time these will not be new stories to you…you've already been a witness. Many of the 19,260 plus views have been silent witnesses choosing not to comment and that's okay… just stopping by is truly appreciated. To those of you who left messages of hope and support after reading certain posts or who joined me in the celebrations of the last year…I want to say thank you to you all. You've been wonderful and so appreciated and I am thrilled to have formed new friendships through this now familiar medium. Whether we're telling our individual stories or listening to someone else's we are a witness…of good times and bad, hope and heartbreak, joy and discovery, and sometimes when we're lucky, healing. [Claire][4]

Despite this community-building potential, a blog is also a personal space. It is usually created and maintained by one individual, who has control over its look and contents. This is the case for blogging much more than for a profile on a social media platform like *Facebook* or *Twitter*, where individuals have limited control over what content they see and where their own contributions may be overlooked in the wealth of data being generated. Blogging, in contrast, offers individuals control over their space, not only regarding their own posts, but often also regarding the comments they receive, as bloggers can choose to approve of content first before it gets published, and can choose to block unwelcome contributions. Furthermore, the blog focuses on their experiences and allows them to publish much longer contributions than social media platforms would. Personal blogs like the ones written by expatriates can thus be seen as online places of the self, where individuals reflect about their experiences and share their thoughts with interested readers.

Such places of the self created when moving abroad are dynamic sites in terms of identity. The relationship between the move abroad, expatriates' identity and their blogging is visualised in Figure 1.

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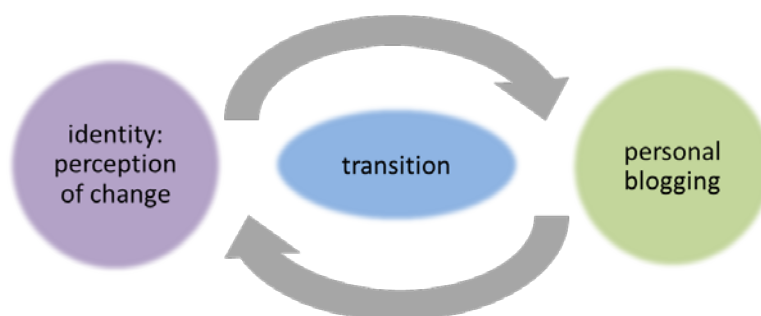[4] All bloggers' names are pseudonyms.

*Figure 1. Relationship between transition, identity and personal blogging.*

Expatriates can be seen as individuals undergoing transition: the move from one country to another entails not only a physical move from one location to another, but also a change in terms of sociocultural and linguistic environment as well as personal living situation and routine. Experiencing this may lead individuals to perceive themselves as undergoing change, by adapting to their new living situation, learning about another culture, or perceiving some form of personal growth. This perception of change may then result in the need to share one's experiences to document and reflect on them and their impact of the self, and the expatriate bloggers in this study do so through what can be broadly termed personal narratives. This includes descriptions of their daily life abroad, documentation of trips, anecdotes of incidents or reflections and comparisons of their home and country of residence. These narratives, in turn, may feed back into how expatriate bloggers see themselves and their environment, thus establishing a cyclic relationship between identity and narratives or more broadly language use in general. Expatriate blogs are thus an environment rich with identity construction and conducive to the study of how identities are achieved linguistically.

## 3. Identity and personal blogging

This research conceptualises identity in terms of what Bucholtz & Hall (2005) have termed the sociocultural linguistic approach, which defines identity as '*the social positioning of self and other*' (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:586, original emphasis). It encompasses five principles outlining their understanding of identity. The first two principles are concerned with how identity can be understood ontologically. The principle of *emergence* emphasises that identity is not inherent in an individual like a stable core, but that it is instead produced in and emerges through interaction with others. Identity is thus not what a person is or has, but originates from what a person does when engaging with other people.

Similarly, the principle of *positionality* maintains that this emergence happens on different levels simultaneously, both with regard to macro-level categories such as nationality or gender and on the local level of specific interactions and the positions and roles that are adopted therein.

The principle of *indexicality*, then, is concerned with the constitution of identity, how it is produced through indexicality, which is the establishing of relationships between linguistic elements and social meanings. This can be done through the explicit mentioning of identity categories such as membership categories (Sacks 1992), but also through more subtle stances such as presupposition or evaluation (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:594-595).

However, identity is not done by one individual alone but intersubjectively, which is encompassed in the principle of *relationality* through relations that Bucholtz & Hall detail

elsewhere (2004a,b) as *tactics of intersubjectivity*. These comprise the dimensions of similarity and difference, realness and power and will be discussed in Section 4.

From this understanding of identity as relational finally follows the principle of *partialness*. It acknowledges that because identity is constituted in interaction and in specific contexts through particular means, it is always partial rather than a unified whole. The authors stress that no analysis can thus capture the complex phenomenon of identity completely (Bucholtz & Hall 2005:607) and therefore encourage an interdisciplinary approach encompassing different methods. Sociocultural linguistics hence provides a label for the integration of various approaches and research fields such as sociolinguistics, conversation analysis, discourse analysis and linguistic anthropology in 'an intellectual coalition for the study of language, culture, and society' (Bucholtz & Hall 2008:404).

The sociocultural linguistic approach thus views identity as socially constructed in discourse and emergent in interaction. Identity is not a fixed core inherent in an individual, but is ever-changing and dynamic, shaped and reshaped in local contexts. However, Bucholtz & Hall (2004a) stress that whilst their approach conceptualises identity as constructed rather than inherent, essentialist notions cannot be discarded as long as they are seen to be relevant to participants. Thus, expatriate bloggers may perceive of themselves as individuals with a stable identity that undergoes some form of change in the process of their relocation, and it is this very perception of change to the self that may then result in bloggers' personal narratives to negotiate and ascribe meaning to this experience. This process was visualised in Figure 1.

Having explained the conceptualisation of identity adopted in this research, the discussion will subsequently take into account a number of studies which have explored the connection between personal blogging and different aspects of identity. For instance, research has examined personal narratives of illness (Page 2012; De Boer & Slatman 2014) or weight-loss (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain 2012), in which individuals undergo a form of personal transformation or transition. Focusing on a different form of transition are studies examining the relationship between the self and the other when travelling or living abroad. For instance, in her analysis of blogs written by young British gap year travellers, Snee (2014) has shown that individuals on a gap year aspire to cosmopolitanism, stress the value of their experience and distance themselves from what they call *tourists*. However, the study focuses on the conceptualisation of taking a gap year as becoming cosmopolitan rather than on the actual construction of identity through linguistic means.

Research on expatriate blogs (Cappelli 2008) has examined a blog written by an American living in Italy in terms of their use of humour and irony. Cappelli found that the blogger produces a sense of hierarchy of individuals who are mobile, with expatriates constituting the highest-level category followed in descending order by seasonal residents, travellers and tourists. These findings resonate with the distinction that the bloggers in Snee's (2014) study make between their own gap year experience and 'common' tourists.

Finally, Vora (2012) has investigated how expatriates, migrants and locals are produced in the United Arab Emirates English language blogosphere. She has found that expatriates produce belonging as residents through constructing themselves as central to the online community of the blogosphere whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from the nation. The above studies have thus explored links between individuals undergoing a form of transition and their identity construction in personal blogs. The debates about what kind of mobile person an expatriate is, the distinction from other forms of travellers and the values that are attached to this notion can be explored through the two frameworks discussed below.

## *4. Membership categorisation and tactics of intersubjectivity*

To investigate how identity is constructed in expatriate blogs, this research draws on two frameworks, membership categorisation analysis and tactics of intersubjectivity. This section briefly outlines the aim and background of both approaches, followed by a discussion of what makes them suitable to investigate identity construction in expatriate blogs.

MCA is an ethnomethodological approach and as such 'an analytic mentality', focusing on participants' own understanding of their practices and methods as observable in the data (Housley & Fitzgerald 2015:6). It was first developed by Harvey Sacks (1992) and originates from his lectures. Its aim is to investigate how social order and structure are produced at the local level of interaction through participants' own methods, such as social categorisation (Lepper 2000). It thus examines what categories interactants assign to themselves and others, how these are grouped into collections and what activities and predicates are associated with these categories. For instance, in relation to the studies on travellers, tourists and expatriates discussed above, MCA could illustrate how a person constructs category membership as a traveller as opposed to a tourist, and what activities and frame of mind they connect with this category as evident in the data. These might for example be features such as exploration, open-mindedness, or engaging with the local population. Whilst MCA has frequently been used to examine conversational data, such as extended turns in radio phone-in programmes (Housley & Fitzgerald 2002), it has also been applied to computer-mediated discourse such as chat room interactions (Vallis 2001) and rolling news media (Stokoe & Attenborough 2015).

The Tactics framework, in contrast, is an element in Bucholtz & Hall's (2005) sociocultural linguistic approach to identity outlined above, and as part of the *relationality* principle it investigates the construction of identity in interaction through semiotic resources and processes, with a focus on linguistic ones. Whilst the approach has mainly been used in research on gender and sexuality (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall 2004b), it can also describe various other forms of identity work, nor is it limited to conversational data. For instance, recent research has drawn on Tactics to investigate how flight attendants construct identity in computer-mediated discourse (Clark 2013). The analytic flexibility of the Tactics framework is due to the conceptualisation of three different but overlapping and interacting dimensions: similarity and difference, (non)genuineness and (il)legitimacy. The tactics of *adequation* and *distinction* operate on the level of similarity and difference and comprise the extent to which participants highlight perceived similarities or differences between themselves and others. This is thus the classic dimension against which identity is often measured. However, the authors have incorporated two more dimensions into their framework in order to be able to capture the dynamic process of identity construction more fully: *authentication* and *denaturalisation* pertain to what identities are treated as genuine or are constructed as artificial, and *authorisation* and *illegitimation* focus on what identities are institutionally sanctioned or are denied legitimacy. Table 1 provides an overview of the two approaches as discussed above.

|        | *MCA (Sacks 1992)*                                             | *Tactics (Bucholtz & Hall 2004a,b)*                                                     |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aim    | describe members' own methods which produce social order and structure | examine how identity is constructed through semiotic resources and processes similarity and difference |
| Focus  | collections, categories, predicates, activities               | realness and artifice legitimacy and illegitimacy sociocultural linguistics, predominantly |
| Origin | ethnomethodology, developed alongside conversation analysis   | applied in research on gender and sexuality                                            |

*Table 1. The frameworks compared.*

Both MCA and Tactics are suitable approaches to examine identity construction in expatriate blogs for a number of reasons. Firstly, both approaches are concerned with language use at the micro-level of specific interactions and the local production of identities through language. This allows for a close investigation of identities as produced in the context of single blog posts in line with a social constructionist understanding of identity. Additionally, as both MCA and Tactics examine unsolicited data and work towards uncovering individuals' own methods of creating identities, the approaches lend themselves for an investigation of the narratives produced by individuals undergoing a phase of perceived change to the self. A further advantage is how well the approaches can complement each other: category membership is a fundamental aspect of identity and may be used to highlight the boundaries between the self and the other, thus creating similarity and difference.


## 5. Data and method

The data for this study consist of personal blogs written in English by foreign nationals living in England. Two expatriate blog directories were surveyed in April 2015, yielding a sample of 187 blogs that were publicly accessible, live and authored by a single person. The sample was narrowed down to blogs containing narratives about life abroad in England written by individuals who were living there rather than staying temporarily for a study-abroad year or similar short-term commitments. A further selection criterion was for the blogs to have been begun with a focus upon relocation abroad, either with bloggers announcing the move and documenting their process of making the required arrangements, or by beginning their narrative with the actual move to England.

This selection process resulted in 30 blogs whose authors were contacted, and informed consent was obtained from 12 bloggers. Whilst blogs are publicly accessible, consent was sought because as outlined above this research views expatriate blogs as places of the self where individuals occasionally discuss very personal matters for which a researcher cannot be seen as the intended audience. Furthermore, as extracts from the blogs will be quoted verbatim, individuals may be identifiable through Internet searches, and this potential exposure constitutes another argument for obtaining their consent.

The data consist of all blog posts written from the onset of the blog up to one year after relocation to England. All posts are contained in the blog archives and were unsolicited and composed before bloggers were contacted. This allows this research to avoid the observer's paradox (Labov 1972) as well as any disturbance of individuals' current blogging practices.

The blogs are written by 10 Americans, one Australian and one New Zealander. Nationality was not a selection criterion, as this research studies how expatriate bloggers

construct their identity in their blogs when moving to England rather than focusing on a particular national group. However, the data mirror the distribution in terms of bloggers' nationality in the surveyed expatriate directories, where a majority of blogs are written by Americans, with Australians and New Zealanders also being strongly represented, as illustrated in Figure 2.
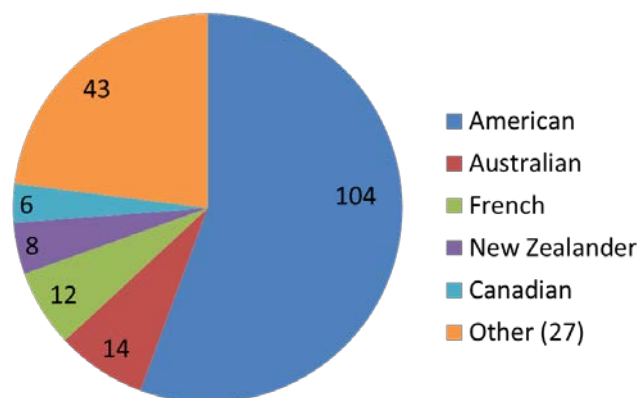


*Figure 2. Nationalities of expatriate bloggers in England in the sampled directories (N=187).*

The data can thus be seen as a reflection of the national constitution of the expatriate blogosphere. The focus of the subsequent analysis is on the first post in each of the 12 blogs.

## 6. Analysis

The first post in a blog has a special significance, as it is in this post that bloggers usually outline why they are starting a blog and what they will be writing about. All 12 expatriate bloggers mention that they are moving to England. It is thus worthwhile to study in more detail how this first contribution is achieved and what identities are invoked in the process. MCA allows for the close inspection necessary to answer this question by uncovering members' – the expatriate bloggers' – methods to accomplish the beginning of their narrative. To illustrate what MCA can reveal in terms of identity construction, this framework will in the following be applied to the first post in one of the blogs (2).

(2)    Hello world!
       This blog entry's title is literal and figurative. Why, you ask?
       My love for seeing the world began as a child. When adults would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, one of the things that I said was "a tourist". I read an atlas, had pen pals in Europe, Africa and South America, and thought about living abroad. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that I'd be "a tourist" when I grew up. I've not only visited those continents, I was crazy enough to pack up and move to one of those continents. Job opportunity and personal growth – what more can one ask for?
       You'll have answers to that question, and many others, as you follow my journey from American dreamer to expatriate extraordinaire. Hello world! indeed.
       On Twitter? Follow [username] for updates. [Aubrey]

Firstly, Aubrey's overt self-categorisation of herself as *"a tourist"* is noteworthy. As she points out, this identity is one she wanted to adopt in her childhood. However, this is portrayed as a child's dream, and Aubrey shows herself surprised that as an adult she has indeed attained this identity: *Never in my wildest dreams did I think that I'd be "a tourist" when I grew up.* The use of the quotation marks around the categorisation points to a deeper level of complexity. In the first occurrence, they may introduce the direct speech of Aubrey as a child, but they may also foreshadow the second occurrence, where they can be more readily understood as modifying the category in which membership is claimed. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the activities and other category-bound predicates that the blogger draws on.

Having a *love for seeing the world* is mentioned as a state of mind that describes the category *tourist*. Aubrey then goes on to exemplify how her love for seeing the world manifested itself: not only did she *read an atlas*, she also engaged with pen pals from different continents. These activities are portrayed as being in line with a tourist's desire to explore the world. However, she also *thought about living abroad*, which she mentions as a third element underlining her love to see the world. She thus includes another aspect of open-mindedness in her self-categorisation, which clashes with the perception of a tourist as somebody visiting a country rather than living in it. In her next paragraph, she makes clear that she is aware of this distinction by pointing out that she has not only met the criteria that classify her as a tourist – visiting those continents she dreamed about as a child – but has in fact moved to live abroad. This may explain her use of quotation marks in the second instance of overt categorisation, for as an adult she knows that moving abroad is not a typical tourist activity. She was *crazy enough* to go beyond merely visiting places to actually becoming a resident. The category *tourist* thus serves her to point to the extraordinariness of her situation.

She then goes on to explain her motivations for moving abroad, which again go beyond a regular tourist experience, as they suggest a more permanent change to her personal situation by starting a new job and also developing as a person. Both aspects are framed as a positive discourse of potential: getting an *opportunity* to work abroad as well as *growth* as a person, which implies a change for the better. This is reinforced by the rhetorical question *what more can one ask for?*, suggesting that this opportunity was too good to miss.

Finally, Aubrey suggests another change to her identity: She is on a *journey from American dreamer to expatriate extraordinaire*. She goes from dreaming about exploring the world to actually being an expatriate. In the process, she no longer portrays herself as *American*, but as *extraordinaire*, creating a playful effect through alliteration and at the same time reinforcing how *crazy* or special – extraordinary – her experience is. *Hello world!* is then indeed a greeting aimed at the world she is about to explore as well as at her readers who she invites to follow her *journey* and her ensuing narrative.

The analysis has shown how categorisations and their pairing with activities and predicates can be used to not only claim membership in one category, but also to expand this category or alternatively to show how the category and its predicates in their narrow understanding are surpassed and no longer fully applicable to oneself. At the same time, the extraordinariness of Aubrey's situation and her *journey* are constructed as worth sharing with readers. The way she draws on categories and predicates to portray her sense of identity and her experiences of moving abroad thus makes an important contribution to achieving her first blog post.

*6.1. Being a person in transition*

The categories and predicates uncovered above as well as similar ones also pervade the other first blog posts. What bloggers do in their first post can be broadly labelled as *being a person in transition,* emphasising the change of personal situation they are going through upon moving abroad. The following examples illustrate how bloggers accomplish this through a number of identity categories and associated predicates.

### *6.1.1. Entering a new phase in life*

Several participants emphasise that they are persons entering a new phase in life, which is also alluded to in example (2) through the idea of *personal growth*. Examples (3) to (5) show how bloggers express this concept.

(3)   It was me wanting to introduce myself as me, as the girl about to embark on a very exciting chapter in her life. [Kim]

(4)   I am moving away from home, away from the beaten path where my life to date has led me and definitely beyond the range of my current experiences. [Megan]

(5)   Most of you are aware that in the last six weeks my life has changed dramatically, I've gone from having an American zip code to a post code found in the United Kingdom and a new living situation along the [county] coast of England. [Claire]

In example (3), Kim explicitly categorises herself as a *girl about to embark on a very exciting chapter in her life*, thus portraying herself as somebody at the edge of a new beginning. This new phase in her life is bound to predicates of excitement and adventure, evoked through her lexical choices of *very exciting* and *embark*. She signals that this is how she sees herself, and this is how she wants to introduce herself to her readers.

This discourse of adventure can also be found in example (4). In contrast to example (3), however, Megan constructs the new phase in her life as more daunting rather than exciting. She emphasises abandoning the familiar and venturing into the unknown: her move involves going *away from home*, *away from the beaten path where my life to date has led me and definitely beyond the range of my current experiences*. She thus categorises herself first and foremost as a person leaving her old life behind.

In example (5), finally, Claire starts her blog with a post looking back on her move abroad. She confirms that her *life has changed* and has done so *dramatically*, just as the bloggers in examples (3) and (4) anticipate. Not only has she moved physically from one location to another, and exchanged American zip code for British post code, but this has also entailed *a new living situation*.

The above examples show how the move to another country is characterised as a new beginning that has a big impact on the blogger's life. Predicates associated with the person who moves abroad evoke a discourse of adventure and change, be it in an exciting and positive or slightly daunting way.

### *6.1.2. Being mobile as a lifestyle*

Another way of being a person in transition is placing emphasis on being mobile as a lifestyle, as an extract from another first post illustrates (see (6)).

(6)     We are far from experienced expats, tho we do feel like we are global nomads, and as
        we prepare for our 3rd move maybe we are. […]
        Our lives are made even busier with news that friends in Dublin are moving over
        summer; friends in Bournemouth moving to Dublin; Tokyo friends have recently landed
        in Texas, others in Canada, neighbors repatriated to USA, PTSA colleague repatriated
        to Brisbane, while others have returned to various European cities. It's been VERY busy
        and rather emotional.
        Having just written where friends are coming and going from, I guess it's time to admit,
        we are living a true global nomadic life.
        Who'd     have     guessed!?!?!?!?!?     Not     me     that's     for     sure     hehehehhe
        [Emily]

Emily and her family are moving internationally for the third time, and she searches for a
category that adequately describes them. She openly refutes being *experienced expats*, but
emphasises feeling *like we are global nomads*. She then supports her feeling of being globally
mobile by the fact that they are moving for the third time, reaching the tentative conclusion
that *maybe we are* – although whether she means *experienced expats* or *global nomads*
remains ambiguous.

   Emily then portrays her family as having close ties with globally mobile individuals,
detailing her friends', neighbours' and colleagues' international moves, which make her life
*VERY busy and rather emotional*. This then leads her to categorise herself as globally mobile
as well: *I guess it's time to admit, we are living a true global nomadic life*. At the same time,
however, she constructs a reluctance to accept this categorisation fully, firstly by having to
*admit* her category membership, and then immediately questioning it again playfully: *Who'd
have guessed!?!?!?!?!? Not me that's for sure hehehehhe*. Whilst the latter can be read as an
instance of surprise at her own conclusion, it may also function as irony and thus signal the
opposite, namely that her category membership was evident all along.

   Regardless of which of these possible readings is adopted, the extract illustrates how much
negotiation may be involved in the claiming of category membership. The categorisation of
herself and her family as persons who lead a globally mobile lifestyle has to be accomplished
discursively and is seemingly reluctantly accepted due to the overwhelming evidence for it.
Emily thus achieves claiming mobility at the same time as indicating that this may not have
been a conscious endeavour, thus constructing mobility to be discovered as a feature of her
natural lifestyle. Being a person in transition, then, entails moving internationally as well as
having a social network sharing this mobile lifestyle.

### *6.1.3. Sharing knowledge gained through experience*

A further aspect of being a person in transition is being able to share one's knowledge gained
in the relocation process. Several bloggers post information or advice about moving to
England in their blogs in order to support other potential future expatriates. This practice is
already apparent in some of the first posts (7-8).

(7)     Moving pets to the UK is an expensive and lengthy process. I will be trying to
        document the pet process as we go and hopefully it will help others. [Jessica]

(8)   As we are leaving sooner (4-6 weeks max) rather than later, I decided to just DO the things that i know from past experience need doing to make the move as smooth as possible ........ [list of 17 steps follows] [Emily]

In example (7) Jessica mentions that she is in the process of moving her pets to the UK. She promises to keep her readers informed about her progress in order to help others in a similar situation. As she is currently arranging her pets' move, she can already claim with authority that it is *an expensive and lengthy process*. By means of her own experiences, she becomes a person who can give advice. The knowledge gained through the process is thus constructed as worth sharing for the benefit of others.

Similarly, in example (8) Emily portrays herself as knowledgeable on the basis of her previous experiences and able to take the necessary steps to organise the move: *I decided to just DO the things that i know from past experience need doing to make the move as smooth as possible*. This is then followed by a long and detailed list of 17 steps she takes in preparation for her and her family's move, such as packing, finding a buyer for their car and researching potential schools in England. All these activities are tied to being a person in transition, and listing them in detail both helps her to assert her category membership as well as serves as a potential source of advice for others.

Sharing one's knowledge gained in the process of moving abroad is a type of support that expatriates can provide for other expatriates. Just as the experience is characteristic of a person in transition, so does the sharing of it confirm one's category membership.

### 6.1.4. Sharing one's life through stories

Finally, another form of sharing is an aspect of being a person in transition, namely the practice of sharing one's life through stories. This is related to the conception of a person in transition entering a new stage in life, as bloggers point out that they want to keep their readers informed about their life in England. Examples (9) and (10) contain explicit mentions of this intention.

(9)   I hope to share my life here in England though regular posts written for you like a series of picture postcards from abroad. Please drop by often and say hello. [Claire]

(10)  I always want to write so that my personality shines through. I want to share stories about my life straight from the heart. I want you to feel like you're right there with me. [Kim]

Claire in example (9) aims to *share my life here in England* and compares her posts to *a series of picture postcards from abroad*, thus adopting the perspective of her readers who have remained in her country of origin. Switching her viewpoint back, she encourages her audience to visit her blog and comment: *Please drop by often and say hello.* She thereby categorises herself as a person sharing her life with others and suggests that her life abroad is worth writing about, alluding to the discourse of adventure that is captured by sending postcards from one's travels.

A similar wish for closeness to her readers is expressed by Kim in example (10), who aims to *share stories about my life straight from the heart* and wants her readers *to feel like you're right there with me*. She thereby categorises herself as an open sharer of life stories, drawing on predicates of authenticity – *so that my personality shines through* – and closeness – *like*

*you're right there with me*. Sharing one's new life is thus a practice that a person in transition can legitimately engage in.

To summarise, MCA has revealed how bloggers draw on categorisations and predicates centring on the practice of being a person in transition in order to accomplish both a personal introduction and an explanation of their blogging in their first posts. The following key aspects have emerged: entering a new phase in life, being mobile as a lifestyle, sharing knowledge gained through expertise, and sharing one's life through stories. Whilst the analysis has focused on the local production of these categories and predicates in context, it has been able to show commonalities with regard to what identities expatriates evoke in order to achieve their goals.

### 6.2. Similarity and difference

Complementing the analysis of membership categories for identity work, the Tactics framework grants insight into how individuals position themselves with respect to others and how identity is produced through the dimensions of similarity, authenticity and legitimacy. The following analysis will focus on the first dimension and examine how expatriate bloggers use linguistic resources to construct and express similarities and differences between themselves and their environment. Example (11) illustrates the complexity of this positioning act.

(11)   So, what has brought me to begin this blog? I'll be moving to England come September to actually (*finally!*) live in the same place as the guy I am dating and to begin graduate school! Although I won't be able to share my adventures as an American living abroad as they are actually happening until then, I do have much to tell from the five weeks I spent in the UK at the beginning of this summer. So, for the time being, I'll be writing about that along with all of the other fun stuff that goes with preparing for a move across an ocean. There might even be some guest appearances from the Brit as it's rumored he has some visits planned before my departure! [Kim]

The most noticeable resource Kim draws on is overt categorisation of herself and her partner in terms of nationality. She refers to herself as *an American living abroad* and to her partner as *the Brit*. She thus uses nationality to juxtapose their background and to emphasise what to her appears be a salient difference between them. At the same time, however, she points out that she will be living abroad, thus modifying her category slightly, establishing difference between herself and Americans who have not moved abroad.

However, she also creates similarity between herself and her partner by announcing her relocation plans, pointing out that she will *be moving to England come September to actually (finally!) live in the same place as the guy I am dating* and that she is currently *preparing for a move across an ocean*. She creates more similarity between herself and her partner by moving to his country and sharing his environment. Also, having already spent some time in England means that she has *much to tell* even though she has not moved there yet. Whilst sharing a space and her experiences with her partner allows her to establish similarity between herself and him, the fact that spending time in England is worth telling about highlights that this is a new and different environment for her.

Establishing similarity or difference is thus a complex act potentially involving both poles on this scale, as they are very much intertwined. Whilst the construction of similarity and

difference can vary from person to person, an analysis of the first posts shows commonalities between expatriate bloggers. In the following, two such aspects are discussed in more detail: how individuals stress that they are or will have to be adopting English practices, and how they see moving abroad as an experience that they share with others.

### *6.2.1. Adopting English practices*

In their early posts before their relocation, several expatriate bloggers try to anticipate the changes they will be met with upon moving to England, impacting on their daily life and routine. This may encompass their social network, physical environment, or cultural and linguistic aspects. When reflecting on these, bloggers show an awareness of having to adapt by changing some of what can in broad terms be labelled their practices. Examples (12) and (13) illustrate this attentiveness to change.

(12)   Follow me as I get this blog up and running, add photos, a header, links... and as I get used to driving on the wrong side of the road. [Ruth]

(13)   I keep telling [pet names] that they all need to work on their British accents but I don't think they quite understand just yet. But, they will learn soon enough! [Jessica]

In example (12) Ruth invites her readers to follow her not only as she constructs and fleshes out her blog, but also as she adapts to driving on the left. She thus promises a narrative featuring her attempts to change a familiar practice. This is enhanced by her pointing out that she will be driving *on the wrong side*. Whilst she is aware of the changes she will have to adopt, she simultaneously creates distinction by emphasising her perspective on the matter.

Another feature expatriate bloggers show themselves aware of is being exposed to a different accent of English. Example (13) shows a playful approach to the topic: Jessica encourages her pets, and by implication herself, to change their accent. She thus positions them as different and points out that they will need to make an effort to become more similar to their future environment.

Anticipating the adoption of English practices hence offers bloggers a means to point out their differences and simultaneously foreshadow the construction of greater similarity with their environment. This allows them to revisit the matter at a later stage, delivering the promised narrative or reflect on if and how they have changed after living in England for a longer period of time.

### *6.2.2. Moving abroad as a shared experience*

Expatriate bloggers not only establish similarity or difference between themselves and their new environment, but they also do so with regard to other expatriates and their experiences. As discussed in Section 2, the expatriate blogosphere can engender in individuals a sense of community and shared experience by offering them access to others' narratives and reflections on living abroad. Although every expatriate's circumstances will be different, moving abroad and having to adjust to a new environment comes to be seen as a shared experience. This is evident in the blogroll, the list of links bloggers provide to other blogs they follow. These often include not only blogs written by other expatriates in England, but also by individuals who have moved to a different country. The unifying experience thus

seems to be the very act of moving abroad. Instances where this shared experience is acknowledged can be found below.

(14)   So, the rollercoaster of emotions have been oh so fun (obvious sarcasm). I think I may be in the denial portion of the 12 steps of moving to another country haha. [Jessica]

(15)   We are far from experienced expats, tho we do feel like we are global nomads, and as we prepare for our 3rd move maybe we are. [Emily]

Commenting on the ups and downs of preparing for her move, Jessica in example (14) locates her experiences in *the 12 steps of moving to another country*. She thereby acknowledges that what she is going through may be very similar to what other expatriates experience, and the steps in her process of relocation become identifiable as variations of a common theme. Going through these emotions in the course of moving abroad thus creates a sense of similarity to other expatriates who are undergoing similar processes.

   However, the above extract communicates an additional layer of meaning. The *12 steps* allude to programmes designed to deal with personal problems such as addiction. This constructs the relocation process as a problem that needs to be addressed and solved step by step, and other expatriates as members of a self-help group. This reinforces the perception of the expatriate blogosphere as a community, albeit one based around an issue that needs resolving.

   Example (15) shows that individuals may contemplate to what extent they are part of a community of expatriates. Emily does not want to claim expert status as she feels that her family do not have enough experience to do so. Yet at the same time she acknowledges that they are feeling like *global nomads* and that they are moving for the third time, which evidences that they must be reasonably familiar with the process. She thereby carefully manages relations of similarity and difference to other members of the expatriate community.

   The dimension of similarity and difference thus grants insights firstly into how bloggers position themselves with regard to their new environment, what changes they anticipate they will be faced with and what English practices they consider adopting. Secondly, exploring notions of similarity and difference allows individuals to locate themselves within a community of expatriates sharing similar experiences. This dimension of Tactics hence enables an understanding of how expatriates construct and position their identity in relation to both their physical and online environment.


## 7. Discussion and conclusion

Identity is multi-faceted, shifting and constantly constructed and negotiated through language. This is especially prevalent in expatriate blogs, as these sites contain personal narratives and reflections written by foreign nationals at the time of their relocation. These were triggered by the move abroad and contain a wealth of identity work as individuals document and reflect on the transition they undergo. Even though their experiences are individual and their identity is constructed locally in every blog post, the analysis has shown that there exist commonalities across the blogs. This was achieved by illustrating the prevalent categorisations and constructions of similarity and difference expatriate bloggers employ to construct and express their identity.

An examination of the membership categories expatriates draw on to accomplish their first posts has revealed that being a person in transition is a means for individuals to introduce themselves to potential readers and legitimise their blogging practices as people who have a story to tell. Transition is highlighted in the self-categorisation of bloggers as people who are entering a new phase in life, or who have adopted global mobility as part of their lifestyle. They further impart their knowledge about aspects of moving abroad, which they have acquired by virtue of undergoing this process themselves. Finally, expatriate bloggers construct themselves as people wanting to share their new life through stories.

The first dimension of Tactics, the construction of similarity and difference, examines notions that are central to expatriates' experience of being in transition and thus potentially undergoing personal change. The analysis has revealed that expatriate bloggers discuss the adoption of English practices both to fit in better with their new environment as well as to emphasise how they are different from it. This negotiation is not limited to their immediate physical environment, but also pertains to other expatriates, whose experiences are accessible through the expatriate blogosphere.

The combination of MCA and Tactics is fruitful as they focus on different aspects of identity. As part of the *relationality principle* (Bucholtz & Hall 2005), Tactics emphasise the relational and social dimension of identity and how individuals position themselves with regard to others. MCA, in contrast, focuses on how individuals employ certain types of categories and identities in order to achieve certain interactional goals, which in this case comprised accomplishing a first blog post through being a person in transition. The relational aspect and the focus on an individual's self-categorisation complement each other and offer a more holistic picture of how identity is achieved in expatriate blogs.

Further research could incorporate the remaining dimensions that constitute the Tactics framework and thereby examine how expatriate bloggers authenticate and authorise their identity especially in their early posts but also throughout their blogging practice. This promises to be a fruitful endeavour as the combination of the two approaches undertaken in this research has granted further insights into linguistic aspects of identity construction in a moment of transition and change.

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