

Language and Identity: Issues  
and assumptions

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# The Power of Language

- Transmit culture
- At the center of cultural, political and economic struggle
- Potent instrument of control

# Language and Identity

Culture embodies moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which (people) come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race.

# Introducing the concept of identity

- **Identity is unique to us**
- **Identity also implies relationship(s)**
- **Examples?**
- **Much of the debate around identity derives from the tension between these two aspects:**
- **self vs. (multiple) identifications with others.**
- **‘Who I am’ or ‘who I think I am’ also varies according to a number of factors:**

# History- A brief

- Early 1980's saw the appearance of important studies focusing on the linguistic aspects of identity: e.g. Gumperz (1982) and Le Page and Toubouret Keller (1985)
- In more recent times: linguistic ethnography (Rampton et al, 2007)
- **Assumption: contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assume**

# Continued.

- Language can also be considered as a marker at the individual level.
- e.g. idiolect
- It could be argued that even idiolectal usage is a social or group phenomenon because most language involves a communicative intent.

# Continued-II

- So, besides our uniquely personal sense of self, we also have social identities based on the various groups to which we belong.
- **Speech mobility: everyone possesses a range of speaking styles.**
- **Bi-dialectalism and accent and style variations exist along a continuum.**
- **Style: what is style?**

# Stylistic variation: Martin Joos (1967)

- Five distinct styles of English usage: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, intimate
- Attempts to illustrate that all ordinary speakers have a range of possibilities in their linguistic repertoire.
- They pick and choose from this according to their sense of occasion



# Identity Issues

- **The identity of identity**
- **Put as simply as possible, your identity is who you are. If someone asks**
- **‘Who are you?’, the answer they expect is your name. Who are you really? Who are you deep down? Now the answers come far less easily, because who one is ‘deep down’ can never be fully captured and articulated in words.**

# Fundamental types of identity

- Three apparent pairs of subtypes of personal identity:
  - one for real people and one for fictional characters;
  - one for oneself and one for others;
  - one for individuals and one for groups.

# **Group Vs. Individual Identities**

- **Group identities would seem to be more abstract than individual ones, in the sense that ‘Americanness’ does not exist separately from the Americans who possess it, except as an abstract concept. Yet combinations of such abstractions are what our own individual identities are made up of. What is more, group identity frequently finds its most ‘concrete’ manifestation in a single, symbolic individual.**

# Foregrounded connotations

- **self and person: a distinction made by some anthropologists and found for example in the work of Besnier (1991, 1995) and Street(1993), in which my ‘self’ is who I feel myself to be, emotionally and ‘affectively’, while ‘person’ is the identity I project to others in my socially defined roles.**

# Foregrounded connotations-II

- **ethos**: a term used in rhetorical theory and adopted for example by Cherry (1988) to mean ‘the personal characteristics which a reader might attribute to a writer on the basis of evidence in the text’ (Ivanic, 1998, p. 90; see further under ‘persona’, below). Fairclough (1992) uses ethos as a general term for a person’s identity as conceived and constructed in the context of world view and social practices.

# Foregrounded connotations-III

- **persona: a term that originally meant a ‘mask’ and that has been prominent in discussions of language and identity at least since the work of Erving Goffman (1922–82; see Goffman, 1956), to refer to the self that one projects in everyday interactions. Cherry (1988) contrasts persona as an objective self (basically a social role, like ‘mother’, in Ivanic’s interpretation) that we create in order to position ourselves within the context of those around us, as opposed to ethos, the self that consists of our own inner qualities.**

# Foregrounded connotations-IV

- ***subject, subject position, positionings:***  
terms deriving from the work of the French structuralists Louis Althusser (1918–90), Michel Foucault (1926-84).
- **that ‘the singular term “subject position” in particular is ‘misleading, since it suggests one unitary position to which an individual is subject, rather than a variety of dimensions on which a person might be positioned simultaneously’**

# Foregrounded connotations-V

- *subjectivity, subjectivities, positionings, possibilities for self-hood:*
- Ivancic's (1998, p.10) preferred terms, which she sees as 'carrying the connotation that identity is socially constructed and that people are not free to take on any identity they choose, but adding a sense of multiplicity, hybridity and fluidity'.



# Foregrounded connotations-VI

- **identify, identification:**

**It has recently become fashionable to eschew ‘identity’ in favour of the verb ‘identify’ and its nominalisation ‘identification’, on the grounds that these refer to a process rather than a ‘fixed condition’ a long tradition of reconceiving the noun ‘language’ in such a way as to emphasise its semantic features as a ‘process’ noun, which makes it verb-like in meaning and thus a prototypical of nouns.**

# Theories and Methods

- Aspects of language that are connected with identity as being mere by-products of another activity (such as communication of information)
- Seeing language itself as a determinate structure that directly determines important aspects of the lives of its speakers, sthg they control and use to their own end.

# Theories and Methods-I

- Focusing uniquely on the self-identity of an individual or group, to a granting of equal importance to the interpretations others make of a person's or group's identity.
- Identifying the 'groups' relevant to identity solely in terms of institutionally recognized categories and toward 'micro' groups.

# Essentialist view of language-

## Sapir

- Language is a great force of socialization [...]. [T]he mere fact of a common speech serves as a peculiarly potent symbol of the social solidarity of those who speak the language. The fundamental quality of one's voice, the phonetic patterns of speech [...] – all these are so many complex indicators of the personality. [O]ne of the really important functions of language is to be constantly declaring to society the psychological place held by all of its members.

# Related Identity Issues

- Language and ethnicity
- Language and nationality
- Language and religion
- Language and gender
- Language and political persona
- Language and cultural identity
- The analysis of agency

# Language always political- Proved.

- Identified structures of languages as enforcing structures of power
- Identifying languages as important for nation