Identity: Towards a synthesis of perspectives

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The perennial issue of shedding light on human identity has been a concern since the time of Plato and Aristotle. In the age of *Liquid Modernity*, 'the search for identity is the ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless' (Bauman 2012 [2000]: 83). This quest has generated a considerable amount of research across different fields and theoretical frameworks. To the extent that language is considered central to the production/interpretation of identity, its study has constituted a major trend in (non-Chomskyan) Linguistics. *Applied Linguistics*, defined as 'the theoretical and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which language is a central issue' (Brumfit 1995: 27), takes a particular interest in identity as it is implicated in a variety of such problems. Lisa McEntee-Atalianis' book is yet another addition to the burgeoning literature on identity, as it remains salient – despite arguments against its use as a category of analysis (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

In view of the fact that this book places itself within the field of *Applied Linguistics*, it would be useful to see how it fits into the scope of this discipline. The field originated in second and foreign-language teaching before expanding into many different subfields. Interest in identity, in particular, was fueled by a shift from a psycholinguist approach to SLA to 'a greater focus on sociological and anthropological dimensions of language learning, particularly with reference to sociocultural, post-structural, and critical theory' (Norton 2011: 318). Over the years, a wide range of issues/topics has been identified as relevant to its study.

In a volume featuring identity as its theme, the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* (Mackey 2015) – one of the field's flagship journals – focuses on topics such as social class, translanguaging, investment, transnationalism and multingualism, academic discourse, heritage language education, assessment of proficiency, written discourse, language policy, voice quality, technologies and expressive activity, forensic profiling, ethnic identity and second language learning, ethnic and (supra)national identities (migration policies and the linguistic integration

of migrants). A seminal book on discourse and identity (Benwell and Stokoe 2006) as well as one of the latest handbooks on language and identity (Preece 2016) list additional dimensions/perspectives: conversational, institutional, narrative, commodified, spatial and virtual identities; conversation analysis, corpus linguistics, critical discourse analysis, deaf linguistics, discourse analysis and pragmatics, language for specific purposes, lexicography, literacies, multimodal communication, translation.

McEntee-Atalianis' book covers most of these areas, with an emphasis on contemporary topics/issues. The book is organized in twelve chapters, each containing several sections and some subsections. Chapters start with an introduction and are rounded off with a conclusion that guide readers through the points (to be) made.

The first Chapter aptly begins by offering the customary historical and theoretical overview that traces the development of identity through the ages and across different paradigms. The main part is taken up by presenting the split between essentialist and non-essentialist/constructionist perspectives, followed by a comparison of two contemporary accounts of identity that subscribe to these contrastive approaches, namely *Social Identity Theory* and Bucholtz and Hall's framework (2005).

Chapter 2 explores linguistic idiosyncrasy as instantiated in the evolution of identity research in the area of *Sociolinguistics*, within which quantitative studies were eventually replaced by qualitative research that emphasizes individual agency, realized as style, stance, crossing, ideology, indexicality, etc., under the influence of *Ethnography* and *Stylistic Practice* studies.

Chapter 3 presents some clinical research in aphasia and memory degeneration as affecting perception of self and necessitating renegotiation of identity, stressing the importance of narratives in dealing with these conditions both in and outside clinical contexts.

Forensic linguistic research is covered in Chapter 4. Specifically, authorship identification in both spoken and written texts – with the help of some examples that illustrate the importance of voice and stylistic analysis– as well as the whole spectrum of possible courtroom identities (judges, lawyers, witnesses, defendants, victims) are discussed.

In Chapter 5, the writer explores youth studies conducted within the theoretical framework of *Communities of Practice*. Studies from USA, Canada, UK as well Belgium, France, Germany and Spain show young people employing practices of bricolage and glocalization 'in order to "style" themselves into being and position themselves ideologically within a local and global frame of reference' (p. 95).

Workplace and professional identities – novice, mentor, expert and (second) language learner – in (trans)national contexts are examined in Chapter 6, with a focus on their discursive enactment as developing a recognizable and convincing professional/institutional identity involves 'the appropriation and use of culturally relevant content and form' (p. 101), besides professional knowledge and favourable socio-economic circumstances.

In Chapter 7, the writer explores identity in social media, focusing on the second wave of computer-mediated communication research/studies. The issues of authenticity, hybridity and intersectionality are examined in light of the various technical affordances/constraints and 'context collapse'. Websites allow for constant identity negotiation and different positionings but, also, for the online reproduction of offline norms.

Chapter 8 reviews developments in the study of ethnic identity as intersecting with religious identity. The traditional framework of *Ethnolinguistic Vitality* is criticized for adopting *Social Identity Theory* and for prioritizing status, demography and institutional support over other variables as well as for relying on subjective evaluations collected from questionnaires. The concept of *ethnolinguistic repertoire* is investigated next as it allows for greater agency over sociolinguistic variation. The chapter concludes with a look at macro- and micro-level discursive approaches to identity (*Narratives, Positioning Theory, Discursive Psychology, Interactional Sociolinguistics*).

Gender and sexual identities are investigated in Chapter 9, starting with an overview of language and gender research that follows the evolvement of gender theory from a dominance vs difference binary conception of gender – correlating with specific language features and interactional patterns (genderlect) – into gender as a continuum, a spectrum of gender(s), 'enacted locally in diverse ways, through particular roles, stances, styles and activities' (p. 176), and intersecting with sexual identity as well as with other social categories. The writer credits Butler's *performativity* with the paradigm shift that breaks the link between sex and gender as well as compulsive heterosexuality attached to it. The influence of *queer theory*, which challenges heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity, is detected in the study of gay/lesbian identity.

Chapter 10 offers a view of D/deaf identities, with an emphasis on the experiences of the Deaf community. The writer points out that various constructions of 'Deafhood' represent different historical moments in the way 'subaltern' deaf people are positioned by hegemonic discourse. Manifestations of Deaf community and identity, such as sign language and signed stories are presented next. The ambivalent relationship between D/deafness and technological advancement is also discussed. The chapter concludes with a call for identity research to incorporate Deaf epistemologies as they offer a unique visual perspective and embodied experience of self and others.

Chapter 11 addresses the relationship between language, space/place and identity, i.e. construction of 'spatial' identity, adopting a micro-to-macro 'scalar' approach that starts with local studies of socio-phonetic variation and continues with supralocal dialect levelling – which can result in a realignment of linguistic features and social meaning –, before moving onto identity construction and negotiation in (supra)national borderland regions. The relationship between national identity and language is re-examined in light of globalization and mobility, which are likely to lead to commodification of language and identities, as in the case

of tourism. Transnational identities 'bypass national identification [...] supporting a fragmented and deterritorialized perspective of identity' (p. 230), thus turning 'place' into a social practice rather than a fixed locality. The overall argument is that people and place/space are mutually constitutive of each other.

The closing chapter summarizes preceding chapters in terms of themes explored and conclusions reached and identifies the still unresolved issues of i) accounting for the complexity and multiplicity of identities, their possible hierarchical prioritization at the moment of production/comprehension as well as their intersectional/conflictual relationships; and ii) incorporating psycholinguistic and cognitive aspects of identity production and maintenance which have been neglected due to the current dominance of the 'discursive turn'. As a remedy for these theoretical pitfalls, the writer goes on to propose her own *Dynamic Integrated Systems Model*, consisting of three spheres that interact both synchronically and diachronically: individual (psychological/cognitive mechanisms and personal characteristics); socio/relational (macro-, meso-, micro-levels); and linguistic processes of (inter)-subjectivity. She argues in favour of her model by referring back to the themes discussed in various chapters of the book. The chapter is rounded off with a(n unanticipated) word of caution against automatically assuming that identity is central in the analysis of linguistic data and with a call for greater conscious reflexivity among practitioners.

McEntee-Atalianis sets the tone for her book right from the beginning, by citing Margaret Thatcher's life and legacy kaleidoscopic representation by the media as an example of identity as 'inconsistent, neither predetermined nor self-determined, mutable and immutable, ever ubiquitous, open тo revision and apparently never clear-cut or final' (pp. 1-2). She thus makes a strong case for the currently dominant, non-essentialist, social constructionist view of identity, and she consistently follows this thread throughout the chapters by repeatedly referring to identity as being 'discursively' produced. Nevertheless, she tries to strike a balance between the contrasting approaches by making room, for instance, for *strategic essentialism*, by (critically) reviewing *Social Identity Theory*, and by pointing out that 'even social constructionist accounts of identity draw on essentialized or "fixed" category labels' (p. 11) apropos Tracy's framework (2002).

As regards the much-debated 'structure–agency' and 'micro-macro' binaries, the writer takes a middle position by (favourably) presenting *Discursive Psychology*, *Positioning Theory* and *Narrative Analysis* studies, which combine both macro and micro levels (plus an occasionally intervening meso-level), and by adopting criticisms of *Critical Discourse Analysis* for granting individuals limited agency (p. 14), and of *Conversation Analysis* for not attending to broader cultural/social/political issues (p. 15). She also calls for intersectionality – which interconnects '*biological* and *social* categories, *variables* and *attributes*' (p. 238) – as well as for interdisciplinarity, which involves thinking across boundaries.

The writer's concern with reconciling all relevant aspects of identity research is evidenced in the proposed *Dynamic Integrated Systems Model*, which is related to the 'dynamic turn' (de

Bot 2015: 87ff) in *Applied Linguistics*, brought about by the application of *Dynamic Systems Theory* – 'a set of concepts that describe behavior as the emergent product of a self-organizing, multicomponent system evolving over time' (Perone and Simmering 2017: 44) –, which originated in physical sciences and mathematics. This view of language as 'dynamic, complex, nonlinear, chaotic, unpredictable, sensitive to initial conditions, open, self-organizing, feedback sensitive, and adaptive' (Larsen-Freeman 1997: 142) has met with mixed reactions: heralded as 'the new paradigm that fills the gap left by formal linguistic models, the disembodied psycholinguistic approach and various theories that either look exclusively at the psycholinguistic side or at the sociolinguistic and sociocultural side only' (de Bot 2015: 87), but also greeted with skepticism (Swan 2004; Gregg 2010). McEntee-Atalianis distances her model from other similar ones (Thelen[1] 2005; de Bot et al. 2007) by adding a footnote, but she only admits to similarities and does not elaborate any further. She also rejects previous attempts to overcome the differences between social-psychological and post-structuralist accounts and to integrate structure-agency, i.e. Bourdieu's 'habitus' and Giddens' 'structuration', as 'they are rooted in sociological thinking and cannot offer a balanced or detailed account of the dynamic psychosocial interface' (p. 245). In the same way, Tracy's (2002) sociocultural/rhetorical model and *Discursive Psychology* studies, which emphasize the social and discursive aspects, are criticized for neglecting 'the more enduring but also dynamic psycholinguistic and cognitive structures and operations' (p. 240). Commendable as the writer's attempt at theoretical synthesis is, it remains to be seen if this is indeed a viable way of superseding separate disciplines or it is still 'largely an illusion. For it is simply not possible to see things from two different perspectives at the same time' (Widdowson 2005: 19). In any case, it would have been extremely helpful if she had presented an actual application of her model.

Overall, this is a well-researched book, reflecting the writer's interests and work in the particular areas. The collection and analysis of studies that support the points made is impressive, showing thorough knowledge and deep understanding of the subject matter. As a result, we are given a complex, nuanced view of identity. However, certain areas are inevitably showcased (e.g. deaf studies, ethnolinguistic vitality), while others are under-represented (e.g. translanguaging) or completely missing.

Among the noticeable absences is that of social class[2] (Block 2014) and neoliberalism, especially in view of the emergence of the 'precariat', the new global class (Standing 2011) that results from this dominant ideology. Neoliberalism impacts the workplace, imposing flexible labour policies and occupational identities that are 'geared to competitiveness' (Standing 2011: 159). Also, it commodifies[3] education, with students being 'semantically reframed as "customers"' (Chun 2016: 560) and teachers succumbing to assessment/accountability re-

1 Misspelled as Thelan (p. 266, 303)
2 Occasional reference to class as intersecting with other variables.
3 Mention of commodification in relation to tourism (Ch. 11).

gimes striving for 'excellence', a 'normative technology of neoliberal ideology' (Saunders and Blanco Ramirez 2017: 3). Overall, it promotes a 'corporate form of agency [...]. Other forms of agency are getting pushed aside' (Gershon 2011: 539). As Block et al. (2012: 11) observe, 'in framing identity exclusively in terms of inscriptions such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality and sexuality at the expense of class, many applied linguists have occupied an ideological space which neoliberalism has found easy to accommodate'.

As regards research paradigms, missing is a full-fledged presentation of ethnomethodological *Conversation Analysis* and *Membership Categorization Analysis* studies, especially when other theoretical frameworks such as *Discursive Psychology*, which lack the relevant micro-level gear, employ their analytic tools. Incidentally, DP and CA 'tend to have a different theoretical outlook on the status of cognition in interaction. [...] (as) discursive psychologists systematically analyze 'cognition' as part of participants' interactional apparatus' (Te Molder 2015: 5). Additionally, the micro/macro dichotomy does not arise for CA, as both levels are generated simultaneously by members' ethnomethods (Hilbert 1990). And, in any case, analysts can always invoke 'external' contexts, provided that they are shown to be oriented to by the participants themselves (Schegloff 1992: 215). Finally, *Ethnomethodology* has also made a significant contribution to the exploration of gender as an ongoing accomplishment in the seminal study of 'inter-sexed' Agnes by Garfinkel (1967), long before Butler's performativity, which usually gets the credit (e.g. Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987).

On the practical side, the book would have benefited from a less sparse contents table, as chapter sections/subsections – which would have made it more reader-friendly – are not included. As chapter structure cannot be easily predicted, readers have to find out by skimming through the book. An author index is also missing and the compilation of the existing (subject) index is somewhat erratic as, for instance, 'structure' – one of the recurring themes – does not get an entry but 'stylometry' does, although it only appears in a footnote (fn. 8, p. 253).

In summary, despite some questions of selection and balance, McEntee-Atalianis has generally succeeded in her task of producing a comprehensive account of the current investigation of identity in *Applied Linguistics*. The book brings together most of the key topics, adopting multiple perspectives and focusing on the latest research developments, including some welcome additions such as D/deaf and spatial identities. Undoubtedly, this book is an invaluable resource for both linguists and advanced students.

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