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Identity

Identity is defined as the linguistic construction of membership in one or more social groups or categories. Though other, non-linguistic criteria may also be significant, language and communication often provide important and sometimes crucial criteria by which members both define their group and are defined by others. Identities may be linguistically constructed both through the use of particular languages and linguistic forms (e.g., Standard English, Arizona Tewa) associated with specific national, ethnic, or other identities and through the use of communicative practices (e.g., greeting formulae, maintenance of mutual gaze, regulation of participation) that are indexed, through members' normative use, to their group. Language and communication are critical aspects of the production of a wide variety of identities expressed at many levels of social organization.

This typology of identity includes national, ethnic, racial, class and rank, professional, and gender identities. For hundreds of years, champions of nationalism and apologists for nation-states have used the notion of a shared language, and the common identity it was understood to represent, as a means of naturalizing political boundaries. Recent research on national identity by non-linguistic anthropologists, such as Benedict Anderson, has emphasized the importance of shared participation in literacy activities (like reading newspapers and popular novels) written in standardized, national languages, as a means of creating national identities. Ethnic and racial identities operate within nation states as members (e.g., African- and Native American in the United States) deploy African-American Vernacular English or ancestral languages like Tewa as a means of expressing nested and/or alternative group membership both through these culturally distinctive linguistic forms and through the interactional use of discursive practices (e.g., indirection in African-American, traditionalism, and purism in Arizona Tewa) that are valued within these ethnic/racial groups. Class and rank provide other examples of social identities that must be performed through

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use of appropriate linguistic forms. Members of the working class in urban neighborhoods, such as those of Belfast, often demonstrate a strong loyalty to class through their use of phonology and vocabulary that differ from the standardized forms endorsed and supported by the state. New Yorkers of the lower middle class display their recognition of the importance of language as an identity indicator by producing a wide range of pronunciation styles ranging from the local vernacular to the national standard. Kuna (Panama) chiefs, Samoan nobles, and the Arizona Tewa priestly elite all must display their high rank in part through specialized linguistic knowledge and communicative comportment. Professional identities are displayed in the use of specialized vocabularies of groups such as doctors and lawyers as well as in the routines of their disciplinary discourses (e.g., the medical interview, the Socratic dialogue that governs both the courtroom and the law school classroom). Gender identities are also established by the use of vocabulary and discursive practices which position the speaker with regard to cultural models of masculine and feminine speech behavior. The queer identities of gays and lesbians are communicatively produced in a similar fashion by redefining the gender opposition and indexing speech differences to an elaborated set of subculturally recognized gender identities and appropriate forms of display.

One thing this simplified typology of identities suggests is that even though it is conventional to talk about "language and identity," most of these different types of identity are neither exclusive nor singular. Though researchers sometimes focus on only one of these levels, individuals, as social actors, experience the multiplicity and interactivity of these levels, in their repertoires of identity. Distinctive ethnic identities of minority groups, for example, must be constructed from linguistic symbols and/or communicative practices that contrast with resources available for the construction of other ethnic identities or more generally available national identities. Women, in constructing professional identities, especially in fields formerly dominated by men, must simultaneously provide communicative evidence of professional competence and refuse compliance with inappropriate gendered stereotypes (e.g., expectations of accommodation, politeness). Some scholars have suggested that the use of language to communicate distinct identities has intensified in the contemporary, urbanized world as more interactional exchanges occur between relatively anonymous others or those who only know each other in a limited role or set of roles. Under circumstances where little is known about the other's biographical identity, interactants must provide in the here-and-now the communicative symbols by which they will be classified and assessed as persons. In so doing, individuals may engage in strategic communicative work that permits them to interactionally foreground or suppress specific identities. Though it is important to emphasize the role of communicative practices, like the strategic selection of codes from a linguistic repertoire or the patterned use of code-switching to signal discrete or hybridized identities, it is wrong to think that similar processes do not occur in smaller communities. In such societies, interaction typically occurs between people, often kin or fictive kin, who

know each other in so many roles that they must interactionally establish which identity is situationally relevant.

The collective work in linguistic anthropology has contributed significantly to the appreciation of the role of linguistic and communicative microculture in the constructivist approach to identity that has emerged in anthropology and adjacent fields. But though this emphasis on identities, not as essentially given, but as actively produced—whether through deliberate, strategic manipulation or through out-of-awareness practices—captures both the agency of speakers and views language as social action, it has met with objection by some social scientists. They argue that the focus on an individual's freedom to manipulate a flexible system of identities fails to adequately take into account that some identities—most notably race and caste—are imposed and coeercively applied. Though this perspective overstates the case by depicting political-economic factors as utterly determinative and top-down, this observation offers an admonition against any approach to identity, or identities, that does not recognize both the communicative freedom potentially available at the microlevel and the political economic constraints imposed on processes of identity-making.

(See also *community, crossing, gender, ideology, indexicality, switching, variation, voice*)

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