CHAPTER THIRTY

Researching Language and Identity

David Block

In recent years, identity has become a key construct in the social sciences in general, and applied linguistics in particular (Block 2013; Duff 2012; Norton 2010; Norton & Toohey 2011). Following current post-structuralism and social constructivist thinking on the topic from two decades ago (e.g. Giddens 1991; Weedon 1997), many applied linguists today understand identities to be socioculturally constructed ongoing narratives, which develop and evolve across different spatio-temporal scales, ranging from the micro, local and immediate to the macro, global and long term (Lemke 2008). These socioculturally constructed narratives are seen to emerge during individuals' engagements in activities with others, with whom to varying degrees they share beliefs, motives and values, in communities of practice, where a community of practice is defined as 'an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992, p. 464). Such activity-based communication can take place either face-to-face or in an electronically mediated mode, with the latter becoming increasingly more prevalent. In addition, and consistent with the macro, global and long-term scale cited above, identity construction is seen as the negotiating of subject positions at the crossroads of the past, present and future.

Following Giddens's (1984) structuration theory, many researchers also take as axiomatic that individuals are shaped by ever-emergent and evolving social, cultural and historical structures, but at the same time – and indeed, in recursive fashion – they shape these same emergent and ever-evolving social, cultural and historical structures as their lives unfold. Among other things,

negotiation means that such processes involve both self-ascription and self-positioning by individuals who in turn – and simultaneously – are ascribed identities and are positioned in particular ways by others with whom they come in contact. In this process, issues around perceived and invoked sameness and differences, and authenticity and inauthenticity, come into play.

All of this means that the process of identity construction is potentially and indeed often conflictive as opposed to harmonious, especially in situations involving movement across borders which are simultaneously geographical historical, cultural and psychological. In such circumstances, identity work is often characterized by the ambivalence that individuals feel about exactly who they are and where they belong (Block 2006; Meinhof & Galasiński 2005). In addition, following Bourdieu (1984), individuals are seen to be embedded in multiple social milieus, or fields, in which they constantly encounter unequal power relationships related to their access to and their legitimate control over and use of different capitals in these fields – economic, cultural and social. Finally, identities are related to different traditionally demographic categories such as ethnicity, race, nationality, migration, gender, sexuality, religion, social class and language (Block 2006, 2007).

This view of identity to varying degrees underlies a good deal of applied linguistics research that has been carried out over the past two decades, particularly work on multilingualism, language education and second language learning. On the one hand, there are publications in journals such as the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* and the *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*. On the other hand, there is a long list of recent books on identity and language practices which include more general overviews (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe 2006; Block 2007; Edwards 2009; Joseph 2004; Kramsch 2010; Riley 2007), research monographs (e.g. Blackledge & Creese 2010; Block 2006; Byrd-Clark 2010; Jackson 2008; Kanno 2003; Miller 2003; Norton 2000, 2013; Pichler 2009; Preece 2009) and collections of chapters (Benson & Nunan 2005; Caldas-Coulthard & Iedema 2008; Csizér & Magid 2014; De Fina et al. 2006; Fishman & Garcia 2010; Higgins 2012; Llamas & Watt 2010; Nunan & Choi 2010; Omoniyi & White 2006; Pavlenko et al. 2001; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004). In these and other publications, researchers have focused on migration, literacies, language policy, language learning and language use in a wide variety of contexts, emphasizing particular dimensions of identity – age, ethnicity, race, nationality, migration, gender, sexuality, religion, social class and so on.

Typical stages in carrying out the research

Applied linguists have tended to explore identity from two separate but often interlinked perspectives. On the one hand, many researchers have taken seriously the notion that all utterances constitute 'acts of identity

in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles' (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller 1985, p. 14). As a first stage, these researchers typically collect samples of their informant's speech, either in the latter's day-to-day activities or in face-to-face interviews. The general view is that speakers' identities are indexed in how they draw on repertories of linguistic resources, which include language choice, accent, lexical choice, morphology and syntax. However, in recent years, the interest has moved beyond language, to a multimodal approach which examines semiotic resources, including body movements, gaze, clothing and space (Blommaert 2005). The upshot of this interest is that identity is seen as discursively constructed, where discourse, with a capital 'D', is understood in a broad sense as

> ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity (Gee 2011, p. 201).

In addition, the process of indexing is not framed as two-dimensional, as was the case for early sociolinguistic work which focused on dyadic associations such as accent-social class and lexical choice-gender; rather, in keeping with the post-structuralist take on identity outlined above, indexing is reflexive and multidimensional. It is reflexive in that researchers generally do not posit a one-way deterministic flow from category to linguistic phenomenon (e.g. social class determines accent); rather, they see speech acts as constitutive of categories. Meanwhile, it is multidimensional and intersectional in that few researchers suggest that just one dimension of identity can be enacted at a time; rather, it is difficult to focus on just one dimension (e.g. gender) without considering others (e.g. social class and ethnicity) (Block & Corona 2014).

Over the past twenty-five years, many researchers have discussed and documented what has been termed the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences (Atkinson & Delamont 2006; Clandinin 2007; Clandinin & Connelly 2004; Czarniawska 2004; Dainute 2014; Elliot 2005; Goodson, Loveless & Stevens 2013; Goodwin 2012; Gubrium & Holstein 2009; Holstein & Gubrium 2000, 2012; Reissman 2008), whereby there is progressively more and more interest in how individuals present their life stories when communicating with others and how these stories might be analysed and interpreted. While life stories may be elicited by a variety of means, such as diaries or electronic logs, it is by far the face-to-face interview which has been the elicitation mode of choice in recent years. In such research, interviews are generally lengthy and relatively open-ended in nature, and they are often organized around particular stages in life, such as early childhood, early primary school, early adolescence and so on. The researcher may conduct just one life-story interview with an informant, or he/she may conduct a set of two or three interrelated ones, fairly close together in time

(Wengraf 2001). Alternatively, the researcher may adopt a longitudinal approach, which involves multiple interviews, carried out at intervals over a long period of time. Whatever the number of interviews per informants, in the end, the interest is generally the same: 'the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what is remembered of it, and what the teller wants others to know of it…' (Atkinson 1998, p. 3).

Research strategies and techniques: Doing narrative identity research

In her detailed discussion of narrative methods, Catherine Kohler Riessman (2008) suggests that there are four distinct ways of dealing with narratives, three of which I will present here: *thematic analysis*, *structural analysis* and *dialogic/performative analysis*. *Thematic* analysis is primarily a focus on the content of what is said, leaving to the side other aspects of narrative such as how it is produced. Although some see this approach as intuitive and overly simplistic, Riessman makes clear that it requires a great deal of rigour. First, once spoken data have been transcribed, the researcher has to identify key themes and strands in the narrative. Second, the researcher needs to have a solid background in other social sciences such as history, sociology and anthropology in order to be able to connect narrative content to bigger and broader issues and constructs.

A second approach, *structural analysis*, addresses first and foremost how narratives are produced. On the one hand, such an approach may focus on the micro-level linguistic phenomena, such as grammar, lexis and accent; on the other hand, it may examine how different clauses are assembled to produce a storyline or the strategies adopted by the storyteller as the story is told. Thus, while some researchers may focus on phenomena such as pronoun use and what it might mean, others may follow a variation on Labov and Waletzky's (1967) classic and oft-cited model, whereby narratives are seen to involve a series of steps, beginning with a brief synopsis of the story to be told and the provision of key background information, before moving to the crux of the story, its ending and its meaning to the narrator.

A third approach described by Riessman is what she calls *dialogic/performative*. In this case, the analyst draws on elements of the previous two approaches but, in doing so, creates a distinct third way beyond them. As Riessman notes, 'if thematic and structural approaches interrogate "what" is spoken and "how", the dialogic/performative approach asks "who" an utterance may be directed to, "when," and "why," that is, for what purposes?' (Riessman 2008, p. 105). Thus, the analyst works from the immediate context, in terms of the minutiae of interaction, discourse patterns, the

background of interlocutors, the general sociohistorical backdrop and so on, eventually working up to border social categories, related to institutions and cultures and the identity inscriptions outlined earlier in this chapter (e.g. social class, gender and ethnicity).

A good example of a dialogic approach in action is Donald Freeman's research on teacher knowledge and cognition from two decades ago. Freeman (1996) self-consciously combines a thematic approach (what he calls a 'representational approach') with a structural approach (what he calls a 'presentational approach'). In doing so, he examines his interviews with teachers in terms of three types of relationship:

- *expression* (what is said and how it is said);
- *voice* (what is said to whom and therefore how it may be heard and understood); and
- *source* (what is said and where it comes from).

Being attentive to expression means a focus on the language that is used to say what is said. For example, Freeman examines the use of subject pronouns (I, you and they) and how speakers shift among them as they talk about different topics and personal and professional experiences. For Freeman, the uses of the different pronouns construct shifts in voice, which are related to, and indeed arise in, the changing affiliations of teachers over time. Thus, an informant might show shifts in affiliation in how she talks about her personal and singular experiences (using 'I'), her affiliation to fellow teachers (using 'we') or her lack of affiliation to fellow teachers with whom she does not agree (using 'they').

The idea that voices shift as an interaction unfolds is an essential characteristic of the dialogic/performative approach to narrative. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1981), Lemke makes the point that '[w]e speak with the voices of our communities, and to the extent that we have individual voices, we fashion these out of the social voices already available to us, appropriating the words of others to speak a word of our own' (Lemke 1995, pp. 24–25). Elsewhere, Stanton Wortham argues that '[s]peaking with a certain voice … means using words that index social positions because these words are characteristically used by members of a certain group' (Wortham 2001, p. 38), a view echoed by Gubrium and Holstein (2009) and James Paul Gee (2011). What these authors are saying is that in the process of telling their stories, informants do not just produce unique individualized accounts; rather, their voices are saturated with the voices of others who have preceded them and who are their contemporaries.

In her research, focusing on young Greek women talking about their social lives in informal conversations, Alexandra Georgakopoulou (2006,

2007; De Fina & Georgakopoulou 2012) adopts an approach which sees her first of all examining how talk-in-interaction unfolds in terms of linguistic features such as code, register and style. These features are seen as foundational to an examination of different local 'small, here-and-now identities', specifically participants' 'telling identities', which are related to aspects of group interactions such as amount of participation, floor holding, how much one's talk is ratified (validated) by others and so on. The latter inform the researcher about how participants position themselves and are positioned during the course of their interactions. These positionings include 'expert/novice' and 'advice giver/advice receiver', which in turn can be connected to extra-interactional roles played by individuals in the communities of practice of which they are members, such as 'good student/bad' student. And with reference to the latter, there is a link to broader society-level identities related to gender, social class and so on. Thus, Georgakopoulou shows how her informants talk may be analysed, working from micro-level linguistic features, all the way up to macro-level social categories.

In the work of Freeman, Wortham, Georgakopoulou, De Fina and many others, I see something akin to a consensus emerging among researchers interested in narrative, both those who focus on narratives elicited in interviews and those who focus on narratives arising in informal conversations. In both cases, researchers negotiate an appropriation of Reismann's thematic and structural approaches as they move towards a dialogic/performative approach. Some researchers offer a great deal of detail as they navigate their way through their concern with micro-level language practices and how they connect with larger social constructs such as voice and broader identity inscriptions. Meanwhile, others work more elliptically, moving to the macro-level fairly quickly, although once there, they may go into great detail as regards what they think their data are saying. However, in both cases, there is a common willingness and desire to engage with the complexity of identity in narrative. There is, therefore, a position that what is needed is dialectic analysis which slides back and forth, between and among three general interacting levels:

- *micro:* at the basic level of utterances, examining how what is said is said;
- *meso:* at the intermediate level of positioning in the narrative, via the adoption of voices; and
- *macro:* at the broader, more macro-level, whereby what is said is related to identities and social groups in society.

And, in this sliding back and forth, there will inevitably be more emphasis on one level or another, a point to which I return in the next section.

Associated problems with narrative analysis

The approach to identity in narrative outlined in the previous section is not without problems, which in turn are directly related to the complex task that researchers set themselves. On the one hand, there are foundational and conceptual issues, which are beyond the scope of this chapter. More relevant to this book are problems related to data analysis in applied linguistics research on identity and language. Aneta Pavlenko (2007) identifies what she sees as five major problems common in much narrative research based heavily or exclusively on thematic analysis:

> The first is the lack of theoretical premise, which makes it unclear where conceptual categories come from and how they relate to each other. The second is the lack of established procedure for matching instances to categories. The third is the overreliance on repeated instances which may lead analysts to overlook important events or themes that do not occur repeatedly or do not fit into preestablished schemes. The fourth is an exclusive focus on what is in the text, whereas what is excluded may potentially be as or even more informative. The fifth and perhaps most problematic for applied linguists is the lack of attention to the ways in which storytellers use language to interpret experiences and position themselves as particular kinds of people. (Pavlenko 2007, pp. 166–167)

The overriding and unifying issue here would appear to be transparency and rigour in analysis. These problems are addressed to a large extent in the work cited in the previous section, where researchers adopt a dialogic approach which allows them to better articulate a multitude of analyses across scales, ranging from the micro-local to the macro-global. However, as Wortham (2008) notes, even in such dialectic research, problems remain, mainly concerning the lack of explanation of how big constructs, such as identities and social structures, come into existence and how they are maintained, strengthened and weakened over time. He proposes greater attention to the level of practice which means a close examination of the critical points in activities engaged in across space and time scales, where and when identities are, in a sense, made locally. This level of analysis then allows the researcher a clear path to making connections at higher levels (as regards structure) and longer scales (as regards time).

A sample study

As a way of concluding this chapter, I will now revisit a publication of mine (Block 2001) based on a study that I carried out over a decade ago,

discussing it as a way *not* to proceed in this type of research as opposed to a way *to* proceed. I will reproduce a section of the publication to show the reader how I presented and analysed interview data and then, based on what has hitherto been discussed in this chapter, elaborate a brief critique of it. First, however, I provide some background.

The backdrop of the study which produced the publication was my reading about a shortfall in foreign language teachers in English secondary schools, which was being alleviated to a great extent by a flow of young adult French, German and Spanish nationals from their home countries to England. Interested in issues such as national identity and educational cultures in conflict, I conducted periodic interviews with nine such teachers between September 1999 and December 2002. The study began as the teachers started a Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course in foreign language teaching and it then carried on subsequently as they settled into jobs in secondary schools in Greater London. Here, I present a section of a discussion of how study participants dealt with being positioned as different or foreign by the students with whom they came in contact as they did their PGCE teaching practice. The interviewees are two German nationals, whom I here call Arnold and Hilda. The interviews were carried out in English, and a language in which the two interviewees were extremely proficient.

The need for a reasoned response to national stereotyping was especially pronounced for German nationals, for if there is one nation which has inspired emotional responses in Britain since the Second World War, it is Germany. From the anodyne humour of Fawltey Towers and the classic line, 'Don't mention the war', to the spectacle of football fans celebrating wildly on any occasion that the English national side manages to beat Germany in an international competition, there is little ambivalence about the Germans: they were the enemy in the trenches during the two world wars of the twentieth century, and for many English fans today, they are perceived to be the ultimate rivals on the football pitch. The two German teachers commented about this phenomenon of Germans as the nemesis in the following way:

A = Arnold H = Hilda DB = David Block

A: You also feel sometimes that you are some kind of an ambassador or something for German culture, Germany, German politics, German history especially …

H: Oh, yeah. German history.

DB: Did that come up very much? You know, the whole sort of 'German Thing'…

H: The German thing, yes …

A: So you always had to be quiet but I was always quite relaxed about that… Sometimes they would draw some swastikas just to see 'what are you doing here?' (imitating dopey student voice) 'Ho-Ho-Ho'… Of course they just waited for me to explode or really be upset but I never was. So I really talked to them about it, although they were much too silly. But then in the end, they even listened, so I said 'OK, that's the way it is. We have to live with our past history. Imagine it is not always easy for Germans as well…' And I hope, even though it was year 10 and they are 16 and really silly and thick at times… I think they understood it a little… I mean it was just provoking me so they didn't expect that at all, that I would take it seriously and say something. I'm relaxed with that… I know that they all have some… Well, I have the feeling they have some prejudice and it's really just stereotypes and you just try to… open their mind up and say 'OK,… German people are exactly like you…. What comes to your mind when you think about Germany? And what do you think is the media influence?' And they actually discuss things with you…

H: It's society, it's on TV, and it's every night.

DB: And it'll all come out now with the football again…

H: Exactly. I'm so glad I'm not at school at that time… And hopefully in two years' time when the World Championship is on…

A: And no matter if Germany or England wins, I will not be there the next day…

H: No, no way.

A: Especially if England wins. (6 June 2000)

Block (2001, pp. 297–298)

As regards the interview data discussed here, it is first of all noteworthy that they are transcribed orthographically (that is, in cleaned up form), as opposed to sociolinguistically (that is, with a view to capturing the detailed subtleties of spoken language). Suspension points (…) are used variably to convey either pauses or deleted words, which does little to recreate the interview as event. For example, the inclusion of pause times would perhaps have been useful to show any number of affective relationships with what was being said, such as hesitance or an inability to articulate thoughts. Also missing in the transcriptions are other features of conversations, such as overlapping speech or inflections on what is said (e.g. rising intonation), and we therefore do not get a clear sense of how Arnold and Hilda co-construct a version of events with their words. On the other hand, there is an attempt to mark with double quotation marks ('') what Bakhtin (1981) called 'double voicing', that is, instances when Arnold is speaking as the protagonist in the story he is telling in his second turn. On the one hand,

he double voices his students, putting on what I refer to here as a 'dopey voice', and on the other hand, he double voices the teacher (himself) with a more normal voice. Neither the telling of the story by Arnold nor the way it is told is commented on in my article, and thus, there is no consideration of Arnold's positioning himself as the more active interlocutor in this exchange (it is more his story than Hilda's), or how the double voicing draws lines between the sensible teacher and his students, described here as 'really silly and thick at times'. In sum, there is little that addresses what Pavlenko identifies as key problems in narrative research.

Instead, the content of the exchange is somewhat superficially linked to what is said in the paragraph that opens this excerpt from my article, in which I very briefly gloss English stereotypes of Germans revolving around the Second World War and football. There is, therefore, no overtly dialectic approach involving the moving back and forth across levels. There is no in-depth exploration, either sociologically or historically, of how Germany and Germans are discursively constructed in England today, and thus, no attempt at an explanation of how the stereotypes mentioned came into existence, and more importantly, how they are maintained and strengthened in day-to-day life in England and in the school setting described by Arnold. There is Hilda's comment – 'It's society, it's on TV, and it's every night' – but this is not explored further.

Space does not allow further dismantling and critiquing of my analysis and discussion from a decade and a half ago. However, I think I have done enough here to make my point. This, I should emphasize, has not been to position myself as a poor researcher in 2001; rather, I have used my work as a foil in my attempt to discuss very briefly what a researcher might do with life-story interview data, when working dialectically across levels and scales. Indeed, it should be noted that I have cited just a page-length section of a twenty-page article and that in other parts of it there is in-depth discussion of issues around national identity and educational culture, which in turn is filtered into my analysis of a fair number of interview excerpts.

Still, there is one inescapable problem with all research which attempts to link what people say about their lives to identity issues. Any such example of analysis – no matter how meticulously carried out, detailed and articulated across spatio-temporal scales – will always be partial in that there will always be more that could be said. The researcher can always dig more at the micro-level, relating findings to the meso-level, and he/she can always say a great deal more about social identities that serve as a backdrop to recounted experiences and indeed the interviews themselves as social events. In addition, there is the notion, introduced above, that identity is not only language-mediated, but more generally multimodally/semiotically mediated. If this notion is taken seriously, it means that any analysis which is exclusively language-based will be partial in that it misses many other aspects of communication, effectively ignoring the roles of other semiotic resources (gaze, posture, hand movements, dress and so on) as integral to identity

construction. As Sigrid Norris (2004, 2011) argues, these other resources might even be more important than language at a given moment. From this point of view, researchers perhaps need to consider how phenomena such as gaze, posture and hand movements are part of interviews, and how they might contribute to attempts to link the interview to meso- and macro-level constructs.

Resources for further reading

Block, D 2007, *Second Language Identities*, Bloomsbury, London. NB Reissued in 2014 as part of the Bloomsbury Classics in Linguistics series.

This book is a selective but in-depth overview of how identity is an issue in different language learning environments. It begins with an overview of the post-structuralist approach to identity that has become dominant in applied linguistics, before moving to consider how identity is an issue in naturalistic, foreign and study abroad language learning contexts.

Caldas-Coulthard, C & Iedema, R (eds), 2008, *Identity Trouble: Critical Discourse and Contested Identities*, Palgrave, London.

This is a good state-of-the-art collection of chapters which also examines the interrelationships between language, discourse and identity. In thirteen chapters, contributors discuss conceptual issues related to the analysis of narrative from different perspectives, such as conversational analysis and social semiotics, focusing especially on contexts and events in which the emergence of identity is problematic in some way.

De Fina, A & Georgakopoulou, A 2012, *Analyzing Narrative: Discourse and Sociolinguistic Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

This is an excellent exploration of storytelling from a sociolinguistic perspective, situated more specifically in linguistic ethnography. It begins with a discussion of narrative studies in general before moving on to current scholarship in applied linguistics. Importantly, the book examines the different methodologies employed by researchers interested in stories elicited in research interviews, including conversation analysis and critical discourse analysis.

De Fina, A, Schiffrin, D & Bamberg, M (eds), 2006, *Discourse and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

This is an excellent collection of work in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, which explores the interrelationships between language, discourse and identity. In fifteen chapters, contributors examine conceptual issues and the specifics of research on public and private identities, masculinities and the interactions between person and place.

Riessman, CK 2008, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, Sage, London.

This book is a highly readable review of narrative methods in identity research. The author provides an excellent synthesis of her personal perspective and the work of other scholars, focusing on research processes and issues around data analysis.

Clandinin, J (ed.), 2007, *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, Sage, London.

This is still perhaps the most comprehensive and authoritative statement of what narrative research in the social sciences means today. It is extensive, although far more manageable than even more extensive collections such as Goodwin (2012).

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