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AN IDENTITY APPROACH TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Overview

The central argument of the identity approach to second language acquisition (SLA) is twofold: First, SLA theorists need a comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the individual language learner and the larger social world; second, SLA theorists need to address how relations of power in the social world affect learners' access to the target language community. In relation to the former, a fully developed theory of identity highlights the multiple positions from which language learners can speak, and how sometimes marginalized learners can appropriate more desirable identities with respect to the target language community. In relation to the latter, identity theorists are concerned about the ways in which opportunities to practice speaking, reading, and writing, acknowledged as central to the SLA process (cf. Spolsky, 1989), are socially structured in both formal and informal sites of language learning. Identity theorists thus question the view that learners can be defined in binary terms as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, without considering that such affective factors are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways within a single individual.

Norton first published these key arguments in the mid-1990s (Norton, 1997; Norton Peirce, 1995), supporting this theory with a comprehensive study of language learners (Norton, 2000). She then followed up these findings in subsequent research, often conducted collaboratively (Kanno & Norton, 2003; McKinney & Norton, 2008; Norton, 2001; Norton & Gao, 2008; Norton & Pavlenko, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2001, 2004; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Norton uses the term identity "to reference how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (2000, p. 5). In this view, every time learners speak, they are negotiating and renegotiating a sense of self in relation to the larger social world, and reorganizing that relationship in multiple dimensions of their lives.

Drawing on poststructuralist theory, Norton argues that three characteristics of identity are particularly relevant to SLA: the multiple, non-unitary nature of identity; identity as a site of struggle; and identity as changing over time. The construct of identity as multiple is particularly powerful because learners who struggle to speak from one identity position can reframe their relationship with their interlocutors and reclaim alternative, more powerful identities from which to speak. This has profound implications for SLA.

There is now a wealth of research that explores the relationship between identity and language learning, testament to the fact that issues of identity and power are being recognized as central to SLA (see, for example, volumes by Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Block, 2003, 2007b; Clarke, 2008; Day, 2002; Heller, 2007; Higgins, 2009; Kanno, 2003, 2008; Kubota & Lin, 2009; Lin, 2007; Miller, 2003; Nelson, 2009; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Potowski, 2007; Toohey, 2000; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007). Further, while much of this research explores the multiple and intersecting dimensions of language learners' identities, there is also a growing body of research that seeks to investigate the ways in which particular relations of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation may impact the process of SLA. Identity research does not regard such identity categories as psychometric variables, but rather as sets of relationships that are socially and historically constructed within particular relations of power (cf. Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004; Ibrahim, 1999; King, 2008; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Nelson, 2009). Further, the key concepts of a learner's *investment* in the target language (Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton & Gao, 2008), as well as their identification with *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), have been developed to broaden our understanding of processes of SLA.

Motivation and Investment

Drawing on identity theory, as well as the micro-level workings of power in everyday social encounters (cf. Foucault, 1980), Norton and Toohey (2001) have argued that many theories of the good language learner have been developed on the premise that language learners can choose under what conditions they will interact with members of the target language community and that the language learner's access to the target language community is a function of the learner's motivation. The concept of motivation is drawn primarily from social psychology, where attempts have been made to quantify a learner's commitment to learning the target language. The pioneering work of Gardner and Lambert (e.g., 1972) has been particularly influential in introducing the notions of instrumental and integrative motivation into the field of SLA. In their work, *instrumental motivation* references the desire of language learners to learn an L2 for utilitarian purposes, such as employment, while *integrative motivation* references the desire to learn a language to successfully integrate with the target language community. While researchers such as Crookes and Schmidt (1991), Dörnyei (1994, 1997), and

Oxford and Shearin (1994) have sought to extend the theoretical framework proposed by Gardner and Lambert, such debates often do not do justice to the complex relationship between power, identity, and SLA.

The construct of *investment*, first introduced by Norton (Norton Peirce, 1995), signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language, and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. It is best understood with reference to the economic metaphors that Bourdieu used in his work – in particular the notion of cultural capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) used the term “cultural capital” to reference the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms, with differential exchange values. Norton argued that, if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on that investment—a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources.

By way of example, consider a recent classroom-based study conducted by Duff (2002) in a multilingual secondary school in Canada that included native English speakers and English language learners. Drawing on macro-level and micro-level contexts of communication in one content course, Duff found that the teacher’s attempts to foster respect for cultural diversity in the classroom had mixed results. In essence, the English language learners in the class were afraid of being criticized or laughed at because of their limited command of English. As Duff noted, “Silence protected them from humiliation” (p. 312). This silence, however, was perceived by the native English speakers as representing “a lack of initiative, agency, or desire to improve one’s English or to offer interesting material for the sake of the class” (p. 312). It is clear from the classroom data, however, that the English language learners in the class were not unmotivated; rather, it could be argued that they were not *invested* in the language practices of their classroom, where there were unequal relations of power between the English language learners and native speakers, with differential cultural capital.

Significantly, this notion of investment is not equivalent to instrumental motivation. The concept of instrumental motivation often presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers. The notion of investment, on the other hand, conceives of the language learner as having a complex identity and multiple desires. The notion presupposes that, when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus an investment in the target language is also an investment in a learner’s own identity, an identity that is constantly changing across time and space.

The construct of investment provides for a different set of questions associated with a learner’s commitment to learning the target language. Instead of asking, for example, “To what extent is the learner motivated to learn the target language?” the researcher asks, “What is the learner’s investment in the target language

practices of this classroom or community?” A learner may be a highly motivated language learner, but may nevertheless have little investment in the language practices of a given classroom, which may, for example, be racist, sexist, elitist, or homophobic. Thus, despite being highly motivated, a learner could be excluded from the language practices of a classroom, and in time positioned as a “poor” or unmotivated language learner.

Imagined Communities and Imagined Identities

An extension of interest in identity and investment concerns the *imagined communities* that language learners aspire to when they learn a language (Anderson, 1991; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2001; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Imagined communities refer to groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination. In our daily lives we interact with many communities whose existence can be felt concretely and directly. These include our neighborhood communities, our workplaces, our educational institutions, and our religious groups. However, these are not the only communities with which we are affiliated. As Wenger (1998) suggested, direct involvement in community practices and concrete relationships—what he calls *engagement*—is not the only way in which we belong to a community; for Wenger, imagination is another important source of community. Norton (2001) extended Wenger’s work by proposing the construct of imagined communities with respect to L2 learning, arguing that it serves, in part, to explain non-participation and resistance in the language classroom. Imagined communities provide insight into imagined identities.

Imagined ties extend both spatially and temporally. Benedict Anderson (1991), who first coined the term “imagined communities,” argued that what we think of as nations are imagined communities, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). Thus, in imagining ourselves bonded with our fellow compatriots across time and space, we can feel a sense of community with people we have not yet met, and perhaps may never meet. A focus on imagined communities in SLA enables us to explore how learners’ affiliation with such communities might affect their learning trajectories. Such communities include future relationships that exist only in the learner’s imagination as well as affiliations—such as nationhood or even transnational communities—that extend beyond local sets of relationships. These imagined communities are no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their identities and investments.

Theoretical Principles

The theoretical assumptions that underlie the identity approach to SLA are best understood with reference to poststructuralist theories of language and subjectivity, respectively, and sociocultural theories of learning. We examine each of these in turn.

Poststructuralist Theories of Language

Language learning engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols, but also a complex social practice through which relationships are defined, negotiated, and resisted. This view draws on poststructuralist theories of language, which have achieved prominence in the late 20th century and are associated, for many scholars, with the work of Bakhtin (1981), Bourdieu (1977), Derrida (1980), Kramsch (2010), Kress (1989) and Luke (2004). These theories build on, but are distinct from, structuralist theories of language, associated predominantly with the work of Saussure. Saussure's (1966) distinction between speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*) was an attempt to provide a way of recognizing that, despite geographical, interpersonal, and social variations, languages have shared patterns and structure. For structuralists, the building blocks of language structure are signs that comprise the signifier (or sound-image) and the signified (the concept or meaning). Saussure asserted that neither the signifier nor the signified preexists the other and that the link between them is arbitrary. He noted that it is the linguistic system that guarantees the meaning of signs and that each linguistic community has its own set of signifying practices that give value to the signs in a language.

One of the criticisms poststructuralists have levelled at this notion of language is that structuralism cannot account for struggles over the social meanings that can be attributed to signs within a given language. The signs /research/, /SLA/, and /poststructuralism/, for example, can have different meanings for different people within the same linguistic community. Witness, for example, debates over the meaning of "SLA theory" in the field of applied linguistics, which have given rise to contrasts between cognitivist and social approaches to language learning (Atkinson, 2002; Block, 2007a; Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Swain & Deters, 2007; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). This edited collection itself contributes to this debate. Thus, while structuralists conceive of signs as having idealized meanings and linguistic communities as being relatively homogeneous and consensual, post-structuralists take the position that the signifying practices of societies are sites of struggle, and that linguistic communities are heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power. The poststructuralist theories of Bakhtin (1981) and Bourdieu (1977), discussed next, foreground struggles over meaning and legitimacy, which are particularly relevant to the identity approach to SLA.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1984), a Russian philosopher and literary scholar, took the position that language needs to be investigated as situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to create meanings. In this view, the notion of the individual speaker is a fiction as all speakers construct their utterances jointly on the basis of their interaction with listeners, both in historical and contemporary, actual and assumed communities. Any one utterance for Bakhtin is thus a link in the chain of speech communication, as the context of any one utterance is past, present, and future utterances on the same topic. The historical, present, and future positioning of speakers and those of their interlocutors are

expressed in the words that constitute an utterance—words that are not neutral but express particular predispositions and value systems. In this view, rather than seeing SLA as a gradual, individual process of internalizing a neutral set of rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language, Bakhtin's work encourages us to think about the learning of language within particular discourses and with particular interlocutors. Speakers need to struggle to appropriate the voices of others, and to use those voices for their own purposes. What others say, the customary discourse of any particular community, may privilege or debase certain speakers. Finding answering words for others, joining the chain of speech communication, is as much a social as a linguistic struggle.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), a French sociologist, focused on the often unequal relationships between interlocutors and the importance of power in structuring speech. In arguing that “speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it” (1977, p. 652), Bourdieu suggested that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks, and that the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from larger networks of social relationships. He argued that, when a person speaks, the speaker wishes not only to be understood, but to be “believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished” (p. 648). However, speakers' abilities to command respect are unequally distributed because of the symbolic power relations between interlocutors. To redress the inequities between what Bourdieu called “legitimate” and “illegitimate” speakers, he argued that an expanded definition of competence should include the “right to speech” or “the power to impose reception” (p. 648). Like Bakhtin then, Bourdieu reminds the SLA theorist that language cannot be idealized and that we cannot take for granted that good faith will prevail between participants in oral or literate activities. Bourdieu's foregrounding of power relations in language use has important implications for how language learners are positioned by others, for the opportunities they get to speak, and for the varieties of language that we teach and that they use.

Poststructuralist Theories of Subjectivity

The work of feminist poststructuralist Christine Weedon (1987/1997), like that of Bakhtin and Bourdieu, is centrally concerned with the conditions under which people speak, within both institutional and community contexts. Like other poststructuralist theorists who inform her work, Weedon has foregrounded the central role of language in her analysis of the relationship between the individual and the social, arguing that language not only defines institutional practices, but serves to construct our sense of ourselves—our *subjectivity*: “Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of selves, our subjectivity, is constructed” (p. 21).

The use of the term “subjectivity”, derived from the term *subject*, is compelling because it serves as a reminder that a person's identity must always be understood

in relational terms: One is either subject *of* a set of relationships (i.e., in a position of power) or subject *to* a set of relationships (i.e., in a position of reduced power). Weedon noted that the terms “subject” and “subjectivity” signify a different conception of the individual than that associated with humanist conceptions of the individual dominant in Western philosophy. While humanist conceptions of the individual presuppose that every person has an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent core, poststructuralism depicts the individual (i.e., the subject) as diverse, contradictory, dynamic, and changing over historical time and social space. Drawing on the Foucauldian notions of discourse and historical specificity, subjectivity in poststructuralism is understood as discursively constructed and as always socially and historically embedded. As noted above, these theories of subjectivity have been central in the work of many identity theorists in SLA.

Poststructuralist approaches to theorizing identity have also been fruitfully put to work by cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1992a, 1992b) and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) to de-essentialize and deconstruct identity categories such as race and gender. In theorizing cultural identity, Hall focused on identity as in-process, and stressed the importance of representation following from the discursive construction of identity. In his notion of *new ethnicities*, Hall provided an alternative theorizing of race that recognizes experiences of race without homogenizing them. Hall emphasized a multifaceted rootedness that is not limited to ethnic minorities and that can be applied to other forms of difference. However, one of the difficulties in theorizing difference in this way is that people often wish to assert their identities as homogeneous and unitary, foregrounding a particular aspect of their experience such as gender, race, or religious affiliation. We see this in the current strength of nationalisms and religious fundamentalism in different parts of the globe. Such unitary assertions of identity are often referred to as “strategic essentialism” (cf. Spivak, in Fuss, 1989; Yon, 1999). The terms *identity politics* or the *politics of difference* reference this particular coalescence of identity and power relations, emphasizing the material effects of difference.

Sociocultural Theories of Learning

Rather than viewing SLA as a predominantly mental and individual process (Davis, 1995), the identity approach investigates SLA as a sociocultural practice. SLA is conceptualized as a relational activity that occurs between specific speakers situated in specific sociocultural contexts. A shift from seeing learners as individual language producers to seeing them as members of social and historical groups calls for an examination of the conditions for learning, or the appropriation of practices, in any particular community. This view is informed by anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), who argued that “situated learning” is an integral and inseparable part of social practice. Through a process of *legitimate peripheral participation*, newcomers interact with old-timers in a given community setting, become increasingly experienced in the practices that characterize that community, and gradually move toward fuller participation in that community. Lave and Wenger

recognized, however, that particular social arrangements in any community may constrain or facilitate movement toward fuller participation.

In developing these ideas, Wenger (1998) focused on the relationship of participation to the construction of a learner's identity. He argued that our relation to communities of practice involves both participation and non-participation, and that our identities are shaped by combinations of the two. Non-participation in some communities is inevitable because our experiences include coming into contact with communities to which we do not belong. This kind of non-participation differs from that which occurs when we are non-participatory in the practices of communities to which we do belong. In the latter case, Wenger's distinction between *peripherality* and *marginality* is a useful one. By peripherality, Wenger refers to the fact that some degree of non-participation can be an enabling factor of participation, while marginality is a form of non-participation that prevents full participation.

In conceptualizing learning in SLA, such theories are particularly apt in situations where L2 learners (newcomers) enter a classroom in which speakers of the target language (old-timers) constitute the more experienced members of the community. Toohey's (2000, 2001) research with ESL children in a public school who attended classes in which the majority of children were native English speakers showed a community that included many mentors who were experienced English speakers. In other classrooms, however, such as the adult immigrant language classes discussed by Norton (2001), all of the members of the classroom community, apart from the teacher, were newcomers; the only old-timer was the teacher. The question that arose then was what community practices did these adults seek to learn? What, indeed, constituted the community for them?

To address this question, Norton (2001) found Wenger's discussion on identity and modes of belonging particularly useful. Drawing on his research with insurance claims processors, Wenger (1998) noted that the claims processors' experience of both participation and non-participation reached beyond the walls of their office, and that they had to use their imagination to get a picture of these broader connections. In this view, imagination, as one mode of belonging, addresses the extent to which we create images of the world and see connections through time and space via the extrapolation of experience. As Wenger noted:

My use of the concept of imagination refers to a process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves. Imagination in this sense is looking at an apple seed and seeing a tree.

(p. 176)

Wenger emphasized further that imagination should not be confused with misleading fantasy or withdrawal from reality. This mode of belonging, he argued, is a creative process of producing new images of possibility and new ways of understanding one's relation to the world that transcend more immediate acts of engagement.

Drawing on data from two adult immigrant language learners—Katarina and Felicia, both of whom chose not to participate in their classroom communities—Norton (2001) argued that the communities of practice that characterized Katarina and Felicia's learning trajectories were communities of the imagination. When Katarina and Felicia entered their language classrooms, they not only saw a classroom with four walls, but also envisioned an imagined community outside the classroom that transcended time and space. However, while highly motivated students, they were not invested in the language practices of their respective classrooms, and both chose to withdraw from class.

The connection between non-participation and imagined communities is well illustrated in the example of Katarina, who withdrew from her language course after four months in response to her teacher's evaluative comment that Katarina's English was not "good enough" to take a computer course. In her native country, Katarina had been a teacher for 17 years and was a highly respected professional in this position; she eagerly sought recognition from people who were fellow professionals, and wished to have a profession in Canada in which she could meet people who shared her views and aspirations. As she said, "I choose computer course, not because I have to speak, but because I have to think." Katarina's imagined community was thus a community of professionals, and was as much a reconstruction of her professional past in Poland as it was an imaginative construction of her future in Canada. Katarina's language teacher was an old-timer in this imagined community, a community in which Katarina believed she had already achieved old-timer status. When Katarina felt that her teacher failed to acknowledge her professional identity, thereby positioning her as a newcomer, she was greatly distressed. When, indeed, the teacher appeared to discourage Katarina from taking a computer course that would give her greater access to her imagined community, Katarina refused to continue participating in the language class. Norton concluded that Katarina's act of non-participation helped her to preserve the integrity of her imagined community.

The theoretical assumptions of an identity approach to SLA, reviewed above, suggest that language learning is not a gradual individual process of internalizing a neutral set of rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language. Rather, such theoretical principles suggest that language learners need to struggle to appropriate the voices of others; they need to learn to command the attention of their listeners; and they need to negotiate language as a system and as a social practice. Further, learners' investments in the practices of their communities, whether real or imagined, are also important for SLA. An imagined community assumes an imagined identity, and investment in target language practices can be understood within this context.

Research Methods

Given the focus of an identity approach to SLA, the key methodological question to be answered is what kind of research enables scholars to investigate the

relationship between language learners as social beings and the frequently inequitable worlds in which learning takes place? Since an identity approach to SLA characterizes learner identity as multiple and changing, a quantitative research paradigm relying on static and measurable variables will generally not be appropriate. The focus on issues of power also necessitates that qualitative research designs are framed by critical research. For these reasons, methods that scholars use in identity approaches to SLA tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative, and often draw on critical ethnography, feminist poststructuralist theory, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. There are a number of common assumptions that such scholars bring to their qualitative research projects, three of which are as follows:

First, much identity research rejects the view that any research can claim to be objective or unbiased. In this view, researchers have to understand their own experience and knowledge as well as those of the participants in their studies (Norton & Early, *in press*). This does not suggest that qualitative research is lacking in rigor; on the contrary, all research studies are understood to be situated, and the researcher integral to the progress of a research project. In her research in India, Ramanathan (2005) noted, for example, “Questions and issues of what are ‘present’ and ‘absent’ clearly underlie what are ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ in literacy events and practices and are determined, to a large extent, by the researcher’s lens” (p. 15).

Second, identity researchers aim to investigate the complex relationship between social structure on the one hand, and human agency on the other, without resorting to deterministic or reductionist analyses. While taking race, class, gender, and other structural issues into account in their analysis, they need to ensure that they leave conceptual room for the actions and investments of human agents. Menard-Warwick (2005) has made the case that Bakhtin’s theories of language have the potential to resolve some of the contradictions between continuity and change that characterize debates on identity in the fields of SLA and literacy.

Third, identity researchers seek to better understand how power operates within society, constraining or enabling human action (Cummins, 2000; Fairclough, 1989; Janks, 2010; Pennycook, 2007). They often draw on Foucault (1980) to understand not only the relationship between knowledge and power, but the subtle ways in which power operates in society. Foucault noted, for example, that power is often invisible in that it frequently naturalizes events and practices in ways that come to be seen as “normal” to members of a community. As Pennycook pointed out:

Foucault brings a constant skepticism toward cherished concepts and modes of thought. Taken-for-granted categories such as man, woman, class, race, ethnicity, nation, identity, awareness, emancipation, language or power must be understood as contingent, shifting and produced in the particular, rather than having some prior ontological status.

(2007, p. 39)

In an identity approach to SLA, there has thus been a strong methodological focus on narratives, whether collected through fieldwork (Barkhuizen, 2008;

Block, 2006; Botha, 2009; Goldstein, 1996; McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2003; Norton, 2000) or from existing autobiographical and biographical accounts (Norton & Early, in press; Pavlenko, 2001a, 2001b, 2004). This methodological focus has many potential synergies with a critical research paradigm in that it foregrounds an individual's sense-making of their experience as well as the complexity of individual/social relationships. As Block (2007a) has pointed out, the focus on narrative in SLA research follows its recent popularity in social science research, and is part of a wider "social turn" (Block, 2003) in SLA research. Pavlenko has made a strong case for the particular contribution that narrative can make:

L2 learning stories . . . are unique and rich sources of information about the relationship between language and identity in second language learning and socialization. It is possible that only personal narratives provide a glimpse into areas so private, personal and intimate that they are rarely—if ever—breached in the study of SLA, and at the same time are at the heart and soul of the second language socialization process.

(2001b, p. 167)

Turning our attention to fieldwork-based research on identity and language learning, we find that researchers often combine a range of methods of data collection such as ethnographic observation, interviews (including life history interviews), diary studies, and written responses (narrative or other) to researcher questions. Extended time frames provide particular depth. For example, Toohey's (2000, 2001) longitudinal study of six young learners from minority language backgrounds in a Canadian school tracked their development over a three-year period. Toohey combined several ethnographic data collection methods: regular classroom observations were captured in fieldnotes and audio recordings and supported by monthly video recordings; interviews and ongoing informal discussions were held with the children's teachers; and home visits where parents were interviewed were common. It was the combination of such methods that provided the rich data necessary to understand the learners and their classroom language learning as socially, historically, and politically constructed, and the classroom as a site of identity negotiation.

Qualitative research on language and identity is not without its challenges, however, and the following two studies are illustrative of some of its difficulties. Drawing on their research on task-based language learning in urban settings in the United Kingdom, Leung, Harris, and Rampton (2004) examined the inelegance of qualitative research, arguing that the "epistemic turbulence" in qualitative research in second language acquisition centers on the question of what constitutes or represents reality. The methodology adopted in their study was to collect naturally occurring data with the use of video and audio recordings, which were supplemented by field notes. They described the data as "messy" in that it was difficult to represent and account for data that did not fit neatly into the theoretical construct of task-based language use. Leung et al. made the case that

researchers need a conceptual framework that acknowledges rather than obscures the messiness of data.

In a very different context, Toohey and Waterstone (2004) described a research collaboration between teachers and researchers in Vancouver, Canada, with the mutual goal of investigating what practices in classrooms would make a difference to the learning opportunities of minority-language children. While teachers were comfortable discussing and critiquing their educational practices, they expressed ambivalence about translating their practice into publishable academic papers, noting that they felt little ownership over the academic language characteristic of many published journals. To address precisely this type of challenge, Sharkey and Johnson (2003) initiated a productive and engaging dialogue between researchers and teachers, with the expressed aim of demystifying research and theory that addresses themes of identity, power, and educational change.

Supporting Findings

Apart from Norton's own work, numerous researchers, as discussed above, have investigated the relationship between identity and SLA. While some have focused particularly on the notion of investment in explaining language learning processes (e.g., Cummins, 2006; Haneda, 2005; McKay & Wong, 1996; Pittaway, 2004; Potowski, 2007; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002), others have taken up the idea of imagined communities (Carroll, Motha, & Price, 2008; Dagenais, 2003; Kanno, 2008; Kanno & Norton, 2003; Kendrick & Jones, 2008; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Here we present evidence of the usefulness of both of these concepts in understanding SLA.

All five of the immigrant women in Norton's original study (Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000) were highly motivated learners of English, yet there were particular social conditions under which the women in this study were most uncomfortable and unlikely to speak. The data suggest that a language learner's motivation is mediated by investments that may conflict with the desire to speak, or, paradoxically, may make it possible for the language learner to claim the right to speak. The case study of Martina, a Czech immigrant and mother of three children, is a powerful case in point. Despite never feeling comfortable speaking in English and despite what could be described as a high affective filter, Martina refused to be silenced. In her workplace, for example, where she worked alongside young native English speakers in a fast food restaurant, she saw herself positioned as a "broom," a position that dehumanized her and denied her the right to speak. Martina therefore reframed the relationship between herself and her co-workers as a domestic one, in which her co-workers were positioned as "children" rather than powerful native speakers. In claiming the right to speak as mother/parent/adult and resisting the identity of the immigrant, Martina positioned herself as a legitimate speaker in this encounter. In essence, while Martina was a highly motivated language learner, she was not invested in the language practices of her workplace. However, she could transform these language practices by drawing on

an alternative and more powerful identity position from which to speak, with significant implications for SLA.

In a study of Chinese adolescent immigrant students in the United States, McKay and Wong (1996) extended the notion of investment. Like other identity theorists, they demonstrated how the specific needs, desires and negotiations of learners are not distractions from the task of language learning, but “must be regarded as constituting the very fabric of students’ lives and as determining their investment in learning the target language” (p. 603). While Norton focused on opportunities to speak, McKay and Wong’s research investigated students’ investments in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. They argued that investment in each of these skills can be highly selective and that different skills can have different values in relation to learner identities. For example, in the case of one of the students, Michael Lee, his spoken discourse in English developed rapidly while his written language skills did not improve. Unlike the other students in the study, Michael’s sporting ability enabled him to make friends and to socialize primarily with non-Chinese immigrant students. McKay and Wong provided fascinating evidence of Michael’s ability to resist and counteract his powerless positioning by school staff as “ESL student” (see also Talmy, 2008). Their study provides further powerful evidence of the impact of social positioning by teachers and peers on an individual’s language learning. It is no coincidence that the student from the lowest socio-economic background, Brad Wang, was consistently positioned unfavorably and as a low achiever, despite his excellent writing skills relative to the other students in the first writing assessment completed by the students.

Skilton-Sylvester (2002), drawing on her research with four Cambodian women in adult ESL classes in the United States, has argued that traditional views of adult motivation and participation do not adequately address the complex lives of adult learners, and that an understanding of a woman’s domestic and professional identities is necessary to explain her investment and thus participation in particular adult ESL programs. Haneda (2005) has drawn on the construct of investment to understand the engagement of two university students in an advanced Japanese literacy course, concluding that their multiple membership in differing communities may have shaped the way they invested differently in writing in Japanese. Potowski (2007) has used the construct of investment to explain students’ use of Spanish in a dual Spanish/English immersion program in the United States, noting that, even if a language program is well run, a learner’s investment in the target language must be consistent with the goals of the program if language learning is to meet expectations. Cummins (2006) has drawn on the construct of investment to develop the notion of the identity text, arguing that the construct has emerged as a “significant explanatory construct” (p. 59) in the L2 learning literature.

As noted in the discussion of “Theoretical Principles” above, Norton (2001) adapted the construct of imagined communities to explain the non-participation of two adult immigrant learners in their language classes. In 2003, a special issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, entitled “Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities” (Kanno & Norton, 2003), helped to place this

construct on the SLA agenda, and interest in the topic has continued to grow (cf. Carroll et al., 2008; Dagenais, Moore, Sabatier, Lamarre, & Armand, 2008; Kanno, 2008; Kendrick & Jones, 2008; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). In the Japanese context, for example, Kanno (2008) examined the relationship between school education and inequality of access to bilingualism in five different Japanese schools promoting bilingual education. She found that, while additive bilingualism was promoted for upper middle-class students, subtractive bilingualism was far more common in schools serving immigrant and refugee children. Kanno argued that, in the schools she researched, different visions of children's imagined communities called for different forms of bilingual education, exacerbating existing inequities between students with unequal access to resources.

In Canada, Dagenais et al. (2008) investigated the linguistic landscape in the vicinity of two elementary schools in Vancouver and Montreal, illustrating the ways in which the children imagined the language of their neighborhoods, and constructed their identities in relation to them. Dagenais et al. described the innovative ways in which researchers and students drew on multimodal resources such as digital photography to document the linguistic landscape of these neighborhoods, and the way children in both cities were encouraged to exchange letters, posters, photographs, and videos. Dagenais et al. argued that documenting the imagined communities of neighborhoods, as depicted and understood by children, can provide much information on the children's understanding of their community, an important consideration for language educators. In another region of the world, Kendrick and Jones (2008) drew on the notion of imagined communities to analyze the drawings and photographs produced by primary and secondary schoolgirls in the Ugandan context. Their research, using multimodal methodologies, sought to investigate the girls' perceptions of participation in local literacy practices, and to promote dialogue on literacy, gender, and development. What the authors found was that the girls' visual images provided insight into their imagined communities, which were associated with command of English and access to education.

Differences vis-à-vis Other Approaches

In common with most of the other alternative approaches to SLA represented in this volume, a focus on identity developed as a response to the largely asocial character of SLA theory, with its exclusive attention on individual language learners and individual cognition, acknowledged by many SLA scholars (Atkinson, 2002; Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Ricento, 2005; Swain & Deters, 2007; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). An identity approach thus has many synergies with other approaches that foreground the profoundly social nature of language learning. In line with this, the identity approach does not in any way claim to be able to answer all the questions pertaining to SLA, nor does it claim to invalidate other approaches such as sociocultural theory, conversation analysis, sociocognitive approaches, and so on. What we do argue is that failing to consider the centrality of learners' identities, as well as issues of power

and inequality in the language learning process, will produce an inadequate understanding of SLA.

What is distinctive about the identity approach in relation to mainstream, cognitivist approaches to SLA, as well as the alternatives presented in this volume, is the focus on issues of power and inequality as central to our understanding of language learning. Opportunities to speak and exposure to target language speakers, essential to language learning, are fundamentally socially structured. As Norton (1997, p. 410) argued, “speech, speakers and social relationships are inseparable.” The difference between an identity approach and the others in this volume is thus largely a matter of emphasis: Social identities and power are foregrounded in understanding SLA, whether in naturalistic settings or classroom language learning settings. In this sense, the focus on identity does not attempt to bridge the gap between social and cognitive approaches, as does the sociocognitive approach (Atkinson, 2002) or chaos/complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2007), but is better characterized as an unequivocally social approach to SLA.

In common with a sociocultural theory (SCT) approach (Lantolf, 2000), an identity approach views learners as historically and socially situated agents, and learning as not just the acquisition of linguistic forms but as growing participation in a community of practice. Learning in both approaches is thus seen as part of the ongoing process of identity construction. However, the SCT approach to understanding SLA is centrally concerned with individual cognitive processes, for example the learner’s zone of proximal development or use of private and inner speech, rather than with social processes. The theorizing of language further differs in that an identity approach sees language as always socially situated; language can never be fully internalized because the sign is seen as always unstable and the word as always populated with the intentions and meanings of others (Bakhtin, 1981).

The identity approach shares a social view of learning as participation in communities of practice with conversation analysis (CA) (e.g., Wagner, 2004). Two main differences with a CA approach, however, are the focus on different kinds of data and the value attached to such data. An identity approach aims to include an emic understanding, which aims to access participants’ own understandings of their experiences; in line with this, self-reported and reflective data are highly valued. CA focuses exclusively on naturally occurring conversation and is not necessarily concerned with issues of power. Finally, an identity approach has most in common with the language socialization approach to SLA. Much of the research discussed in this chapter could be included in reviews of a language socialization approach (e.g., Duff, 2002). However, power may not always be foregrounded in a language socialization approach (e.g. Swain & Deters, 2007; Watson-Gegeo, 2004), and Duff has pointed out that “language socialisation models tend to imply that the appropriation of target culture norms and practices is *always* desirable, virtuous, inevitable and complete” (p. 291). Duff’s own research, carried out within a language socialization framework, does however foreground issues of power and shows how appropriation of target culture norms is an uneven process that may well be strategically resisted.

Future Directions

With regard to future directions in research focused on identity and power in SLA, there is scope for expanding the methodological tools used. First, Wagner (2004) and Block (2007a) have recently commented on the potential of the analysis of naturally occurring interaction to enrich research in the area of identity in SLA, particularly in exploring the negotiation of participation. As Wagner argued, “the understanding of learning as empowerment of social participation can recruit strong empirical support in a CA-based analysis of second language talk” (p. 614). While there are several identity-focused analyses of L2 classroom talk (e.g. Duff, 2002; Makoe & McKinney, 2009; Pomerantz, 2008; Talmy, 2008; Toohey, 2000), analyses of talk outside of the classroom are less common.

Second, much emerging research on identity and L2 learning addresses technology as a site of language learning, and this trend will likely continue in the future. Lam (2000), for example, who studied the internet correspondence of a Chinese immigrant teenager in the United States who entered into transnational communication with a group of peers, demonstrated how this experience in what she called “textual identity” related to the student’s developing identity in the use of English. In another context, White (2007) investigated innovation in distance language teaching in the Australian context, arguing that attention to issues of identity can enhance our understanding of educational innovation. The research of Kramsch and Thorne (2002) has indicated, however, that not all transnational internet communication leads to positive identity outcomes. In their study of the synchronous and asynchronous communication between American learners of French in the United States and French learners of English in France, they found that students had little understanding of the larger cultural framework within which each party was operating, leading to problematic digital exchanges. Further, as scholars such as Andema (2009), Snyder and Prinsloo (2007), and Warschauer (2003) have noted, much of the digital research on language learning has focused on research in wealthier regions of the world, and there is a great need for research in poorly resourced communities to impact global debates on new technologies, identity, and language learning.

Third, we would argue that an understanding of SLA processes focused on identity would be greatly enriched by research conducted in postcolonial sites where multilingualism is the norm and language acquisition processes can be quite different from immigrant language learning experiences in the north or study abroad contexts. In an article that challenges monolingualist assumptions underlying much of SLA theory, Canagarajah (2007, p. 935) argued that “insights from non-Western communities should inform the current efforts for alternate theory building in our field.” In such multilingual contexts it is unlikely that the term SLA itself is appropriate. As Block (2003, p. 5) has noted, the term “second” doesn’t capture the “experiences of multilinguals who have had contact with three or more languages in their lifetimes.” Recently scholars have called for the field of language education to decolonize English language teaching in particular, and to restore

agency and professionalism in periphery communities (Canagarajah, 2002, 2005, 2007; Higgins, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005; Tembe & Norton, 2008).

To take but one area of focus, postcolonial multilingual contexts have much to contribute to our thinking on processes of identity and language learning (e.g. Makubalo, 2007; McKinney, 2007; Nongogo, 2007). McKinney's study of the language practices of black South African students attending previously white high schools showed the complex self- and other-positioning of black youth in relation to different "brands" of English as well as to the use of local African languages. In a country with 11 official languages, but where English is the language of power, one learner referred to the prestige variety of English as "Louis Vuitton English," illustrating the idea of English as a commodity (p. 14). Despite the accusations aimed at these black students who are acquiring a prestige variety of English that they are becoming white, or the use of derogatory labels such as "coconuts," such students resist these identities and show their awareness of the different kinds of cultural capital carried by varieties of English and local languages. They are clearly appropriating English for their own uses rather than identifying with white L1 speakers of English in their language acquisition processes.

Fourth, the relationship between language, identity, and resistance will become increasingly important in SLA research. In exploring what he called the subversive identities of language learners, Canagarajah (2004) addressed the intriguing question of how language learners can maintain membership in their vernacular communities and cultures while still learning a second language or dialect. He drew on his research with two very different groups, one in the United States and the other in Sri Lanka, to argue that language learners are sometimes ambivalent about the learning of a second language or dialect, and that they may resort to clandestine literacy practices to create "pedagogical safe houses" in the language classroom. In both contexts, the clandestine literacy activities of the students are seen to be forms of resistance to unfavorable identities imposed on the learners. At the same time, however, these safe houses serve as sites of identity construction, allowing students to negotiate the often contradictory tensions they encounter as members of diverse communities.

In sum, we have drawn on a burgeoning body of research to argue that identity is always in process, and that learners often have differential investments in the language practices of their classrooms and communities. Further, we have made the case that the imagined identities and imagined communities of learners are central in the struggle for legitimacy. As language learners in every region of the world claim the right to speak, their identities and investments are now firmly on the SLA agenda.

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