Relational work and identity negotiation in critical post observation teacher feedback

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article responds to the call for more empirical research to further our understanding of how identities are produced and performed in discourse. Data extracts from dyadic post observation feedback meetings between an experienced teacher and two supervisors are analysed. Analysis focuses on the relational work participants do to achieve identities in interaction. Analysis reveals delicate and complex negotiation processes as participants claim, ascribe, challenge, and relinquish local identities. Analysis shows that identities are emergent, relational and co-constructed, and that (im)politeness is an interactional resource used to construct identities. This article extends previous research by comparing interactants' relational work. Analysis of data extracts from two different meetings in which a supervisor points out the same teaching problem (poor instructions) with the same teacher enables a comparison of how identities are achieved. One supervisor uses politeness strategies while the other adopts aggressive and critical behaviour to claim and ascribe the same identities. In both instances the teacher resists but then co-constructs his negative ascribed identity. Within a linguistic ethnographic framework, micro analysis of feedback talk is supplemented with ethnographic interview data to enable a con-textualised examination. Ethnographic data reveal the influence of institutional goals on local identity construction and relational work.

1. Introduction

Discourse is an important locus for the study of identity (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). The rise of post-structuralist theories of language and meaning in recent decades has seen a par-allel shift in the understanding of identity, moving away from a core, essentialist view towards a conceptualisation of identity as emergent and relational (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). This means that rather than a pre-determined, fixed psychological attribute that a person *has*, identity is now seen as active and performative. From this point of view, identity is a verb, something that a person *does* in situated social practices whilst pursuing practical goals (Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Sarangi and Roberts, 1999) i.e. identities are performative (Butler, 1990). One way of performing identities is through so-cial interaction: "identity is constructed, maintained and negotiated to a significant extent through language and discourse" (Varghese et al., 2005: 23). Benwell and Stokoe (2006) note the "enthusiastic use" (p.34) of the term 'discourse' in identity theory, but maintain that empirical studies are rare, with few researchers engaging with actual situated examples of language use. They contend that research overlooks the following questions:

> …**how** exactly are identities discursively produced or performed? What is the process or **mechanism** by which the individual speaker takes up positions in discourse…? (p.35, original emphasis)

This article responds to a call for more empirical research to further our understanding of how identities are negotiated in discourse (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Dobs, 2014; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Locher, 2008) by providing analysis of talk between an in-service English language teacher and two supervisors during post observation feedback meetings.

There is a growing interest in language teacher identity (Barkhuizen, 2017), underpinned by the belief that a better understanding of teacher identities can provide insight into teachers and their practice (Varghese et al., 2005). Much of the research employs interviews (e.g. Liu and Xu, 2011; Trent, 2014) often featuring narratives (e.g. Barkhuizen, 2016; Tsui, 2007). Narratives elicited in research interviews can provide important insight into teachers' identities. However, it is rarely acknowledged that the situated, sequential, and jointly produced talk in interviews can actively constitute and perform teacher identities, and that, as a socio-culturally loaded communicative activity, an interview can shape how participants promote themselves (Rapley, 2001). Identity is co-constructed through engagement and dialogue with others in local contexts (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). As Bucholtz and Hall (2005) point out, identity is relational:

> …identities are never autonomous or independent but always aquire social meaning in relation to other available identity relations and other social actors (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 598)

Haugh (2008) and Miller (2013), for example, demonstrate how an interviewer's contributions play a part in the discursive enactment and negotiation of an interviewee's identity.

This article argues that the field of education should follow the lead of researchers in business and medicine (e.g. Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Holmes et al. 1999; Raymond and Heritage, 2006), and expand the methods used to investigate teacher identity to include analysis of the ways in which teachers negotiate identities during situated institutional interaction. Accordingly, this article examines how identity is discursively accomplished during work-based talk.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Theoretical orientations

This article examines the "interpersonal or relational side of language in use" (Locher and Graham, 2010: 1) and is rooted in the field of pragmatics and in theories of identity and (im)politeness. According to Locher (2008), the use of language for enhancing, maintaining and challenging relationships in interpersonal communication has been described in various ways: as facework (Brown and Levinson, 1987), identity work (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2005), and relational work (Locher and Watts, 2005). This article draws on Locher and Watt's (2005) concept of relational work: "the 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others" (Locher and Watts, 2005: 10). Unlike Brown and Levinson's (1987) view of polite behaviour as cognitive, individualist face threat avoidance at utterance or speech act level, the concept of relational work views politeness as discursive and linked to genre practice norms (Locher and Watts, 2005). Importantly, the concept of relational work also allows examination of the full spectrum of interpersonal linguistic behaviour: polite, appropriate, inappropriate and impolite.

Locher (2008, 2011) proposes merging (im)politeness research with the study of identity, within a postmodernist constructivist orientation. Using Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) framework of identity, Locher (2008) demonstrates the close alignment between relational work and identity. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) define identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (p. 586) and propose a framework consisting of five identity principles. Identity is (1) emergent (i.e. not pre-existing) and is therefore social and cultural. Identity has different dimensions (the (2) positionality principle): macro level demographic categories; local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; temporary and interactionally participant roles (e.g. advice-needer, advice-giver, evaluator). Identities are indexed through linguistic means (the (3) indexicality principle) and are (4) relational i.e. acquire social meaning in relation to other identity positions and social actors. Finally, because identities are relational, they are also (5) partial: deliberate and conscious while also unintentional and habitual; a result of self and others' perceptions and representations while also part of larger ideological and material processes.

Locher et al. (2015) highlight the alignment between Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) conceptualisation of identity and relational work:

> The two research strands on relational work and identity construction can be combined in a straightforward manner since identity is by definition relational and because both approaches emphasize negotiation and emergence (p. 5)

Locher (2008) explicitly links relational work to identity: "relational work refers to the ways in which the construction of identity is achieved in interaction, while identity refers to the 'product' of these linguistic and non-linguistic processes" (p.511). In this article, a close and detailed microanalysis of data extracts from two different one-to-one post observation feedback meetings is carried out, drawing on the concept of relational work by looking at how identities are achieved in interaction.

2.2. Empirical studies

Researchers within the field of pragmatics have highlighted the importance of understanding the connection between identity, face, and politeness (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013; Georgakopoulou, 2013). Despite this, however, the relationship between these phenomena is still unclear (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013). One reason for this may be the limited number of