Language and social identity: an integrationist critique

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ABSTRACT

The concepts of 'native speaker' and 'mother tongue', which attribute to the individual one fixed underlying 'linguistic identity' (or two in the case of bilinguals), are shunned by sociocultural linguists with an interest in group identities, precisely because identities, while being linguistically constructed, are held by the ethnographer to be 'fluid' and never antecedently given. Sociolinguists working on identity within the sociocultural framework have therefore turned their back on any dialectological questions, preferring to focus on how linguistic features may contextually *index* a social identity as part of 'styles' (rather than 'varieties of language'). This paper critically examines the work of two American anthropologists and linguists, Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, from the vantage point of an integrational critique of linguistics (cf. also Pablé and Haas, 2010). The focal point of our critique is the conviction that 'identities', as first-order communicational phenomena, cannot be the object of *scientific empirical research* because this presupposes that indexical values are viewed as micro-contextually determined and available to outsiders with an 'insider view'. The integrationist, in turn, sees 'identity' as a metadiscursive label used by lay speakers to cope with their everyday first-order experience. For the integrationist, this is where identity research begins and ends.

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1. Preliminaries

What is it that we are talking about when enquiring about *social identity*? Representations of *Self* and *Other*? Social displays and positionings? A blurred second-order construct? And more importantly, how can identity be studied 'scientifically', i.e. on the basis of empirical facts? In this article, we shall offer an integrationist critique (Harris, 1998) of how language and identity are theorized and researched within an ethnographically inspired sociolinguistics. We shall argue that 'identity' is taken by the ethnographer to be a *code-based* notion, which presupposes the belief that language is 'coded' too: this is what makes both language and identity observable and describable.[1] Our conviction as integrationists, in turn, is that language and identity are not amenable to scientific description, as sign-making and sign-interpreting are 'private' and cannot be detached from an individual's integrational activities in the *here-and-now* (i.e. how he/she integrates the actual situation with his/her own personal experience).

In our view, 'identity' is first and foremost a linguistic label, and like any other word, it cannot be segregated "from the sequentiality of the rest of our existence", as stipulated by the "principle of cotemporality" (Harris, 1998, pp. 81–82). Moreover, we believe that the notion of a 'social identity' as it is treated in the sociolinguistic literature raises all sorts of onto-

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[1] The term 'linguistic code', as used in this article, refers to the (mistaken) idea that form and meaning/indexical value are determinate, and 'shared'. For us, it does not matter whether the *code* is conceived of as preceding actual communication, or whether en- and *decoding* are contemporaneous with a communicational episode only (and therefore 'fixed' only during that encounter, but not before and after).

logical questions: does a social identity exist independently of speakers, the latter 'acquiring' it via socialization (e.g. through the acquisition of a linguistic code)? Is social identity as 'real' as the linguistic practices themselves? Which one is prior, if at all? In turn, do individuals choose certain social identities, of which they may rid themselves in a later phase of their lives? A likely answer to the latter question would be that one does not choose, say, an 'ethnic identity' (or a 'national identity') – it is imposed upon us by nature or by a state's bureaucratic system; on the other hand, one chooses, say, a 'nerd identity'. Can a speaker display his/her 'ethnic identity' *and* 'nerd identity' at the same time? How does the analyst decide whether the occurrence of a specific linguistic variant in a specific moment reflects the speaker's display of one identity or respectively two identities?[2]

Identities are commonly believed to shift as one shifts code, each shift being potentially meaningful as to which identity a speaker wishes to foreground, as required by a particular situation. When it comes to the much researched phenomenon of *code-switching* an important question that arises is whether speakers, when switching code, actually switch their cultural identity (besides their linguistic identity), or whether the recourse to two codes is precisely their way of expressing *one* cultural identity.[3] If the former alternative is preferred (which is more likely in cases of "metaphorical code-switching" (Blom and Gumperz, 1972)), how is the analyst to establish whether the two codes are 'manifestations of' two *selves* (i.e. two 'authentic' identities) or whether one code may index the voice of *other*, i.e. one identity is merely 'performed'? What is more, it is not clear at all how the concepts of 'native speaker' and 'mother tongue', which attribute to the individual *one* – underlying – *linguistic identity* (or two in the case of bilinguals), can be reconciled with the idea that social identities, while being linguistically constructed, are 'fluid' and never antecedently given. Moreover, should not a micro-group (e.g. 'nerd') identity also have its own micro-linguistic (register-dependent) identity?

2. Social identity and linguistic determinacy

In this section, we should like to direct our critique to a particular sociolinguistic school, known as *sociocultural linguistics*; its proponents work within the framework of an 'ethnography of communication' (Gumperz and Hymes, 1964), and their work is philosophically underpinned by 'social constructionism' (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and methodologically informed by 'practice theory' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The adherents to the *sociocultural* approach to language have reservations concerning the adoption of the traditional 'speech-community model', which they see as too rigid and static (because designed to deal with representatives of macro-social groups), and hence not well-suited for studying *locally shared* and *situationally evoked* identities, which cannot be explained on the basis of either social class, gender, ethnicity, age or education.[4] We shall proceed to discuss, from the vantage point of integrational linguistics, some of the work produced within the sociocultural framework, in fact by the two American linguists and anthropologists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (e.g. Bucholtz, 1999; Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, 2005; Hall and O'Donovan, 1996). Their work deserves attention because (i) Bucholtz and Hall have no sympathy whatsoever towards the notion of 'linguistic code', and because (ii) they advocate a focus on social practices *in general* (linguistic practices being only one among many others). Their positions are, therefore, opposed to the methodology and presuppositions of a Labovian sociolinguistics; at the same time, however, they adopt the Labovian terminology *tel quel* (e.g. *variety of language*, *style*, *superstandard*) to describe how identity manifests itself in language use.[5]

'Practice theory' is said to assign equal importance to the individual and the group, and looks at the combined effects of structure and agency. Social identity is thus seen as "constituted through social action, and especially through language" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 588); it is "intersubjectively produced and interactionally emergent" (587), and "does not precede [discourse]" (607). Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) view is informed by the principle of 'emergence', according to which a *structure* (e.g. a linguistic one) is said to *emerge* in the course of an interaction. While both authors ultimately subscribe, in our opinion, to a view of identity as 'code-given', they also consider other – system-unrelated – forms of linguistic behaviour as manifestations of an identity practice, for instance conversational repair (and self-repair), topic of discussion, and tone of discussion (e.g. jocular, combative, etc.). Bucholtz and Hall's work is informed by two major field studies on practice-induced identities: on the one hand, Kira Hall's research on the so-called *Hijras* (e.g. Hall and O'Donovan, 1996), i.e.

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[2] Depending on the particular communities under scrutiny, some sociolinguists would argue that while a certain linguistic phenomenon (e.g. quotative markers) may index a 'general identity' (e.g. 'youth'), the actual choices (e.g. 'be like', 'be all') index a more 'local identity' (e.g. 'cool girl' vs. 'nerd girl').

[3] In his paper, Hermann (2008) discusses an example showing that multilingual speakers prefer to think of their cultural (ethnic) identity as *one*, despite the use of two codes (irrespective of whether used "situationally" or "metaphorically", in Blom and Gumperz's (1972) terminology): the author quotes a passage from a novel by the Iranian writer Marjaneh Bakhtiari, in which she reports an interview between a Swedish journalist and an Iranian immigrant who has been living in Sweden since her early childhood. Despite the journalist's numerous attempts at convincing her to the contrary, the Swedish-Iranian girl finds it highly disturbing to think of herself as having *two cultures*, which she takes as a sign of schizophrenia. This is not to deny that people may have the impression (or tell others) that they possess a 'hybrid identity' or a 'dual identity', respectively. The view taken in this paper is that the relation between switching code and switching identity is *unanalysable* in scientific terms. The only 'evidence' available is lay speakers' discourses about code-switching.

[4] Included in this critique of a Labovian type of sociolinguistics is the latter's realist position, namely that identities are 'objectively real' (rather than linguistically constructed, and therefore not pertaining to an independently given, and imposed, reality)

[5] That Bucholtz and Hall's work (as everything produced within the 'community of practice framework') is parasitic on 'traditional sociolinguistics' is evident from the following passage: "Such studies [i.e. recent research in linguistic anthropology] indicate that, regardless of how we want to classify any given set of socially meaningful linguistic practices – as "registers", "styles", "varieties", "dialects", or "languages" – indexicality works the same way: In every case, language users both draw on and create conventionalized associations between linguistic form and social meaning to construct their own and others' identities" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004, p. 478). In the abstract of a subsequent article, moreover, one can read the following: "[identities] may be linguistically indexed through [...] *styles*, or *linguistic structures* and *systems*" (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005, p. 585, italics ours).