Self-professional identity construction through other-identity deconstruction in Chinese televised debating discourse

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Abstract

This article is intended to capture self-professional identity construction via other-identity deconstruction in Chinese televised debating discourses. We argue that professional identity construction is the dynamic and interrelational act of enacting, presenting, negotiating, challenging or verifying one's own and others' attributes of professional role, competence and ethics in a specific sociocultural discourse context. In terms of professional knowledge, speakers in televised debates deconstruct their interlocutors' professional identity as nonexpert to construct their own expert identity. In terms of professional role, speakers deconstruct their interlocutors' identity as outsiders stereotyped with negative attributes to construct their own insider identity. In terms of professional ethics, speakers construct an authentic professional identity for themselves by deconstructing their interlocutors' identity into artificial identities, namely crafted identity, problematic identity and fragmented identity. These kinds of 'self-through-other' identity constructions bring to light the interrelationality of self-identity construction and other-identity deconstruction. We have developed Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) principles of identity construction: (1) interactants' multiple self-attributes are not preexisting but emergent in the ongoing debating interactions, and interactants make salient/latent self- and other-attributes to construct different identities at different points of the same interaction; (2) identity construction is not only a relational but also an interrelational phenomenon, and should be addressed by an interrelational approach that captures ways of constructing self-through-other identity and other-through-self identity. Our analyses have also developed Van Dijk's (2000) principles of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation: Interactants highlight negative other-identity attributes not simply as a goal in and of itself, but as a self-through-other means of optimizing positive self-identity construction.
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1. Introduction

In daily communication, interlocutors not only convey information but also construct a self-identity or image (Goffman, 1967). We argue that speakers can construct and deconstruct, project and hide, and affirm and negate self- and other-identity in interaction for a wide range of extralinguistic purposes. Our study attempts to categorize the types of self-professional identity construction through other-identity deconstruction in Chinese televised debating discourses.

The pragmatic study of professional identity construction has been enlightened by studies taking a psychological approach (Schein, 1978; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Boswood, 1999; Ibarra, 1999) and a discourse analysis

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approach (Davies and Harré, 1990; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; van Dijk, 2000; Bamberg, 2004; Georgakopoulou, 2007). The many definitions of professional identity found in psychological studies can inform pragmatic studies. For instance, Ibarra (1999) defines professional identity as one's professional self-concept based on attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences. Boswood (1999:115) argues that a professional communicates in accordance with 'a standard of excellency that is exemplary within a field'. Such professional excellency involves three elements: (1) specific knowledge that is pertinent to a given profession, (2) the necessary skills and (3) the responsible use of such knowledge and skills (professional ethics). These conceptualizations help us draw out the main attributes of professional identity from a pragmatic perspective. Following Spencer-Oatey (2007), the term 'identity' in our study is defined as a person's self-image, consisting of multiple self-attributes, including negatively, neutrally and positively evaluated characteristics. In this vein, professional identity is taken as one's professional image, consisting of such attributes as professional role, professional competence and professional ethics. Our study will focus on how self-professional identity is dynamically constructed by deconstructing other-identity in televised debating discourse. To that end, we will address identity construction taking a socioconstructivist approach (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; De Fina et al., 2006; Spencer-Oatey, 2007), which argues that identity is locally and culturally situated and interpreted (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; De Fina et al., 2006), relationally produced and interactionally emergent (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005; Locher et al., 2015). Based on Simon's (2004) definition of identity as one's self-concept about multiple attributes or characteristics, Spencer-Oatey (2007) emphasizes that all self-aspects or attributes, no matter whether they are construed in terms of individual, relational or collective identities, are both cognitive and social in nature. On the one hand, people form cognitive representations of which they are that are relatively stable and enduring. On the other hand, they also construct and negotiate their identities through social interaction. They not only enact elements of their personal, relational and collective selves through the process of social interaction, but they also negotiate and construct them, with the result that identities develop and emerge through interaction. We take this view as it relates to professional identity, arguing that people not only display various aspects of their professional identity but also construct and negotiate them in different social interactions. Even within the same interaction, interactants present or enact at different points particular elements of their professional identities—organizational affiliation, professional status and authority, among others (see Holmes and Marra, 2005). In our study, we will focus on how self-professional identity is relationally and dynamically constructed via deconstructing other-identity in televised debates in terms of enacting and negotiating such aspects as professional role, competence and ethics. We argue that professional role refers to one's social category or status in work settings and can be considered one dynamic aspect of professional identity. Professional identity can be constructed through role performance or enactment in a particular social interaction (see Sarangi, 2010; Halvorsen and Sarangi, 2015). For instance, a professor has a professional role as either a supervisor of students or an assessor of their dissertations, or a collaborative researcher, or a peer reviewer in different settings; professors can enact or perform different roles or role-sets, leading to different outcomes of their professional identity construction. In televised debating discourse, participants often enact, negotiate or verify the components or aspects of their professional identity and thus (de)construct their professional identity. In our study, to be more specific, constructing self-identity refers to building and enhancing one's own identity while deconstructing other-identity refers to negating and demeaning other-identity via positioning the other as having an identity not consistent with the professional/expert identity the other has claimed in terms of professional role, competence and ethics.

Discourse analysis studies have contributed to our understanding of professional identity construction in various discourses (Holmes, 2006; Iyer, 2009; Baxter and Wallace, 2009; Iyer, 2009; Sznycer, 2010), especially in TV debates and discussion programs. For instance, Kotthoff (1993) demonstrates the preference structures of disagreement and concession in disputes, providing us with insights into the way disputes and debates work interactionally. This leads us to consider how people negotiate their positions and identities in debates and how this changes the local context of the interaction. Regarding discourse analysis as it is applied to understanding professional identity construction, a dimension of central interest is the discursive representation of 'us' (in-groups) and 'them' (out-groups), which may be accomplished by using an underlying strategy of 'positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation' (van Dijk, 2000:44):

– Say positive things about Us
– Say negative things about Them

This strategy not only represents a very general characteristic of group conflict and the ways we interact with opposed groups, but also characterizes the way we talk about ourselves and others (van Dijk, 2000:44). This strategy captures the general trend of constructing self-identity but does not further present the relationship between self-identity construction (by saying positive things about 'Us') and other-identity deconstruction (by saying negative things about 'Them') in interactions. In our study, we will focus on how speakers build up their own positive professional image via challenging the professional competence or diminishing the credibility of their opponents in the debating discourse.