



Language variation and ethnic identity: A social psychological perspective



Kimberly A. Noels

Department of Psychology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2E9, Canada

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ABSTRACT

In the interest of promoting discussion between sociolinguists and social psychologists, this paper offers a social psychological perspective on some of the themes surrounding ethnicity and language that are raised by the authors of the papers in this issue. I present three psychological approaches to ethnic identity and suggest how each of these theoretical models might lead to different research questions regarding the relation between language and ethnicity. I also suggest some caveats regarding the use of self-reports of ethnic identity, particularly quantitative responses to closed-ended questions, that research on language and ethnicity suggests we should be attentive to. I conclude with some discussion of how social psychological and sociolinguistic researchers might jointly advance understanding of the link between ethnicity and language, particularly through a more fully articulated analysis of the “social context”.

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1. Introduction

The relation between language and ethnicity has long interested sociolinguists and social psychologists alike. Variations in linguistic patterns are argued to be influenced by speakers' ethnicities, and, in a reciprocal fashion, language use has been suggested to create and substantiate ethnicity. It is perhaps fair to say, however, that each of these disciplines has tended to centre its analytic focus on different sides of the language–ethnicity relation. As a psychologist who often finds herself sitting in a liminal position between social/cultural psychology, on the one hand, and applied/sociolinguistics on the other, I would like to see even greater rapprochement between these disciplines which share a common pursuit, if not passion. It seems to me that the windows provided by other disciplines can widen our own field of vision. For a long time, social psychologists have pondered the self in its social context, but for some reason, with only a small group of exceptions (see [Robinson and Giles, 2001](#) for an overview), they have paid little attention to the language and communication processes that are the glue that holds the “social context” together. I can't speak with as much confidence about how sociolinguists could benefit from a social psychological perspective, but it seems to me that some of the social psychological discussion about the social factors that sociolinguists use to account for language variation would be relevant to their endeavours, and perhaps inspire new avenues for reflection and research. Moreover, I assume that all of our research would be richer by sharing our methodological approaches so that we have a wider diversity of analytical tools to answer a broader range of questions regarding the relation between language and ethnicity.

As a point of departure for this interdisciplinary dialogue, I will discuss some social psychological issues that the papers in the present issue raise in my mind. To begin, I wish to give a psychological perspective on ethnic orientation, and in so doing, provide sociolinguists with an understanding of some of the issues that many psychologists are dealing with as they work in this area, and highlight some of the theoretical and methodological implications of these issues for studying the interplay

E-mail address: knoels@ualberta.ca

between language and ethnicity. I also try to flag some of the aspects of sociolinguistic research that are raised by the authors of the papers in this issue that I think social psychologists would do well to consider. I conclude with what I feel are important directions for future social psychological and sociolinguistic research on the topic of ethnicity and language use.

2. The landscape of ethnic identity research in psychology

Researchers across a variety of sub-fields in psychology have addressed the issue of ethnic orientation, which I define here as a loosely connected cluster of thoughts, feelings and behaviours pertaining to a person's orientation towards their ancestral ethnic group and/or any other relevant ethnic group. The focus of this discussion of ethnic orientation will be on ethnic identity, as increasingly scholars in both social psychology and sociolinguistics are drawing on notions of the self and identity to account for language practices and/or suggest how language practices constitute the self and identity. Broadly, I refer to ethnic identity as a speaker's construction of a sense of self within her/his social world that pertains to ethnic group membership. Based on their systematic review of studies in various readily available academic databases, [Leets et al. \(1996\)](#) found that early work tended to assess ethnicity through researcher-ascribed social characteristics and categories defined along the lines used in governmental censuses, including religious background, national origin, native language, and so on. Over the decades, however, researchers have come to see problems with assuming homogeneity within such large categories and with assuming that there is a necessary correspondence between ascribed categories and self-reports of identity. It is now common practice for ethnic identity to be assessed through subjective assessments of personal experience (but see [Devos, 2006](#)).

For this paper, I will concentrate on quantitative indices of ethnic identity because there seems to be an interest in using such measures among several of the authors of the papers in this issue. Quantitative self-reports usually involve explicitly responding to a series of statements according to an interval scale (usually ranging from 5 to 9 points to allow for relatively nuanced assessments) that reflects the degree to which the participant endorses that statement regarding identity. Quantitative data offer some benefits for concisely documenting social and psychological constructs, and lend themselves well to statistical analysis of the relations between language and social variables. When well designed, they can also provide valuable information that is useful for comparison across data sets from different studies. That said, I wish to underscore that such data are only appropriate for answering certain questions, and that I believe that any account of the relation between ethnicity and identity would be most complete when this methodological approach is used alongside qualitative methods (which are also used in the research reported in this issue).

There are at least three subfields within psychology that address ethnicity and ethnic identity. This wide-spread interest has yielded a range of theoretical and empirical work on the psychology of ethnicity, but regrettably it is often the case that researchers across these subdisciplines have little interaction and are unfamiliar with the conceptual frameworks and research findings of the other. Although ethnic identity is recognized to be a subjective experience, researchers differ in their conceptual and operational characterizations of identity. In their review of collective identity, [Ashmore et al. \(2004\)](#) emphasized that identity is a multi-faceted construct that includes self-categorization, evaluation, importance, attachment, a sense of interdependence, social embeddedness, behavioural involvement, content and meaning. Although Ashmore and his colleagues suggest that all of these aspects should be included in assessments of identity, theoretical and practical considerations often guide researchers to focus on a narrower subset.

Perhaps most widely known among sociolinguists is the work of social psychologists such as Howard Giles, whose theories of communication accommodation and ethnolinguistic identity account for language and identity variation from an intergroup perspective (e.g., [Sachdev et al., 2012](#)). From this standpoint, ethnolinguistic identity is one kind of social identity, defined as “that part of the individuals' self-concept that derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” ([Tajfel, 1981, p. 255](#)). Following this definition, [Cameron's \(2004\)](#) measure of social identity reflects a tripartite model including: (1) the centrality or the importance of the identity to one's sense of self (e.g., “I often think about the fact that I am a member of my ethnic group”); (2) affect, or one's sense of esteem associated with this membership (e.g., “Generally, I feel good when I think about myself as a member of my ethnic group”); and (3), ties or a sense of connectedness to the group (e.g., “I have a lot in common with other members of my ethnic group”). These kinds of dimensions have been shown to differentially relate to aspects of intergroup relations, including experiences of prejudice and discrimination and well-being ([Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992](#); [Zhang and Noels, 2012](#)), and in a parallel manner we might think that some are more or less relevant to language use, as will be discussed further below.

Developmental and counselling psychologists have also been interested in ethnic identity, particularly as it relates to ethnic minority group members' well-being, but they articulate quite different identity constructs than do social identity theorists. Drawing from [Erikson's \(1950, 1968\)](#) theory of psychosocial development and its extension by [Marcia \(1966\)](#), developmental psychologists maintain that identity issues become highly salient during adolescence, a period during which many people are hypothesized to undergo a process of exploration to better understand who they are within their social world. This so-called “moratorium” for identity exploration is followed by commitment to a particular identity, signalling the achievement of a mature identity. To capture the dynamics of this developmental theory, [Phinney and Ong \(2007\)](#) devised a measure that taps ethnic identity exploration (e.g., “I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions and customs”) and ethnic identity commitment (e.g., “I feel a strong attachment to my ethnic

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