Part I

Perspectives on language and identity
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Introduction

Language and identity is a topic in which contemporary perspectives cannot be neatly separated from historical ones. Identity, even in the here and now, is grounded in beliefs about the past: about heritage and ancestry, and about belonging to a people, a place, a set of beliefs and a way of life. Of the many ways in which such belonging is signified, what language a person speaks, and how he or she speaks it, rank among the most powerful, because it is through language that people and places are named, heritage and ancestry recorded and passed on, and beliefs developed and ritualised.

No language exists in a homogeneous or unchanging form. It is through variation that the identity of individuals is indexed and interpreted: who they are, what they care about and like, and what they aspire to. Such indexing can have both positive and negative consequences. The evolution of sounds, words and grammatical forms has been a history of changes that started small, in some particular town or village, and spread out through contact with people from other towns and villages. Even now, the development of mass communication has not put an end to local differences in language use, so that how people speak indexes where they are from. Even in a given locale, different generations speak somewhat differently; and other cultural differences, including religious or sectarian ones, and those associated with gender, occupation or education, are indexed as well. Because change does not occur in wholesale fashion, it results in something like layers of time in a language. Any members of the younger generation who resist some new word or pronunciation or intonation used by their age mates, sticking instead to the way their grandparents speak, are likely to have this difference interpreted by others as signifying something deeper about their identity.

This chapter aims to consider historical perspectives in two senses: the perspectives that are embodied within identity itself and the conceptual history of their study. Besides approaching language and identity theoretically and historically, the chapter will focus on how such an approach relates to issues of concern to applied linguistics.

Identities are manifested in language as, first, the categories and labels that people attach to themselves and others to signal their belonging; second, as the indexed ways of speaking and
behaving through which they perform their belonging; and third, as the interpretations that others make of those indices. The ability to perceive and interpret the indices is itself part of shared culture. No group can be culturally homogeneous. The urge to tribalise is too deeply rooted in human nature, indeed in animal behaviour generally, which testifies to how deep it runs in our evolutionary heritage. So, for instance, within Christian or Muslim religious identity, there are various ways of ‘being Christian’ and ‘being Muslim’; in other words, a variety of Christian and Islamic cultural identities. They are subsumed under the umbrella of a religious identity that itself admits of variants, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, Sunni and Shia, and within the latter, Sufis, each with their distinctive practices and texts, even if most of their central beliefs are shared.

Cultural identities rarely carry great imaginative power unless they are textualised as national or racial/ethnic identities. Religious identities can be forceful, but they tend as well to take on a national or quasi-national dimension, as is currently the case with Islamic State. People do not go to war for other aspects of their culture the way they willingly die for their fatherland or their people, or other ‘imagined communities’ which they perceive as being naturally constituted, rather than just arbitrary, contingent cultural constructs (Anderson 1991). And yet, it is not provable that any race or nation is a ‘natural’ entity; all are at least partly constructed, and at the same time, as Bateson (1995) has pointed out, ‘Everything is natural.’ Gender identities might seem to be directly linked to the physical configuration of reproductive organs; and yet, people are readier to accept that an individual is a woman trapped in a man’s body, or vice versa, than they are that someone is a Japanese trapped in an Ethiopian’s body.

Overview

From earliest recorded history to the present day, reflection on language has included (and has at times been dominated by) ideas concerning the link between a particular language and the people who speak it. These ideas form an initial dichotomy:

1. That the language a people speaks is not connected in any significant way to the nature of the people who speak it;
2. That the language a people speaks plays a crucial role in making them a people.

Idea (1) had its most powerful champion in Aristotle, who believed that all human beings share the same mental experiences, which get coded differently in the words of different languages but without affecting the experiences themselves. Already in Antiquity however a version of (2) was maintained by Epicurus, who argued that the shapes of people’s bodies, varying by their ethnicity, caused them to expel air differently, and that this combined with the effects of their environment shaped their languages in profoundly distinct ways. It was the revival of Platonic and Epicurean thought from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, removing Aristotle from his unique position as ‘The Philosopher’, that brought about what is known as the Renaissance, and gave rise to modern versions of (2), which, graded from weakest to strongest, include:

2a. That the language plays a purely pragmatic role: the simple fact of its being shared binds a people together, regardless of the internal form of the language;
2b. That the particular form or ‘genius’ of their shared language reflects what distinguishes the people who speak it from other people;
2c. That the particular form or genius of their shared language has endowed them with their distinct nature or genius as a people.
The difference between (2b) and (2c) is that ‘reflecting’ implies that something physical or spiritual in the people’s nature, other than their language, is the cause, and the genius of the language is the effect (this would include Epicurus’s view); whereas ‘endowing’ means that the genius of the language is the cause, and the nature of the people is the effect.

When linguistics was established as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, it was built over a fault line between the Enlightenment conception of a language as a system of rational signs (compatible with 1 and 2a), and the Romantic conception of a language as a Weltanschauung, a deep, spiritual vision of the universe that embodies the essence of a particular nation or race (compatible with 2b and 2c). The Enlightenment took linguistic signs to be grounded in the senses, and hence to have a universal basis, but with the signs of particular languages being ultimately arbitrary. For the Romantics, language originates in the senses, as they are directed by the national soul, to which it remains bound.

Idea (2a) in the list above has been referred to by Sériot (2014) as the ‘Jacobin’ approach, since its most overtly worked-out theorisation and application has been in France, from the seventeenth century through the French Revolution and down to the present day. The Jacobin outlook assumes that creating a shared language is the necessary and sufficient condition for producing a nation out of the sometimes distantly related peoples who live in a contiguous landscape.

Idea (2c) in the list is what Sériot calls the ‘Romantic’ approach, in which the nation comes first, in the form of a shared soul, out of which the language is projected. Neither the Jacobin nor the Romantic approach lacks precedents from before the eighteenth century; they have an ancient heritage. But the lands that would come in 1871 to form Germany were, a hundred years earlier, a nation without a state. This was in stark contrast to France, which had become a relatively united kingdom in the seventeenth century. It was when Napoleonic France began its imperial drive eastward that the concept of German nationhood came to be aggressively asserted, with the shared German language as its cornerstone. As Sériot (2014: 258) writes, ‘For German romantics, language was the essence of the nation, while for French revolutionaries, it was a means to achieve national unity.’

The Romantic view of language was dominant by the time modern linguistics began to crystallise as an academic discipline in the first half of the nineteenth century, though the Jacobin alternative continued to be the principle on which French language policy was formed, both domestically and overseas. Nor did the Jacobin view ever disappear from public discourse about language, even in countries where policy was more Romantically inclined. The Enlightenment/Jacobin concern with signs was reincorporated into modern linguistics with the highly influential Saussure (1916).

These two diametrically opposed views encapsulate the tension and ambivalence inherent in how we think about language and identity. Although no polls have been taken, it seems likely that most of us espouse one or the other view depending on the circumstances. If we believe it is important for the chance to learn a second language to be part of every child’s education, it may be for a combination of Jacobin reasons (civic coherence in a multilingual country, for example) and Romantic ones (the belief that you cannot understand how other people think without learning their language, or that you cannot understand your own thought without the perspective on your mother tongue a second language affords).

All this leaves idea (2b) in the list above with a peculiar status. It is very widespread, perhaps more than any of the others, yet it is ambiguous. For some it represents a strong version of (2a), for others a weak version of (2c). It is also bound up with the role of what can broadly be called the ‘literary’ in national identity. Until universal education became widespread,
starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, the linguistic dimension of national identity was already important, but, figuratively speaking, it floated above the daily life and concerns of the vast majority. Across Europe and Western Asia, the commonly inhabited linguistic reality was that of local vernacular dialect plus liturgical language. Either might be distantly related to the national language, if there was one, or even unrelated, as will be discussed in the next section.

Language and identity research has tended to take the links between the two to be constructed intersubjectively and context-contingently. Each of these terms requires some unpacking. ‘Constructed’ stands in opposition to ‘essential’: the identities a person has (or occupies) are understood not as unchanging, inescapable, determinate categories, but as categories which are potentially fluid and fuzzy, and which the person occupying them does not control. Rather, they are constructed ‘intersubjectively’, which is to say among the participants in a linguistic encounter. I am having a linguistic encounter at this moment with you, my reader; I cannot control the version of me that you construct in your mind based on how I write. There are as many versions of my identity as there are readers of my text, and the same is true of people with whom I have face-to-face linguistic encounters. There, however, my way of speaking is likely to adjust based on the cues I am getting from them moment by moment, whereas in writing I have to imagine an ideal reader. The ‘subjectively’ part means that you, as reader, are not an object, passively having my message poured into you. You are actively co-constructing the meaning of this text, as a subject.

‘Context-contingently’ means that the same people will co-construct different identities for one another depending on the circumstances, even if the linguistic indices are (abstracted from the circumstances) the same. Forensic linguists have to perform that sort of abstraction; for them it is a problem that ‘context’ is potentially limitless. Researchers in language and identity, while not denying that forensic linguistics has its uses, will worry that such ‘objective’ data as it purports to turn up will always be dependent on that abstracting, which removes the data from the reality of context.

Modern linguistics has moved slowly but steadily toward embracing the identity function as central to language (for an overview, see Joseph 2004). The impediment has been the dominance of the traditional outlook, which takes representation alone to be essential, with even communication relegated to a secondary place. This outlook was never the only one available, however, and when early twentieth-century linguists such as Jespersen (1925) and Sapir (1927, 1933) came to investigate how language functions to define and regulate the role of the individual within the social unit at the same time as it helps to constitute that unit, they were not without predecessors. It was just that mainstream linguistics as it had developed within the nineteenth century was not inclined to see such questions as falling within its purview.

An important study by Labov (1963) looked at the dialect of English on Martha’s Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts, where the diphthongs in words like right and house are pronounced as [əyt] and [əws] rather than the standard [ay] and [aw]. This feature is not found in the dialects of the mainlanders who ‘summer’ on Martha’s Vineyard, and with whom the Vineyarders (year-round residents) have a complex relationship of dependency and resentment. ‘It is apparent that the immediate meaning of this phonetic feature is “Vineyarder”. When a man says [rayt] or [haws], he is unconsciously establishing the fact that he belongs to the island: that he is one of the natives to whom the island really belongs’ (Labov 1963: 307). This is very much the sort of analysis of the effect of linguistic identity on language form that would characterise work in the 1990s and since, though it would be sidelined in the mid-1960s by the statistical charting of variation and change.
In the meantime, one particular identity focus – gender – led the way in directing attention to the reading of identity in language (discussed further in the next section). As the notion of separate men’s and women’s language was accepted, the more general notion of the language–identity link was let in through the back door, leaving the way open for the study of group identities of all sorts beyond those national and ethnic ones traditionally associated with language difference. This was a challenge to a sociolinguistics that had been primarily concerned with class differences (see Block, this volume). By the mid-1980s, this shift was under way in the work of, for example, Gumperz (1982), Edwards (1985) and Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), though it was really in the 1990s that it would come to occupy the mainstream of work in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. (For a small but representational sample of studies see, on the sociological end, Fishman 1999; on the anthropological, Schieffelin et al. 1998; in discourse analysis, Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Wodak et al. 2009; and in applied linguistics, Block 2009; Norton 2013.)

This work also received significant input from social psychology, where one approach in particular needs to be singled out: Social Identity Theory, developed in the early 1970s by Henri Tajfel. In the years following his death in 1982, it came to be the single most influential model for analysing linguistic identity. Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’. Within this simple definition are embedded at least five positions which in their time were quite revolutionary: that social identity pertains to an individual rather than to a social group; that it is a matter of self-concept, rather than of social categories into which one simply falls; that the fact of membership is the essential thing, rather than anything having to do with the nature of the group itself; that an individual’s own knowledge of the membership, and the particular value they attach to it – completely ‘subjective’ factors – are what count; and that emotional significance is not some trivial side effect of the identity belonging but an integral part of it.

Partly under the influence of such work, sociolinguists were beginning to reorient their own object of investigation. Milroy (1980) reported data from studies she conducted in Belfast showing that the ‘social class’ of an individual did not appear to be the key variable allowing one to make predictions about which forms of particular linguistic variables the person would use. Rather, the key variable was the nature of the person’s ‘social network’, a concept borrowed from sociology which Milroy defined as ‘the informal social relationships contracted by an individual’ (Milroy 1980: 174). Where close-knit localised network structures existed, there was a strong tendency to maintain non-standard vernacular forms of speech, a tendency difficult to explain in a model such as Labov’s (1966), based on a scale of ‘class’ belonging where following norms of standard usage marked one as higher on the hierarchy and entitled to benefits that most people desire. Labov’s early work on Martha’s Vineyard had suggested that the answer lay in identity, specifically in the value of belonging to a group who, although not highly placed in socio-economic terms, could nevertheless claim something valuable for themselves (in the Martha’s Vineyard case, authenticity). Milroy’s book provided statistical backing for such an explanation.

Although the inner workings of the social network depend somewhat on amount of personal contact, the essential thing is that its members share norms. As attention turned to understanding the nature of these norms, two much publicised views had an impact. Fish (1980) had devised the concept of the ‘interpretive community’ to account for the norms of reading whereby people evaluate different readings of the same text as valid or absurd. An interpretive community is a group sharing such a set of norms; its members may never come into direct physical contact.
with one another, yet share norms spread by the educational system, books or the media. Soon after, Anderson (1991 [1983]) proposed a new understanding of the ‘nation’ as an ‘imagined community’, whose members, like that of the interpretive community, will never all meet one another let alone have the sort of regular intercourse that creates a ‘network’. What binds them together is the shared belief in the membership in the community.

Notably with the work of Eckert, sociolinguistic investigation of groups ideologically bound to one another shifted from statistically based examination of social networks to more interpretative examination of ‘communities of practice’, defined as ‘an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor’ (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464). In the course of this endeavour there emerge shared beliefs, norms and ideologies, including though not limited to linguistic and communicative behaviour. The advantage of the community-of-practice concept is its openness – any aggregate of people can be held to constitute one, so long as the analyst can point convincingly to behaviour that implies shared norms, or, better still, elicit expression of the underlying ideologies from members of the community. This line of research is thus continuous with another one that has focused more directly on the normative beliefs or ideologies by which national and other group identities are maintained. Some early work along these lines was published in Wodak (1989) and Joseph and Taylor (1990), and subsequently a great deal more has appeared, e.g. in Brice-Heath and McLaughlin (1993), Blommaert (1999), Verschueren (1999) and Kroskrity (2000).

Other features of recent work on language and identity include the view that identity is something constructed rather than essential, and performed rather than possessed – features which the term ‘identity’ itself tends to mask, suggesting as it does something singular, objective and reified. Each of us performs a repertoire of identities that are constantly shifting, and that we negotiate and renegotiate according to the circumstances. Very influential in this respect was the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman, whose doctoral research in the Shetland Islands in the late 1940s led him to the view that

The human tendency to use signs and symbols means that evidence of social worth and of mutual evaluations will be conveyed by very minor things, and these things will be witnessed, as will the fact that they have been witnessed. An unguarded glance, a momentary change in tone of voice, an ecological position taken or not taken, can drench a talk with judgmental significance. Therefore, just as there is no occasion of talk in which improper impressions could not intentionally or unintentionally arise, so there is no occasion of talk so trivial as not to require each participant to show serious concern with the way he handles himself and the others present.

(Goffman 1955: 225)

The ‘structure of the self’ as presented in speech, the persona, was what Goffman was developing the analytical tools to describe in a way that would be acceptable within the scientific rhetoric of sociologists. He found that the concept of ‘face’, which Western cultures generally associated with those of East Asia, was actually necessary for understanding human interaction in any culture. Identity and face have much in common. Each is an imagining of the self, or of another, within a public sphere involving multiple actors. Yet they have come into language and discourse research from different directions, and this difference in their origins has led researchers to frame them in such a way that they seem no more than tangentially related to one another.
Identity relates classically to who individuals are, understood in terms of the groups to which they belong, including nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, generation, sexual orientation, social class and an unlimited number of other possibilities. Face, on the other hand, relates classically to exchanges between or among individuals; more specifically, in the view of Goffman (1967: 5), ‘during a particular contact’. There has been, in other words, a fundamental distinction drawn between how the two concepts relate to time, with face as a punctual phenomenon and identity as a durative one. This is not to say that an individual’s behaviour in terms of face is devoid of consistency, or that face work does not have enduring consequences, but simply that we tend to think of face as something that becomes relevant in interactions. By the same token, a person’s awareness of his or her identity may lie below the surface until a particular contact creates a tension that brings it to the fore; yet it has classically been conceived of as a property of the person. The definitions of both face and identity have however been problematised in work of the last decade (see Joseph 2013a).

It is important not to lose sight of the dual sense of identity as something we take to have an essential (but ungraspable) reality, yet recognise as being constructed based on perceptions that are only partial. The temptation to assume that all identity is always freely constructed is strong, but deceptive. Blommaert, taking inspiration from Wallerstein’s (1998) world-systems approach, has argued for applying the metaphor of ‘scales’ in relation to sociolinguistic agency, where the metaphor refers to maps drawn at different scales (see Blommaert 2007, 2010). An act of identity that may feel like wholly a matter of free choice on the individual scale can appear quite different when viewed on the broader institutional or cultural scale, where the social structures that may have guided the choice are rendered more visible than on the scale of the individual act.

So far, I have given an overview of the historical perspectives of language and identity. The next section samples five areas of current research on language and identity that impinge upon the concerns of applied linguistics, and considers their historical background.

**Issues and ongoing debates**

The five areas in this section have significant overlaps: it is impossible to consider language standardisation, for instance, separately from mother tongue, or to divide religious language neatly from heritage. But distinct lines of research are identifiable for each of the areas. They are by no means the only ones that might have been chosen. It would be difficult to find an aspect of applied linguistics in which no identity issues arise; and every aspect of applied linguistics, indeed of linguistics generally, gains in richness and insight when examined in a time-depth perspective.

**Gender and sexual orientation identity**

Besides national, racial/ethnic, religious and social-class identities, gender and sexual orientation are powerfully indexed in language. In many instances, they interact with social-class identity in a way that is related to historical change. Since the 1970s, it has been a regular finding in sociolinguistic research that women are more linguistically conservative than men. In that same period, certain characteristic features of ‘women’s language’ were identified as indexing powerlessness. Lakoff (1973) argued that, in both structure and use, languages mark out an inferior social role for women and bind them to it. Gender politics is incorporated directly into the pronoun systems of English and many other languages, through the use of the masculine as the
‘unmarked’ gender (as in ‘Everyone take his seat’). Lakoff points to features that occur more frequently in women’s than in men’s English, such as tag questions, hedges, intensifiers and pause markers, which as marks of insecurity and of the role women are expected to occupy are fundamental to maintaining the status quo in gender politics.

Yet in the four decades since, those features have become a regular part of both men’s and women’s speech. This suggests that in fact the women studied in the earlier reports were being linguistically innovative – the opposite of conservative. It may nevertheless be true that their innovative features were being interpreted by other speakers as indexing powerlessness; but whether this was a direct indexation, or indirect via education, socio-economic status, etc., is not known.

Over these same four decades the study of gender identity in language has meanwhile moved on, as witnessed in the work of such scholars as Cameron (1992) and Butler (1997), who shifted the perspective to a more radically feminist direction. Within sociolinguistics, the studies collected in Erlich et al. (2014) present a good range of second-generation gender identity research. Investigations of sexual-orientation identity in language have flourished in parallel with gender studies. Gay identities have tended to be interpreted in terms of the indices established for male and female heterosexual identities and, since male homosexual acts were illegal for much of history and remain so in parts of the world, these identities are also linked to ‘secret’ codes and indices meant to be interpretable by insiders to the identity but indecipherable to outsiders (see Baker 2002). Here again, this area has been developing more autonomy in its methodology and conceptual modelling in recent years (see Cameron and Kulick 2003; Bucholtz and Hall 2004; Erlich et al. 2014).

**Religious identity**

Religious identity has been second only to national identity in shaping modern history, as civil wars from Ireland to the former Yugoslavia to the Middle East have shown all too bloodily (for good representative studies see Omoniyi and Fishman 2006; Omoniyi 2010). To complete the picture that Sériot has sketched of the national language as an administrative or a cultural concept, we need to add what were the liturgical languages, and the everyday vernaculars, in use at a particular place and time. So for example in parts of the Holy Roman Empire the liturgical language was Latin and the ‘national’ language German, while the people spoke Hungarian dialects with no historical affinity to either. In the part of the Ottoman Empire that my paternal family inhabited, the vernacular was a local form of Arabic and the ‘national’ language was a multilingual complex involving Turkish, Persian and a type of Arabic that my relatives might not need to have translated but at least mediated for them. The liturgical language situation was very complex indeed, given the presence of some 20 Christian sects and a smaller number of Muslim ones. For the majority the liturgical language was Syriac, distantly related to Arabic, but substantial segments of the population used Greek, Aramaic, Latin and other tongues. Muslims were united by their liturgical use of Koranic Arabic, within the Ottoman Empire and beyond, across India to China and Indonesia. In areas of the highlands of Scotland where the vernacular was Gaelic, the ‘national’ language was English, so distantly related to Gaelic that the relationship was not agreed on by linguists until about 1840, and the liturgical language was Latin for Roman Catholics, Gaelic for some Protestants and English for others. In all these cases, each of the languages served an identity function, in terms of social caste, sectarian commitment and education.
Language standardisation

With few exceptions, the liturgical languages discussed in the preceding section have been either languages of the distant past, or living languages used in a conservative form, often preserving archaic features such as the *thy* and *art* of the Lord’s Prayer in English. In this way, the history of the language is incorporated into its contemporary use. The same is true, if to a lesser degree, of the ‘standard’ language, that version of the national language that is taught and examined in schools. Its purpose is essentially to resist innovation, or at least to slow it down; and to allow students to be hierarchised according to their ability and willingness to master the largely arbitrary rules controlling which aspects of their everyday speech are not acceptable in the standard language, written or spoken. Here again the resistance to innovation means that it is the past of the language being incorporated into its present (standard) state, and indexing users of the standard form as educated and – although this is entirely fallacious – as more intelligent than non-standard speakers. This applies as much to mother-tongue speakers of the language in question as to those for whom it is a second language; Joseph (1987) details why it is that the standard language, as an artefact of writing and education, is no one’s ‘native language’.

Use of the standard language is especially bound up with social-class identity, which is inherently historical in the sense that it is built on a recognition of the fact that we read (correctly or incorrectly) each other’s pedigrees and personal histories from the indices that we perceive and interpret in other people’s language. It was a concern with social class that was behind the research of the 1960s and 70s that brought sociolinguistics to prominence as an academic field. In those days, when academic linguistics, even in the USA, was heavily dominated by Marxist thought, it was taken as read that pre-revolutionary societies were divided into a capitalist ruling class and the workers, with the various intermediate bourgeois layers all serving the interests of the ruling class, although despised and ridiculed by them for their inclination to climb the social ladder. Ross’s (1954) division of U and non-U was that between the aristocracy and the middle class, providing each with a catalogue of linguistic features to avoid or adopt. His categories mirrored the concerns of a particular segment of the British reading public of the time. In the USA, inherited aristocracy might be identified with a few families, but there was a considerable class of descendants of men who had earned great fortunes, and who might be called ‘upper-middle class’, except that their standing did not accord with that of the European aristocrats – so ‘upper-middle class’ seemed more appropriate to them.

Labov’s (1966) analyses were based on a four-way division into lower class, working class, lower-middle and upper-middle class; by the 1970s, he would rebrand the first two as lower-lower and upper-lower, and would shift his focus from class to race. From the start he recognised the difficulty of determining where class boundaries lay, and put considerable effort into developing a ‘socio-economic scale’ which however could capture only part of what ‘class’ was about, since a penniless aristocrat still belongs to his class, and a factory worker who wins the lottery might give up his job and rise to middle-class status, but without wishing or being able to shed the linguistic and other behavioural indices of his working-class belonging. Labov’s interests were always very much focused on historical linguistics, and he demonstrated how change over time is synchronically visible in variation within the language at any given point in time, with such variation being systematic and predictable by social class and comparable factors. For current views on social class identity and language see Block (this volume) and Preece (this volume).
Heritage languages, diaspora and the ethics of identity

Heritage languages is a relatively recent term that gets applied to two kinds of minority languages: on the one hand, the language of an immigrant minority in a diaspora setting (for example, Cantonese in the South Chinese community of Cardiff), and on the other, the traditional language of a place that has become a minority language there, its place taken over by some more widely spoken language (for example, Welsh in Cardiff). Heritage languages possess for their speakers and partisans the ability to form a connection to the past, to origins and to ancestors both real and imagined (the philologist and novelist J.R.R. Tolkien considered Welsh to be his ‘native language’ even though he could not speak it and had no Welsh family background – just a spiritual connection that he felt to the language).

A number of prominent applied linguists have picked up on the idea of ‘translanguaging’ (Li Wei and Zhu Ha 2013) within ‘super-diversity’. The latter term was introduced by Vertovec (2007) in an attempt to capture the tremendous increase in the categories of migrants, not only in terms of nationality, ethnicity, language and religion, but also in terms of motives, patterns and itineraries of migration, processes of insertion into the labour and housing markets of the host societies.

(Blommaert and Rampton 2011: 1)

In historical perspective, it is not clear how new or unprecedented this situation actually is. Certainly the Chicago described by Buck (1903) was as linguistically and ethnically diverse as the city is today, and probably even more religiously diverse than now. Nevertheless, Blommaert and Rampton argue that the linguistic indexicality of identity needs to be reconfigured to take account of a context that has shifted historically from the recent past, when stronger restrictions on immigration (and indeed on emigration in the Communist bloc) were the order of the day, and when the emigrating populations were far less likely to have the advanced degrees and specialised skills that would give them high-level access to the labour market.

There is also an ethical dimension to heritage: as Appiah (2005) has shown, it has the potential to be oppressive. Immigrant parents sometimes try to force a heritage identity on children who identify more with the new country in which they were brought up. A good study of how this tension plays out in heritage language classes is Blackledge, Creese et al. (2008; see also Spotti 2008; Kramsch 2012). Appiah distinguishes between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ pluralism, the former taking seriously the ethical imperative for allowing dissenters to opt out of the group culture into which they were born. The soft type instead sees the group as the most important unit where autonomy is concerned, and insists that individuals cannot have real autonomy except as part of their group belonging. Appiah objects to Kymlicka’s (1995) stress on recognising and preserving identity groups and cultures, which contributes more to reifying them, constraining the individual’s rights, than to liberation.

[When multiculturalists like Kymlicka say that there are so many ‘cultures’ in this or that country, what drops out of the picture is that every ‘culture’ represents not only difference but the elimination of difference: the group represents a clump of relative homogeneity, and that homogeneity is perpetuated and enforced by regulative mechanisms designed to marginalize and silence dissent from its basic norms and mores.

(Appiah 2005: 152)
We should not, Appiah (2005: 268) says, ‘ask other people to maintain the diversity of the species at the price of their individual autonomy. We can’t require others to provide us with a cultural museum to tour through.’

**Native language/mother tongue**

The ‘native speaker’ is a modern idea, not appearing in the sense in which we use it until the last third of the nineteenth century. Arguably, it named something that was implicit in earlier thought. But the concept of native speaker is historically bound up with that of the standard language, which likewise began to appear in the last third of the nineteenth century, though again having earlier roots. The rise of the standard European national languages, ousting Latin from progressively more of its functions, enabled the illusion that everyone is a native speaker of the language of whichever nation they belong to. On the other hand, insofar as the standard language occupies functions bound up with institutional learning at an advanced level, no one is a native speaker of any standard language – it is a quasi-second language for all its users (for a contemporary view see Preece 2010).

The spread of these languages throughout the wider population in the last part of the nineteenth century occurred in tandem with the spread of universal education and, coincidentally perhaps, with the explosion of attention to the ‘Neogrammarian’ principles proclaimed at the University of Leipzig. These established a scientific consensus that the history of languages is determined by forces lying outside the conscious, rational dimension. Although other aspects of Neogrammarian linguistics have not endured, this one has; and so has the concept of native speaker that may be partly its corollary. It figures centrally in our understanding of language and identity, because of a strong cultural belief that one’s ‘native’ way of speaking is one’s true, genuine, authentic way of speaking, and that any deviation from it represents something inauthentic, an attempt to be what one is not.

For Davies (2013), the native speaker is a myth with dangerous and destructive consequences for language teaching and above all for language testing. It is mythical because in reality there is no clear boundary between native and non-native speakers. There are people who, even starting well after puberty, learn a language to such a level of competence that they are scarcely distinguishable from native speakers. Whatever fine differences in grammaticality judgements psycholinguists may detect belong to the research laboratory, and not to everyday life. In Davies’s view, the native-speaker myth is destructive because it gives learners the message that, however strong their motivation and however great their efforts, they can never reach the ultimate goal of foreign-language teaching, by virtue of their birth and other conditions beyond their control. It is thus an unjustifiable form of social exclusion, which applied linguistics should combat rather than reinforce.

If we accept with Davies that the concept of native speaker is neither well defined nor ethically desirable, why does it seem nonetheless that native speakers are different from non-native speakers in most cases? The answer to this has a historical dimension, in this case that of each speaker’s personal history. The acquisition of our first language was a long apprenticeship, which occupied nearly all our waking moments during the first three or four years of our lives and which has continued since. In the course of this childhood apprenticeship, the knowledge we acquire becomes part not only of our memory but also of our entire nervous system – our ‘extended mind’ – which is to say part of our bodies. The brain is not a separate organ in our bodies but continues down through the spinal cord and out via the nerves to our sense organs, including the skin. The brain is not the centre of all actions: reflexes, notably, go just to the
spinal cord. There is no evidence that the fine-grained muscular movements that produce my 'accent' and all the phonetic indices that people interpret to determine where I am from, what sort of background I have and what I am like are represented as knowledge in the brain, rather than the sort of muscular aptitude developed through practice that a pianist has in her fingers, or that keeps us breathing and digesting and our heart pumping in sleep, or even when 'brain-dead' (see Joseph 2013b).

My knowledge of English is a combination of mental knowledge plus something that connects to what Bourdieu (1991) called habitus, a term revived from medieval thought. My first language does not set limits on what I am capable of thinking or doing, but makes some things come more easily than others and makes certain inclinations more natural, while others require greater effort. To be a native speaker is a historical fact concerning the formation of one’s habitus, the set of dispositions, schemata of action and perception that individuals acquire and incorporate through their social experience. One can, with difficulty, attain later in life a competence indistinguishable from that of a native speaker, without going through the whole apprenticeship that produces the native speaker’s habitus. But so long as second language learners do not display the entire habitus that one expects as the accompaniment of native competence, they remain ‘native-like’ in the judgement of others.

**Summary**

Our identities are indexed in the languages we speak and write and in how we speak and write them. This indexicality does not need to be intentional; people will interpret our identities based on our language whether we want them to or not. Their interpretations will be grounded, to a surprisingly large degree, in the ‘layers of time’ that steady linguistic evolution has produced in every language. Education is concerned with managing these layers of time, through teaching of the standard language, as well as with expanding students’ language repertoires, which also has a direct effect on their linguistic identity and how it is interpreted. Such interpretation takes place within a broad cultural tension concerning how the structure of a language relates to the ‘genius’ of the people who speak it, as well as to what degree individual speakers partake of that genius, all of which again has a deep historical dimension.

George Orwell (1987 [1949]: 37) famously wrote in Nineteen Eighty-Four, ‘Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.’ To which may be added: Who controls the schools controls the past, through the teaching of history; structures the present, through the powerful hierarchisation of individuals and communities entailed by language choice and the enforcement of language standards; and shapes the future, by shaping, or even by failing to shape, those who will inhabit it. So too the future study of language and identity stands to benefit by taking account of history, within individuals, within languages and within our paradigms of investigation.

**Related topics**

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Discursive psychology and the production of identity in language practices; Language and ethnic identity; Language, race and identity; Identity in post-colonial contexts; Language and religious identities; Language and gender identities; Language and non-normative sexual identities; A linguistic ethnography of identity: adopting a heteroglossic frame; Minority languages and group identity: Scottish Gaelic in the Old World and the New.
Further reading


References


John E. Joseph


Historical perspectives on language and identity