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Linguistic practices and transnational identities

Anna De Fina

Introduction

Identity is a central area of research and theoretical engagement for socio and applied linguists because language use and language variation are deeply intertwined with processes of identity-building and performance. Identities are conveyed, negotiated and regimented through linguistic and discursive means; therefore, linguistic processes are at the core of identity processes. At the same time, perceptions and constructions of identities fundamentally shape the ways linguistic resources are deployed. Thus, for example, battles about language varieties and even about small linguistic differences mark the creation of boundaries of ethnic or territorial belonging among people. Similarly, linguistic elements at different levels – from phonemes to words – shift, change and are born according to the striving of individuals and communities for differentiation.

Identity is, however, a slippery term, as language can be used to convey and construct different types of identities. A person may for example put on a certain accent to index geographical origin; particular linguistic styles may be regarded as conveying personal characteristics, such as aggressiveness or directness; specific linguistic items or expressions may index a person’s gender, and so forth. Thus, linguistic analyses of identities have dealt with different kinds of identity categories. For this reason, it is not only useful to distinguish between personal and social identities, but also to differentiate between individual and collective identities. While personal identities capture characteristics and attributes that the individual regards as defining her/himself as a particular and unique kind of person, social identities refer to membership into social groupings that may be based on gender, age, ethnicity, place of origin and so forth. Finally, while a person may use language and linguistic strategies to convey something about who s/he is, language can also be used to construct collective identities, that is, to create images of groups and communities. While these categories are not always clear cut in practice, they are useful to distinguish different dimensions of identities.

In this chapter, I will focus on transnational identities and the way language practices contribute to construct, convey and negotiate them. Transnational individuals can be defined as people who actively ‘build social fields that link together their country of origin and their
country of settlement’ (Glick Schiller et al. 1995: 1). Therefore, studying the identities of transnational individuals involves analysing processes and practices that are different from those that are relevant for people who are firmly grounded in one place. This area of research represents a significant point of intersection between socio and applied linguistics as it deals with ‘the theoretical and empirical investigation of real world problems in which language is a central issue’ (Brumfit 1995: 27).

The chapter starts with an overview that first describes the theoretical background underlying the relatively recent interest in transnationalism in linguistics, focusing on groundbreaking work about migration in the 1990s, particularly by anthropologists, that has paved the way for a new understanding of migrants as transnational individuals. The following two sections go on to discuss how such understandings about migration can be compounded with insights on mobility offered by recent trends in socio and applied linguistics that focus on globalisation phenomena and the changes that they have brought about in symbolic practices and constructions. The next part of the chapter presents a brief review of work on identity in the same fields, discussing the recent paradigmatic shift from a focus on stable social identities and speech communities towards a reconceptualisation of identity as processes and practices. In the second part of the chapter I focus on methodology, areas of investigation and issues and ongoing debates, starting with a section that reviews studies of transnational identities before presenting some concluding reflections.

Transnationalism and migration

The idea that migrants and other mobile and/or de-territorialised groups could be best described as ‘transmigrants’ and studied within the frame of transnational phenomena was proposed and developed in the 1990s by social scientists, particularly anthropologists, researching immigration. Scholars such as Glick Schiller and Furon (1990), Gupta and Ferguson (1992) and Rouse (2004 [1991]), among others, pointed to contradictions and fallacies in the way immigrants and migration had been conceptualised in the past and used the concept of transnationalism as a lens to understand mobility in the late-modern world. Crucially, they also used transnationalism as a tool for apprehending changes in the way identities are constructed and conveyed in contemporary societies. Thus, they opposed purely structural explanations of migration, for example economic-based accounts, such as the idea that migration could be understood merely as a product of poverty, underdevelopment and, generally, structural conditions that directly cause push–pull phenomena. According to Glick Schiller and Furon (1990), such structural explanations prevent individual agency and wider cultural factors from entering the picture and do not allow for a consideration of the fact that immigrants are ‘actors who often consciously elaborate and manipulate multiple identities in response to structural forces of a global scope’ (ibid.: 331). Criticism towards traditional views of immigrants, simply as uprooted individuals and communities who struggle to assimilate to their new homeland, was also central to the arguments made by these scholars. Looking at migrants merely as uprooted people means regarding migration as a one-way process of change in which those who arrive are driven to adapt to their country of adoption but essentially do not produce any change there or in their place of origin. Adaptation only happens in one direction: from the immigrant to the host country and culture. Within this view identities and processes are seen as belonging to binary categories such as ‘the national and the transnational, the rooted and the routed, the territorial and the deterritorialized’ (Jackson et al. 2004: 2). Such simple oppositions do not reflect the complexity of the everyday experiences and identities of transmigrant people or the global processes that underlie them.
Linguistic practices and transnational identities

The point made by scholars of migration was that not only do immigrants belong to different worlds and continue to maintain ties to such realities, but also that they bring into being new forms of identity and new economic and cultural practices that produce changes both in the host and home countries by creating, for example, transnational circuits and by defining new configurations of spaces and places (see Rouse 2004 [1991]).

The critique of binary conceptions of identities and processes was compounded with a problematisation of many of the traditional categories used to understand and study immigrant identities. In particular, Glick Schiller and Furon (1990) argued for the inadequacy of the category of ethnicity to subsume immigrant identities and explain intergroup struggles. They found this construct to be inadequate, in that it erases differences in culture, race, geographical origin and so forth that exist within immigrant communities and neglects the role of other categories, such as race, which have been used as pivotal constructs in transnational power struggles. The alternative proposed by these authors was an anthropology capable of explaining transnational experiences and finding adequate categories for their analysis; this anthropological perspective must be able to account for the development of identities within a perspective that recognises the interconnections between local and global phenomena and historical developments that go beyond the boundaries of individual nation states and that involve wider systems and power struggles.

Globalisation, space and place

These theorisations about transnational identities have flourished in conjunction with the spread of new ideas about the centrality of fragmentation and flow in the late-modern world that have been developed also by anthropologists and by profound re-theorisations about the concepts of space and place and their relations with identities. Space had already been established as a fundamental notion by Rouse in a classic study of Mexican migration to the United States (2004 [1991]: 25), in which he talked about the need to identify new ‘cartographies’ that could reflect the changes that have occurred in the relationships between communities and places. He noted that immigrants such as the Mexicans he studied develop activities that span borders and involve different places. As the participants in Rouse’s study worked and stayed in the United States for periods but often went back to Mexico, Rouse argued that their place of origin got fundamentally transformed to serve the needs related to this way of life. Thus, members of this group ‘see their current lives and future possibilities as involving simultaneous engagements in places associated with markedly different forms of experience’ (ibid.: 30).

Spatial images define many of these early works; for example, Glick Schiller et al. define transnationalism as ‘the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement’ (1995: 1). And indeed, besides pointing to transnational processes, scholars also talked about how the very notion of space needs to be at the centre of a theoretical rethinking given that transnational processes and forces have redefined relations between centres and peripheries by bringing the peripheries into the centres and by creating dynamic interaction between the local and the global. As Gupta and Ferguson note:

In a world of diaspora, transnational culture flows, and mass movements of populations, old-fashioned attempts to map the globe as a set of culture regions or homelands are bewildered by a dazzling array of postcolonial simulacra, doublings and redoublings, as India and Pakistan apparently reappear in postcolonial simulation in London, prerevolution Tehran rises from the ashes in Los Angeles, and a thousand similar cultural dreams are played out
in urban and rural settings all across the globe. In this culture play of diaspora, familiar lines between ‘here’ and ‘there’, center and periphery, colony and metropole become blurred. 

\((1992: 10)\)

These transformations in the way communities use spaces and in their sense of identities have been increasingly linked with the changes that globalisation has brought about in the late-modern world and therefore theorisations about migration have gone hand in hand with efforts by social scientists to understand the cultural and linguistic impact of globalisation. Indeed, many scholars agree about the fact that one of its central characteristics is the enhancement and intensification of global flows not only of people, but also of artefacts, cultural products and practices. While it is true that mass migration and transnational contacts have always existed, it is also true that, as Appadurai notes, our world is witnessing ‘global interactions of a new order of intensity’ (1996: 27).

Scholars of globalisation (see Vertovec 2009) point to a number of reasons why our societies have become much more interconnected: the economy has become globalised with the growing influence and power of multinational corporations that dictate new market conditions to local economies and with the frequent decentralisation in the production of goods and the variety of services from developed to developing nations. The labour force has itself become largely globalised due to ‘deindustrialization and the rise of service industries’ (Vertovec 2009: 2). Concurrently, because of mass migration, entire countries have become more and more dependent on remittances from migrants. At the political level, policies are increasingly dictated in a supranational sphere (Robinson 1998), while with the fall of the post-war global equilibrium in the 1990s the map of political influences and alliances is continuously being redrawn.

These transformations would not have been sufficient to redefine the way we live were it not for the fundamental impact and influence of technology and mass-mediated communication, which facilitated the creation of global cultural and information flows that made news and a variety of cultural products and traditions available to people throughout the world. Observers of modernity such as Gupta, Appadurai and Agha have pointed to the immense influence of the media on the way cultural products are created and consumed, on the quality and intensity of political participation, and, crucially, on ways in which communities and identities are created and negotiated. Appadurai (1996: 4) regards the media, particularly electronic media, as one of the signature phenomena of postmodernity. In his words:

The story of mass migrations (voluntary and forced) is hardly a new feature of human history. But when it is juxtaposed with the rapid flow of mass-mediated images, scripts, and sensations, we have a new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities.

Indeed media and global exchanges allow for the sharing of cultural phenomena across physical boundaries. These exchanges determine a dynamic production, reproduction and creative reshaping of practices that while originally created in a particular context and place can become appropriated and reshaped in a completely different context. Local phenomena become global but they also often get ‘glocalized’ – that is, recontextualised within a new local context. This is the case with music trends, fashion, foods and all kinds of products and practices that become available to consumers across the global sphere.

Processes of identity construction and communication and ways in which communities form and maintain contact are centrally influenced by these changes, and that is why work on migration and globalisation constitutes a fundamental frame for understanding analyses and
theorisations about transnational identities. But studies of transnational identities can also be inscribed within new trends in socio and applied linguistics. Thus, I will devote the next section to the emergence of new socio and applied linguistic paradigms connected with mobility and diversity.

**Sociolinguistic shift: from stability to mobility**

In the previous section I described how in migration research and in cultural studies scholars have initiated a theoretical reflection aimed at delineating a new frame for the study of social and cultural phenomena that have been brought about by globalisation. Socio and applied linguistics have experienced a similar shift, as many voices have come together to question traditional categories and methods of analysis that seem wholly inadequate to account for the new ways in which communication takes place and identities are created and managed in late modernity. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Coupland (2003: 466) called for a sociolinguistics of globalisation, arguing that linguistically mediated experience at the local level cannot be grasped without taking into account the influence of global processes. In a recent contribution that summarises some of these developments in the field, Blommaert (2014) proposes mobility as one of the key terms to capture the shift that has taken place in sociolinguistics. Indeed, sociolinguists have started questioning some of the basic assumptions that dominated the study of language in society until the end of the twentieth century, particularly the dominant metaphor of the stability of identities, communities and linguistic processes.

In traditional sociolinguistic accounts of the interactions of languages and identities, such as in Labov’s studies on vernacular English (see Labov 1972), the use of specific language variables was connected to social categories such as gender, age and geographic location. Central to sociolinguistic investigation was the notion of the speech community as a linguistically homogeneous, territorially bounded, culturally unified grouping. Even though scholars such as Hymes (1972) recognised the internal linguistic and social diversity in speech communities and even though this construct has undergone substantial criticism and debate (see Romaine 1994; Silverstein 1996), the speech community can still be regarded as the pillar of the view of a fundamentally static relationship between language and identity.

Critiques of the notion of the speech community are by no means new but they have acquired greater strength within a sociolinguistics and an applied linguistics centred on mobility. Indeed, as discussed in the introduction, a presupposition of boundedness and stability cannot account for language variation and identity formation among mobile individuals and communities and, at the same time, access to transnational and global phenomena is so widespread nowadays that even individuals and groups that are firmly grounded in one place may receive innumerable influences deriving from virtual contact with cultural models and language practices that belong to locations that are physically removed. Thus, mobility is a significant notion for the study of processes that relate to identity.

The critique of speech communities as fixed and stable has been extended to a critique of the perspective of languages as rigid conceptions. This is another theme that has significant implications for the study of identities because it is through the manipulation of linguistic resources that identities are indexed and conveyed, and as a consequence the way linguistic resources are analysed greatly influences how identity processes are studied. The increased contact among people and the transformation of urban centres into ‘contact zones’ (Pratt 1995), which are the hallmark of globalised societies, have brought to the fore the existence of a plethora of linguistic varieties that cannot be easily accommodated within traditional sociolinguistic categories such
as those of language, dialect and so forth. Within traditional sociolinguistic studies, contact between two or more languages is seen as producing code-mixing or code-switching, but these notions are based on the idea that such different codes can be more or less clearly recognised and separated. Thus, studies of identity based on the analysis of code-switching look for ways in which alternation between codes is related to acts of identity. However, a great deal of recent research has demonstrated the relevance of ‘heteroglossic’ (Bakhtin 1986: 89) phenomena, that is, phenomena demonstrating the incorporation of the voice of others into one’s utterances, which is a key element in the study of identity.

The idea that discourse incorporates heteroglossia has been developed and enriched by research on style and stylisation (see Auer 2007; Coupland 2007). This work shows how inter-actants use linguistic resources to index particular identities and personae that are often alien to them, either because they are associated with out-groups or because these resources are not part of their usual repertoire. Research on youth language, particularly in multilingual and multicultural environments (see Ag and Jørgensen 2013), has also strengthened the point, demonstrating that youngsters convey and negotiate identities in extremely innovative ways through the creative use of resources that leads to varieties that are not easily separable into distinct languages or easy to categorise as such. Such phenomena are better captured by models of language behaviour based on the idea that speakers manipulate sets of linguistic resources that at times can coincide and be conceived of as separate languages but that can also constitute elements of new bricolages. As we will see, transnational identities are often constructed through the use of these different resources. For this reason, linguists attuned to globalisation and mobility have also coined new terms such as ‘translanguaging’ (García 2009) or ‘metrolingualism’ (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010) to try to capture these kinds of hybrid language practices. What these notions account for is the incorporation of multilingual resources into everyday talk that follows from the ubiquitous and simultaneous presence of different languages and cultural models in everyday practice. These languages and models are accessed and attuned to through mobile and traditional media, often by people who are themselves mobile.

The kind of approach described above ‘shifts the lens from cross-linguistic influence’ to how multilinguals ‘intermingle linguistic features that have hereto been administratively or linguistically assigned to a particular language or language variety’ (García 2009: 51). Recent work on media, such as web advertising (Martin 2013), has extended the inquiry into the use of multimedia hybrid resources such as music and soundtracks in different languages in transnational practices.

**Identities, interactions and social constructionism**

Theorisations on globalisation, de-territorialisation processes and the reconfiguration of linguistic resources that underlie the study of transnational identities involve and build on anti-essentialist and social constructionist views of identity (for a discussion see De Fina 2011). Anti-essentialism is a central characteristic of late-modern theories about identities such as the ones proposed by Giddens (1991) or Bauman (2005). These thinkers underscore the fact that the dominant conceptions of identity in the West framed the self as characterised by coherence, rationality and continuity. According to Burr (2002: 4–5), who writes from the point of view of psychological theories, within these approaches individual selves are attributed fixed sets of characteristics that encapsulate their personality and describe them as rational in their actions and deliberations as well separated from their environments. All of these presumptions are questioned in postmodern thinking, which, on the contrary, underlines how modern identities cannot be equated with
coherent selves and how they are often fragmented, multivocal, discontinuous and contradictory (see Baxter, this volume). Such views are compatible with the idea that hybridity is central to modernity.

The notion of hybridity has been developed in connection with post-colonial studies to point to the subversion of power hierarchies, through recognition of the existence of ‘third spaces’ in which post-colonised populations and minorities can build their own independent cultural practices (Bhabha 1994). However, it has rapidly been adopted as a trope for the construction of in-between and alternative identities in general. Such a notion is particularly important to encompass identity processes that are initiated and negotiated among diasporic, mobile and de-territorialised people (see Baynham and De Fina 2005; De Fina and Perrino 2013) and in transnational spaces, since individuals and communities that belong to those categories and act in those environments are often dealing with a variety of linguistic resources and inventories of identities.

Another theoretical point of reference for the analysis of identity is social constructionism (see Hall 2000). This perspective views identities as socially built in interaction and within social practices from inventories that are deployed according to contextual constraints. From this perspective, identities do not belong to people but are ‘done’ and performed in that they involve discursive and strategic work. Identity processes are embedded within semiotic practices that involve different rules, roles, presuppositions, etc., and therefore cannot be studied without attending to those contexts.

In the next section I will describe some of the theoretical–methodological tools employed by scholars who work on transnational identities and the areas in which research has been carried out. For each area I will discuss some of the most representative studies.

**Studies of transnational identities: methodologies and areas of interest**

As can be inferred from the previous summary of theoretical positions and constructs that have come to influence research on transnational phenomena, sociocultural linguistic studies of transnational identities are generally oriented towards qualitative methodologies and close analyses of linguistic and other types of semiotic practices. There is a general sense, among scholars, that in order to understand this new phenomenon it is imperative to get the emic perspective of transnational individuals and communities and to avoid applying etic (analyst)–only generated categories to the data. For these reasons studies are usually based on ethnographic methodologies such as participant observation or action research, often complemented with other data collection tools, such as interviews and focus group discussions, in order to triangulate interpretations. However, there is a general division in terms of focus and methodology between two types of studies. One examines participant presentation and representation of identities in talk, frequently using interviews, particularly oral and written narratives and life stories, as data (see Eppler and Codó, this volume). The other uses data from more varied sources that depend on the kinds of practices that are targeted, which may include for example mediated practices such as digital resources or mass media (see Darvin, this volume; Domingo, this volume).

Researchers examining language and identity use a variety of instruments, going from the study of linguistic landscapes to observation of multilingual practices, to specific discourse analytic tools such as membership categorisation analysis (MCA), the study of indexicalities and positioning, and combinations of those instruments through narrative analysis. I will briefly describe what MCA, indexicality and positioning involve. MCA (Hester and Englin 1997;
Antaki and Widdicombe 1998) is the study of ways in which participants in spoken interaction invoke social categories of belonging (for example, ethnic or national categories) and the meanings that they assign to those categories. The most prominent representatives of this methodology work within the frame of conversation analysis (see Benwell and Stokoe, this volume), but the study of how social categories are applied and understood is widely used by discourse analysts from different orientations such as critical discourse analysts (see Wodak et al. 1999) and interactional sociolinguists (De Fina 2006).

Another very popular construct in the study of identities is the concept of ‘indexicality’ (Silverstein 1976), which refers to the ability of linguistic elements that include single sounds, words and combinations of resources to evoke particular associations with identities, such as groups or social personae, and cultural constructs, such as ways of life, values and so forth, that are characteristic of those groups. Indexicality is central to an understanding of social semiosis as continuously evolving and of meanings as profoundly contextualised, since the assumption is that any linguistic or semiotic element or combination of elements can become socially significant. Research on styles (for an overview see Coupland 2007) has taken indexicality as a fundamental construct.

Finally, ‘positioning’ is also widely used in the analysis of identities. Positioning has been interpreted as capturing social agents’ stances and evaluations of their and others’ roles, ideas, actions, etc. The analysis of positioning is based on both indexical processes and on the use of explicit evaluations and categories. Positioning analysis has had specific theoretical developments in the study of narratives as it can capture the relationships that speakers establish with different contexts, such as the story world, the storytelling world and other pertinent contexts (see Bamberg 1997; Deppermann 2013). The studies reviewed here use some or all of these theoretical-methodological instruments.

With regards to areas of analysis, work on transnational identities has focused mainly on transnational individuals as language learners, transnational families, the types of multilingual and mediated practices developed by transnational agents, and ideological constructions of collective identities through transnational practices, particularly by the media. These areas cannot be rigidly separated. Indeed there are many intersections between these foci (for example, work on literacy practices also looks at transnational agents as learners, while collective identities are often constructed by individuals as well as the media); thus, such categories should be seen as convenient groupings rather than clear-cut distinctions.

Review of research on transnational identities

Before presenting an overview of studies of transnational identities, it is useful to discuss their relationship with work on national identities. Indeed, most scholars dealing with transnational phenomena recognise the strength and resiliency of national affiliation categories. Individuals who see themselves as transnational often confront themselves with national belonging both in positive and negative ways. Differences between studies of national and transnational identities reside more in research methodologies and foci than in the categories analysed. At the level of foci, differences are to be found mainly in the fact that researchers on national identities are more interested in top-down processes such as how language policies reflect, construct and support national identities (or even supranational ones) and to what political ends (see Joseph 2004), or how models of identities proposed by the elites are reflected in the discourse of common people (see Wodak et al. 1999; Triandafyllidou and Wodak 2003). For example, Wodak’s work on national and supranational identities concentrates mostly on institutional processes.
through which belonging is defined, in particular processes of exclusion and inclusion. In her recent studies about the European Union (Wodak 2013), Wodak looks not only at how such an organisation positions itself with regards to multilingualism, but also at how citizenship and naturalisation policies in individual European states implicitly contribute to delimiting who is deemed to have greater rights to belong and who should be excluded, thus fostering national hierarchies. A second distinction between research on transnational and national identities is that the former tries to capture the ambiguity and plurality of synergies between different scales (see Blommaert 2007) – that is, how local and global scales are related and influence processes of identity formation at various levels. Transnational studies show how in many cases the creation of a transnational identity goes hand in hand with the establishment of the local as a point of reference or, vice versa, how local identities may be strengthened and authenticated through participation in global processes.

**Language learners as transnational individuals and communities**

Work in this area focuses on migrants as language learners. One strand of research is interested in ways in which transnational experiences and mobility are incorporated into and support self-constructions (Farrell 2008). Another strand, which represents a growing and burgeoning field, deals with literacy practices among transnational individuals and groups and how they affect both learning and the projection and formation of identities (e.g. Warriner 2007; Hornberger and Link 2012; Sánchez and Salazar 2012).

Studies in the first strand use discourse analysis, particularly narrative analysis, to examine how learners draw on their experiences in different countries and on their personal histories of mobility to construct their present identities. For example, Farrell (2008) conducted interviews with 16 highly proficient speakers of English who had migrated to Australia from different countries. She focused on how their ideas about success and failure as language learners shaped their identity constructions and how they negotiated national identities and their sense of belonging in the Australian context. Farrell analysed the positioning of her participants through the use of categories of belonging and ways in which spatial location and personal deixis were employed by the participants as they narrated their stories. She found that transnationalism was highly relevant to her subjects, because being mobile and being from somewhere else brings to the fore, and makes relevant, relationships between place and belonging and therefore, as she argues, leads adult immigrants to always negotiate ‘the here and there’ (2008: 16).

Studies of literacy practices among learners are more varied in terms of methodologies, although they share the objective of exploring ways in which participating in discourse communities and accessing different types of semiotic resources may shape not only the experience of learners, but also their self-perceptions. In a special issue of *Linguistics and Education* devoted to transnational literacies, Warriner (2007: 202) argues that the contributors’ objective is to represent ‘the lived experiences, human practices, and “cultural logics” of people whose everyday lives are dramatically shaped by large-scale global and transnational processes’ and, by doing so, to ‘explore the different social, cultural, political, ideological, and material consequences of literacy’. Thus, transnational literacies interest researchers in education not only because they allow them to appreciate and theorise different forms of learning, but also because they represent a new terrain where interconnections between global and local processes can be investigated in the light of power relations and inequalities. Literacy studies in the field of socio and applied linguistics ask what kinds of linguistic practices immigrants and other transmigrant individuals
such as asylum seekers develop; how they use them in both informal and formal contexts in connection with the construction of identities; and how they index different kinds of identities. Studies in this area use various forms of ethnography (for example, multi-sited ethnography or action research), with participant observation being the most common. Data are collected through video and audiotaping, interviews with focal participants and other data collection tools, such as photographs, student assignments and different digital texts. Practices investigated go from the use of resources such as graffiti and poetry (Richardson Bruna 2007) or traditional oral storytelling (Gutiérrez et al. 2001), to different kinds of digital instruments such as instant messaging, blog writing, social networking, etc. (McGinnis et al. 2007; Lam 2009; Sánchez and Salazar 2012). Findings typically point to the power of alternative and digital literacy practices in producing change in the way learners position themselves with respect to mainstream and ideologically laden categories of belonging and in contributing to the construction of hybrid identities that are inclusive of aspects, categories and values associated with both their places of origin and their new homes. An example of this recent trend is a two-year-long case study by Lam (2009) about the digital literacy practices of a 17-year-old Chinese immigrant to the United States named Kaiyee. Lam carried out ethnographic observations of Kaiyee’s literacy activities at school, at home and within other community sites, as well as semi-structured interviews about her literacy activities, and collected screen photos of her instant messenger online interactions with peers. She observed how Kaiyee communicated with different social networks, involving peers from her local school, friends in the United States and childhood peers in China, and described how different linguistic resources contributed not only to build proficiency in the language varieties that were part of her repertoire, but also to create and foster affiliations with both local and translocal communities in which she performed different identities.

**Studies of transnational families**

Work on transnational families (see Lee 2010; Song 2012; King 2013) has focused on ideologies and practices related to language use and how the latter affects identities. In particular, researchers have studied ways in which families use and foster transnational ties and activities and how these transnational engagements shape and are shaped by family views and desires about identity. Researchers normally use participant observation, recordings of family events and interviews, or interviews only, to ascertain how different members of the family create and develop transnational ties and what kinds of affiliations they develop. For example, King (2013) conducted a 14-month case study of three sisters in an Ecuadorian family living in the United States using interviews, observations and recordings of family interactions. King analysed the dynamics created in the family by the parents’ language ideologies (for example, the idea that English should be learned quickly and smoothly and should be practised) as well as how the siblings negotiated identities and family roles through language choices and ideologies. Her research points to how nationality and race identities intertwine with ideologies about language use. As King argues, ideologies about language learning also shape perceptions about identities. This was the case with the less proficient English speaker in her research, who was framed as an unsuccessful learner, and with unrealistic expectations about the children’s symmetric bilingualism, which created anxieties in the English-proficient daughter.

Thus, studies of transnational families throw light on how multilingualism is practised inside these units and on how people’s sense of self develops in relation to the contact and simultaneous presence of geographically distant referents in everyday life.
Studies of practices and identities among transnational communities

Work in this area does not focus on language learning but investigates different kinds of migrant and transmigrant communities, often defined in terms of ethnicity (Farr 2006; Sabate y Dalmau 2012; Sánchez and Salazar 2012; Li Wei and Zu Hua 2013), nationality (Park and Lo 2012; Perrino 2013), gender (Skandrani et al. 2012) and/or age (Giampapa 2004). Sometimes the focus is on communities that are not mobile but who use mobile resources and transnational spaces (Hornberger and Swinehart 2012; Schneider 2013) and/or transnational practices. The questions investigated are not different from those formulated by researchers in the area of language learning, except that in these studies learning is not the centre of attention. Scholars analyse linguistic and cultural practices, for example the creation of hybrid styles both in speech and within new digital practices, or the reproduction of cultural constructs associated with the home country in the host country or ideological constructs related to transnational identities. Some of this research interrogates ways in which semiotic practices associated with transnationalism shape and are shaped by participants’ identities focusing on everyday contexts of interaction. In other studies, the analysis centres on the role of different types of media and their audiences in the production and reproduction of transnational identities (see Lo and Kim 2012; Chun 2013; De Fina 2013).

Studies comprised in this category use ethnographic methodologies, participant observation and collection of naturally occurring data. Interview data has less pre-eminence here and, given that most of the studies are recent, there is a greater awareness of the role of multimodal resources and modes of communication. An example of research on transnational communities is the study by Farr (2006) on Mexican ranchero families living in Chicago. Farr conducted a decade-long ethnographic study comprising participant fieldwork, interviews and recordings of conversations of these families, following their networks both in Chicago and San Juanico, a ranch in Michoacán from which they originated. Farr focuses on how ways of speaking that are associated with the ranchero culture are recontextualised in the reality in which Mexicans operate in Chicago to create and configure new identities. For example, ways of speaking that can be characterised as direct and frank are used by speakers to distinguish themselves as a group with a distinct personality within the mass of Hispanic immigrants in the United States. At the same time, the values associated with being a ‘ranchero’ are selectively assembled as to respond to the needs of this mobile community, so that characteristics such as individualism and entrepreneurship are privileged over other traits associated with the ranchero culture in Mexico.

An example of a study examining the production and reproduction of transnational identities in more formal environments is my own research (De Fina 2013) on a Latin American radio station in Washington DC. My data come from a three-year-long study of the station’s broadcasts and from recordings of a variety of radio programmes, including talk shows, news, advertising and interviews with experts. I argue that the radio station constructs a Pan Latino transnational identity for its Latin American audience. Pan Latinos are presented as mobile individuals who have not completely established a home in the United States, who have a preference for speaking Spanish and who belong to a low-income stratum of the American population. I analyse the linguistic and discursive strategies used by the radio station to construct such an image, such as the choice of Spanish as the main language of the radio, the implementation of rituals that highlight national pride within the Latino community, the presentation of achievements by Latinos in the US and the participation of Latinos in pro-immigration campaigns. I also discuss how the
identities constructed through such practices are both imposed by economic transnational powers (such as the multinational corporation owning the radio station), who are trying to penetrate the potential market constituted by Latin American immigrants, and ascribed in a top-down fashion through the semiotic practices of the radio station via the interaction between the radio host and their audience.

Summary

As discussed in this chapter, research on transnational identities is a relatively recent but also fast-growing area within socio and applied linguistics. Its merit is to incorporate into the analysis of identities notions of mobility and hybridity and to demonstrate the advantages of considering the intersection of different scales in the investigation of modern migrant, transmigrant and generally mobile populations. It is also clear that much of the existing work focuses on migrants and transmigrants, while neglecting (with few exceptions) other kinds of mobility, such as refugees or asylum seekers. In that sense, the scope of research should be extended. But the fact that researchers have mostly targeted migrants is also due to a problem of ambiguity in the term ‘transnational’. Indeed, critics have pointed to the difficulty of delimiting the phenomena that can be called transnational (see Glick Schiller 1997 and Vertovec 2009 for a discussion). Defining which social groups belong to that category has also proven hard because of a lack of clarity on the criteria that make people or activities transnational. One dilemma is for example whether transnationalism involves only people who are in a situation of mobility or not. It seems from the research reviewed here that many scholars agree with Jackson et al. (2004: 13) that it would be beneficial to develop ‘more encompassing notions of transnationality including those who are not themselves transnational migrants’ to include those who are involved in the social field created by transnational flows. Concurrently, it is important to delimit the boundaries for how individuals and communities can be identified as transnational. The field potentially includes not only investigation on migrants, but on study-abroad students, refugees, asylum seekers, members of travellers groups and so forth. Portes (1997: 16) argued, for example, that the notion should only be applied to people who sustain activities that involve transnational contacts on a regular basis and as a part of their occupations. Other scholars (see Cohen 1997) have tried to build taxonomies of diasporic populations in order to distinguish between different cases. Future research will not only have to deal with these definitional issues, but also to be more comprehensive in its scope. It is, however, likely that the field of study of transnational identities within socio and applied linguistics will continue to expand given that it allows researchers to tackle ways in which the semiotic processes of construction and negotiation of identities have changed in late-modern contexts.

Related topics

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and identity in linguistic ethnography; Language and ethnic identity; A linguistic ethnography of identity: adopting a heteroglossic frame; Styling and identity in a second language; Construction of heritage language and cultural identities: a case study of two young British-Bangladeshis in London; Language and identity in the digital age.
Further reading


References


Linguistic practices and transnational identities


Anna De Fina

