Positioning language and identity
Poststructuralist perspectives
Judith Baxter

Introduction

Applied linguistics now offers a rich diversity of theoretical and analytical approaches to conceptualise the relationship between language and identity; one of the more recent of these can be loosely described as ‘poststructuralist’. While this is not easily defined, the poststructuralist approach offers a set of radical, pragmatic and transformative perspectives that challenge and/or supplement dominant paradigms such as ethnomethodology and critical linguistics. Poststructuralist perspectives contest the conventional dichotomies in applied linguistics between subject and object, discourse and materiality, structure and agency, conformity and resistance, power and apoliticism, and micro- and macro-analysis, proposing that such abstractions are always interdependent and mutually contesting. Thus, reciprocally, identities are constructed by and through language but they also produce and reproduce innovative forms of language.

Poststructuralism does not have one fixed definition but is generally applied to a range of theoretical positions developed from such thinkers as Althusser (1984), Bakhtin (1981), Derrida (1987), Foucault (1980), Kristeva (1984) and Lacan (2006 [1977]). Each of these scholars was working more or less independently within the same couple of decades and therefore their collective works did not produce a unified poststructuralist perspective. Rather, there were a range of diverse and competing perspectives on the relationship between language, meaning and identity. Different forms of poststructuralism theorise the relationship between language and identity in contrasting ways. Psychoanalytic forms of poststructuralism look to a fixed psychosexual order in which male identity is generally viewed as ‘unmarked’ and the female identity as marked; deconstruction considers the ever-shifting relationships between different texts and discourses; and Foucauldian theory, which is the most relevant to this chapter, explores the relationship between historically specific discourses and the construction of social identities. While these different forms of poststructuralism vary in their interests, emphases and practices, they share certain fundamental assumptions about language, meaning and identity. This chapter explores the leading viewpoints in the area, and then reviews some of the debates within applied linguistics about how the relationship between language and identity can be best described, analysed, interpreted and explained.
Positioning language and identity

Overview
At least three points of connection are evident between the various poststructuralist positions above:

1 Philosophical origins in postmodernism;
2 Language and the construction of meaning; and
3 The discursive construction of identities.

Philosophical origins in postmodernism
Postmodernism could be said to encompass and incorporate poststructuralism, which owes its philosophical and discursive stance to this antecedent. Arguably, a poststructuralist scholar such as Foucault might be described as postmodernist, but not all postmodernist thinkers would be viewed as poststructuralists.

Postmodernism is a broad movement encompassing a range of fields and disciplines beyond linguistics including philosophy, politics, architecture, art, literature and the social sciences. It is a philosophical stance that underlies much current thinking about how identities are conceived, constructed and enacted in the modern world. Postmodernism challenges the view that there is a determinate, material world that can be definitively known and explained (Lyotard 1984). A postmodernist perspective considers that it is impossible to know the world by dissecting it through apparently objective methods of inquiry. Rather, knowledge is socially constructed, not discovered; contextual, not foundational; singular, localised and perspectival rather than totalising or universal; and egalitarian rather than hierarchical. How we come to ‘know the world’ is very much bound up with issues of power relations in societies, communities and organisations that, in turn, interact with individual identities and actions.

Foucault (1980, 1984) was particularly interested in theorising the relationship between knowledge and power and how this constructs individual speech and behaviour. He argues that Western knowledge is organised according to irreconcilable binary opposites that are not natural but realised through ‘discourses’. He questions the way that modernist theories of knowledge are encoded into binary or hierarchical oppositions such as mind/body, masculinity/femininity, theory/practice and public/private. In every case, knowledge is constructed to ensure that one pole of opposites is privileged over the other (e.g. masculinity over femininity; rationality over emotion; science over art). This polarising and hierarchical ordering of constructs contributes to the formation of meta-narratives that are excluding in principle and normalising in character. Postmodernist thinkers such as Foucault and Lyotard were therefore sceptical of the universal claims and exclusive rights traditionally put forward by most fields of knowledge such as science, politics or religion. This is because, in Foucault’s (1980: 109–133) memorable terms, the humanist concern with the ‘will to truth’ always becomes a ‘will to power’. That is, any strong belief or field of knowledge, however well intentioned, inevitably systematises itself into a ‘regime of truth’. In other words, it is like saying that my superior knowledge of the world enables me to hold power over you and your inferior knowledge.

Conversely, a postmodernist perspective is sceptical of all universal claims and causes and expresses a profound loss of certainty about the existence of absolute truth. For example, religious or political beliefs that purport to hold the ultimate answers to human problems, such as Christianity or modernist feminism, are viewed as potentially harmful because they attempt to fix meanings and knowledge within a given version of truth and reality. So, a political...
movement that intends to ‘do good’, such as Marxist-inspired political thought or action aimed at liberating the popular classes from the negative conditions of capitalism, is valid as long as it is a force for resistance against dominant ways of thinking. However, once it becomes systematised as normative belief or practice, it too could become a means of oppression. This is because postmodernists consider the attempt to fix knowledge permanently as an expression of coercive power. Alternatively they advocate the fluid interplay of multiple but competing theoretical positions, where one form of knowledge is free to enrich, complement, supplement, challenge, contest or overturn any other. In the context of language and identity, individuals have continually to make sense of conflicting ‘ways of knowing’ and, hence, competing ‘ways of being’, which are constructed and performed through language and discourses.

**Language and the construction of meaning**

Whereas postmodernism is a broad, cross-disciplinary movement that has influenced many spheres of intellectual life, poststructuralism is primarily a linguistic movement associated with the development of literary, cultural and discourse theories from the 1960s onwards. Poststructuralist thinkers consider that language is the place where our sense of self and our identity or ‘subjectivity’ is constructed and performed. The founding insight of poststructuralism, taken from the structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), is that language, far from reflecting an already given social reality, constitutes social reality for us. Meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language. The system of language is composed of signs, which are divided into ‘signifiers’ (e.g. words, sounds, visual images) and ‘signifieds’ (concepts). Individual signs (whether in speech, writing or multimodal forms of text) do not have intrinsic meaning but acquire meanings through their relationship with and difference from other signs.

While meaning is always arbitrary and relational, the language that an individual acquires and understands is the result of an already-existing social contract to which all language users are subject. Thus the meaning of language is to an extent fixed, and individuals are inculcated into this pre-existing ‘structuralist’ language system that partially shapes their identities.

A poststructuralist perspective of language, while strongly building on Saussure’s theory, radically modifies and transforms some of its important aspects. Derrida’s (1987) concept of ‘*différance*’, in which meaning is produced through the dual notions of *difference* and *deferral*, has helped theorists to understand language as operating in a perpetual state of flux. According to Derrida, the meaning of signs emerges not only in their *difference* from other words, sounds or images, but also from the way signs are subject to an endless *deferral*. By this he means that any representation of meaning can only be fixed temporarily as it depends upon its discursive context. Signifiers are always located within a discursive context so that the temporary fixing of meaning, which comes from the reading of an image, word or text, will be dependent upon that particular context. Texts are constantly open to rereading and reinterpretation both within the particular context and, of course, when/if they are shifted to other contexts. Thus, the meaning of texts can never be fixed finally as knowable and immutable but is always a ‘site’ for contestation and redefinition by different readings within varying contexts. Derrida places a particular emphasis upon the way any text, by virtue of the range of readings to which it is subject, becomes the medium for *struggle* among different power interests to fix meaning permanently.

Derrida’s (1987) theories of deconstructive criticism – which attend to the plurality and non-fixity of meaning – are a useful perspective on language and identity. This is because ‘standard’ identity categories such as woman, teacher, mother, wife, friend, scholar, writer and so forth are only temporarily agreed by social contracts to which individual speakers are usually
compliant. Such terms are always open to contestation and redefinition as the struggle for the ‘true’ meaning of each term takes place between social groups with different power interests. So for example, for a modernist feminist, the term ‘woman’ encapsulates a universal ‘female’ nature that can be clearly differentiated from an essential male nature, whereas for a postmodernist feminist, ‘woman’ is viewed as a fluid subject position that only becomes salient within certain discursive contexts but not in others.

Like Derrida, Foucault (1984) considers that language and the range of subject positions it offers always exist within discourses. Foucault’s view is that language as a system does not represent human experience in a transparent and neutral way but always exists within historically specific discourses. These discourses are often competing, offering alternative versions of reality and serving different and conflicting power interests. Such interests usually reside within large-scale institutional systems such as law, justice, government, the media, education and the family. Thus, a range of institutional discourses provide the network by which dominant forms of social knowledge are produced, reinforced, contested or resisted. As discourses always represent and constitute different political interests, these are constantly vying with each other for status and power. As we have seen above, Foucault (1984: 100) resists a modernist conceptualisation of discourse in terms of dualities or opposites, preferring a more fluid, dynamic, strategic interpretation:

We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies … Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.

According to Foucault, discourses are responsible for the ways in which individual identities are recognised, constructed and regulated. This process of identity construction is reciprocally achieved through the agency of individual language users who are subjectively motivated to take up particular positions within multiple discourses and through the ways they are variously positioned as subjects by the social, normalising power of discourses.

The discursive construction of identities

As noted above, a modernist or liberal-humanist perspective of identity presupposes an essence at the core of the individual, which is unique, fixed and coherent, and which makes a person recognisably possess a character or personality. Conversely, a poststructuralist perspective posits that individuals are never outside cultural forces or discursive practices but always ‘subject’ to them. Their identities are governed by a range of ‘subject positions’ (‘ways of being’), approved by their community or culture, and made available to them by means of the particular discourses operating within a given social context. If people do not conform to these approved discourses in terms of how they speak, act and behave, they may be stigmatised by others with labels such as ‘weird’, ‘a misfit’, ‘a freak’ or ‘an outsider’. This is now a particular phenomenon on social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter where the capacity to construct identities (and attack the identities of others) through naming, labelling and membership categorisation (see Darwin, this volume) has become particularly stark. Language therefore acts as a regulatory force to pressurise individuals to conform to socially approved patterns of speech and behaviour.
The regulatory effects of discourse upon identity construction can be observed within institutional settings. For example, within a classroom context, students are subject to a range of institutional discourses offering knowledge about ‘approved ways to be’ in terms of their speech, behaviour, their learning and teacher–student relationships. But of course, not all discourses are institutionally approved or regulated. Competing or resistant discourses will also be constituted by peer value systems and will partly govern peer identities and relationships both in and out of the classroom. These discourses will be interwoven with broader societal discourses, embracing competing perspectives, on age, gender, ethnicity, class and the like. Thus a female student may be subject to various competing discourses within the classroom offering sets of positions relating to her age, gender, race, ethnicity and so on, as well as her participation as a student and membership of a peer group. On the one hand she may feel a pressure by her school and parents to conform to be a ‘good’ student who achieves high grades, but on another, she may sense that her peers consider that it is not ‘cool’ to work hard and thus aim to give off the appearance of indifference to her studies (Baxter 2003). Both identities pertain to her and can be invoked or resisted within different contexts by the student herself or by her associates. This does not make her inconsistent, but rather a complex, multifaceted individual with unique yet reasonably predictable ways of being.

Linguists have utilised the ‘discursive construction of identity’ concept within a wide range of applied contexts. For example, in the field of second language acquisition, Ibrahim’s (1999) research on being constructed as Black within certain language learning communities is informed by the poststructuralist notion of being multiply positioned by assumptions about racial identity. Similarly, Moffatt and Norton’s (2008) work on sexual orientation shows how language learning practices can naturalise heteronormative sexual identities as well as challenge them. With respect to gender, Pavlenko’s (2004) work has revealed that cultural assumptions about female–male dichotomies may lead to inequalities among particular groups of language learners such as women, minorities, the elderly and the disabled, but crucially, they can also be contested. Finally, in multilingual studies, Blommaert and Rampton (2011) propose the poststructuralist notion of ‘superdiversity’: that is, the increasing access speakers have to plural discursive resources such as ‘translanguaging’, due to migration, increased mobility, the prevalence of social media and so on.

In all these contexts, individuals are shaped by the possibility of multiple (though not limitless) subject positions within and across different and competing discourses. Furthermore, the formation and reformation of identity is a continuous process, accomplished through actions and words rather than through some fundamental essence of character. Belsey (1980: 132) has suggested that individuals must be thought of as ‘unfixed, unsatisfied … not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change’. Given this understanding of identity/ies as a fluid network of subject positions, many feminist poststructuralists such as Weedon (1997) prefer the term ‘subjectivity/ies’, which has three defining characteristics: the plural, non-unitary aspects of the subject; subjectivity as a site of struggle; and subjectivity as changing over time. In this chapter, identity is used as the overarching term for a generic, cross-disciplinary concept, and ‘subjectivity’ is used where it pertains to poststructuralist conceptualisations.

Begging the question within this discussion is the extent to which poststructuralist theory accepts the concept of ‘agency’: a measure of individual awareness or control over the means by which subjects are ‘interpellated’ or called into existence (Althusser 1984) to a range of subject positions made available by different discursive contexts. What is the relationship between discourse and the individual as implied by poststructuralist theory? How much ‘control’ does an individual have over
their ways of being in the world? In a sense, this is a question inspired by modernist critique that our identity exists at best in some sort of compliance with or resistance to discourses. At worst, identity becomes simply a function or an ‘effect’ of discourses, seen to be barely relevant to the ways in which meanings are produced through social practices. Indeed, Foucault suggests that the theorist’s task is not to address the complexity of the world as experienced by the ‘human subject’. Moreover, in his discussion of the question ‘What is an author?’ in terms of written texts, Foucault explicitly urges theorists that ‘it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analysing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse’ (1984: 118).

Poststructuralists have argued that individuals are not uniquely positioned, but are produced as a ‘nexus of subjectivities’ (e.g. Davies and Harré 1990), in relations of power that are constantly shifting, rendering them at times powerful and at other times powerless. However, this notion of identity as little more than a form of interconnection or ‘mobility’ between different subject positions has not satisfied all poststructuralist theorists. To sum up the range of poststructuralist perspectives on identity, they can be characterised along a spectrum between the more radical thinkers, who perceive the concept simply in terms of discursive functions or effects, and the more moderate, who consider that identity embraces psychological elements such as the consciousness and memory of the individual, physical and material aspects such as bodily expressions of pain and pleasure (filtered through discourse) and semiotic expressions that index wider cultural identities.

I will now consider in more detail four key poststructuralist perspectives on the relationship between language and identity:

1 Performativity;
2 Positioning;
3 Feminist poststructuralist; and
4 Enunciative pragmatics.

**The performativity perspective**

At the more radical end of the poststructuralist spectrum is the view that the materiality of life, and specifically the body, is discursively constructed, and that life itself can only ever be experienced and conceptualised through the lens of competing discourses. Famously, the philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1995) published a book entitled *The Gulf war did not take place* in which he argued that the Gulf War was not really a war but rather an atrocity that masqueraded as a war. He suggested that the American military forces, using mainly air-power, did not directly engage in combat with the Iraqi army and suffered few casualties. Almost nothing was made known about Iraqi deaths. Thus, the fighting ‘did not really take place’ from the point of view of the Western world. Moreover, spectators only learnt about the war through propaganda imagery. Media representations made it impossible to distinguish between the experience of what materially happened in the conflict and its stylised, selective (mis)representation through Western discourses of war or, in Baudrillard’s terms, ‘simulacra’.

The poststructuralist linguist Judith Butler (1990 [2007]) has extensively debated the issue of whether or not the materiality of life is fully constructed, characterised by her theory of ‘performativity’ in relation to aspects of identity such as gender and sexuality. For Butler, such apparently genetic aspects are always achieved through performative acts: that is, ‘constituting the identity it is purported to be’ (1990: 33). This view links directly with Austin’s (1962)
speech act theory, which argues that illocutions such as ‘I swear’ or ‘I promise’ do not describe pre-existing states but literally call them into being. Accordingly, Butler claims that aspects of gender identity such as ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ behaviour are not what we are, nor traits we have, but effects we produce by way of particular actions we perform. She famously argued that ‘gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural kind of being’ (1990: 33).

According to Butler, aspects of identity such as gender have to be constantly reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with cultural norms, which themselves are historically and socially constructed and in perpetual flux. Thus, perceived characteristics of a person such as their masculinity or femininity are nothing of the sort; they are symbolic enactments that are semiotically indexed through (for example) speech, body language, dress, appearance and possessions. Spoken language in particular has an influential part to play in that it too is a ‘repeated stylisation of the body’ and produces the notion that women and men have different speech styles and norms of interaction. Cameron (1997: 49) suggests that Butler’s theories of performativity are revelatory for studies in language and identity because:

This shifts the focus away from a simple cataloguing of differences between men and women to a subtler and more complex inquiry into how people use linguistic resources to produce gender differentiation … it acknowledges the instability of identities and therefore of the behaviour in which those identities are performed.

Butler primarily illustrates her views of the discursive construction of gender identities by means of the example of drag artists. She argues that the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender of the performed. She suggests that there are three contingent dimensions at work: anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance, all of which are in some sort of parodic interplay. Butler uses drag acts to show that the concepts of biological sex and the social construct of gender are revealed to be dissonant. In other words, a drag artist may have the body of a man and perform the gendered identity of a woman in everyday life, but in a drag act perform a transvestite’s view of a female identity. In this self-conscious playing with different gendered identities, which are themselves regulated by a discourse of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich 1976), drag artists reveal the irrelevance to human identities of the materiality of biological sex:

As much as drag creates a unified picture of ‘woman’ … it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalised as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.

(Butler 1990: 187)

I suggest that Butler’s perspective on gender identity is radical not least because of the way she has also contested the category of biological sex as ‘natural’. Butler explicitly challenges biological accounts of binary sex, reconceiving the sexed body as itself culturally constructed by regulatory discourses. The supposed obviousness of sex as a natural biological fact attests to how deeply its production in discourse is hidden. The sexed body, once established as a ‘natural’ and unquestioned ‘fact’, is seen as the alibi for constructions of gender and sexuality, inevitably more cultural in their appearance, which can purport to be the seemingly natural expressions or
Positioning language and identity

consequences of a more fundamental biological sex. According to Butler, it is on the basis of the construction of natural binary sex that gender identities, and hence normative heterosexuality, are likewise constructed as natural.

In sum, Butler’s perspective on the relationship between language and identity is that certain elements such as sex and gender that we take to be ‘internal’ features of our psyche are actually ones that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts and, at an extreme, ‘an hallucinatory effect of naturalised gestures’ (Butler 2007: xvi). Despite such assertions, Cameron (1997: 49–50) points out that Butler does not reduce women and men to ‘automata programmed by their early socialisation to repeat forever the appropriate gendered behaviour, but treats them as conscious agents who may – albeit often at some social cost – engage in acts of transgression, subversion and resistance’. Drag acts are a case in point, demonstrating that individuals are active producers of discourses rather than passively positioned by such discourses, without which an understanding of discursive provenance would always remain unclear. I now consider poststructuralist perspectives on language and identity that bestow rather more agency upon the concept of ‘personhood’.

The positioning perspective

Rather more moderate than performativity is the positioning perspective. This views language and identity in terms of a balance between the ways in which discourses position participants as ‘subjects’ in competing ways and the ways participants make their own and other people’s actions socially determinate. Here, there is a place for agency as more than simply individual acts of resistance or compliance to discursive practices, but rather as recognition that people are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices.

Positioning theory emerged from the work of linguistically orientated social psychologists in the 1990s who wished to better understand the socially constructed yet dynamic aspects of linguistic encounters. Two such theorists were Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré (1990), who adopted the poststructuralist paradigm to make better sense of the psychology of ‘personhood’ and to address the ambiguity of the question ‘Who am I?’. Their discussions are based on poststructuralist principles that acknowledge both the constitutive force of discourse and, in particular, ‘discursive practices’, yet at the same time recognise that an individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who actively helps to constitute the discourses of which they are a part:

Accordingly, who one is [must always be] an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one’s own and others’ discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and other people’s lives.

(Davies and Harré 1990: 46)

According to the authors, ‘positioning’ is the discursive process whereby identities or ‘selves’ are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in ‘jointly produced story-lines’ (1990: 47). In speaking and acting from a position, people are bringing to the particular situation their history as a subjective being. This is not the history of accumulated experience in a liberal-humanist sense but rather the history of one who has been in multiple subject positions and engaged in different forms of discourse. Davies and Harré suggest that there are two types of position within which participants routinely find themselves: interactive
positioning, in which the utterances of one person position their interlocutor through the process of turn-taking, and reflexive positioning, in which one has some agency to position oneself. Neither type of positioning should be viewed as intentional, according to the authors, but rather as part of the ongoing process of reproducing oneself within existing and emerging discourses.

The positioning perspective evolved by Davies and Harré is linked closely to the idea that we (re)produce ourselves through our lived autobiographies. In other words, in order to produce some form of consistency and coherence between our multiple subject positions, we tell ourselves and others stories about how we have lived and how we intend to live our lives. This need to develop storylines involving events, characters and moral dilemmas is an attempt to resolve the ways in which we are continuously positioned by discursive practices in contradictory ways that disrupt the sense of sustaining a coherent identity. According to the authors, appearing to be historically continuous and unitary is how being an ‘authentic’ person is ‘done’ in Western culture.

The positioning perspective has since been taken up by discursive psychologists with an interest in ethnomethodology, which views everyday conversation as a resource through which speakers and hearers can intersubjectively negotiate their identities and construct a specific social order. For example, Wetherell (1998: 388) has traversed different schools of linguistic thought to argue that ‘a stance which reads [poststructuralism] in terms of [ethnomethodology] continues to provide the most productive basis for discourse work in social psychology’. She argues that the way a subject position emerges within conversation is only partly the consequence of the discourse it is assigned to. Much more significant are the ways in which participants orient to turn-taking procedures in conversation, which serves to reveal the formation and contestation of multiple subject positions. What clearly initiates and sustains one or more subject positions in conversation is ‘accountability, or participants’ orientations to their setting and the emergent conversational activities’ (ibid.: 401).

Wetherell (ibid.: 395) argues that poststructuralist theory is almost always discussed in the abstract, on the basis of implicit assumptions of language and identity, and is rarely applied to ‘what is happening right now, on the ground, in this very conversation’. She demonstrates the value of interplay between poststructuralist and ethnomethodological approaches by means of a research study involving three young, white, male sixth form students in the UK discussing a sexual encounter. Wetherell (ibid.) analyses how one young man, Aaron, moves between different subject positions within the course of a single conversation, trying to account for these inconsistent positions in varying ways. In talking about how he starts a casual relationship with a young woman, both Aaron and his friends variously position him as drunk, lucky, ‘on the pull’, having a good month, on the moral low ground, not intentionally ‘going for it’, displaying impressive conduct and so on. Wetherell explains that the question of how to evaluate these conflicting subject positions remains unresolved within the conversation itself. However, Wetherell suggests that ‘this portfolio of positions remains available to be carried forward to other contexts and conversations making up the “long conversation” which is the sixth form common room culture’ (ibid.: 400). In other words, these participant orientations do not emerge uniquely from a single conversation but fit within broader, culturally recognisable ‘interpretive repertoires’ about male sexuality available to young men. In sum, the creative potential of these young men to negotiate who they are and how they relate to others is available as a resource, but always constrained by the culturally governed range of subject positions available to them, and the discursive tension between such positions.
The feminist poststructuralist perspective

This perspective and its analytical version as feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) combines aspects of positioning theory and performativity theory but differs in holding a rather more dynamic, agentic and fluid approach to identity, or what Chris Weedon (1997) calls ‘subjectivity’. There is also a focus upon critiquing gender relations, although this is not based upon a simple, binary conceptualisation of gender.

While a feminist poststructuralist perspective recognises identity categories such as ‘woman’ to be permeable, it does not go along with the view that individuals are just the passive, unstable, fragmented effects of competing discourses. Although ‘the subject’ in poststructuralism is always socially constructed within discourses, Weedon (1997: 102) argues that s/he ‘none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices’.

In other words, feminist poststructuralism believes in women’s lived, embodied reality and their subjective, emotional and cognitive experiences, since the ways in which individuals make sense of their lives is a necessary starting point for understanding the ways in which gendered discourses continue to structure social relations. However, it is in the conceptualisation of a woman’s consciousness, agency or ability to act for herself that feminist poststructuralism differs from both modernist and social constructionist versions of identity by centralising her subjectivity as a site contested in discourse. According to this conceptualisation, individuals neither conform to the liberal-humanist conception of the free individual in control of their destiny, nor to the notion of a passively positioned subject. So, female (and male) speakers are positioned in a fluid, dynamic, contextual relation with competing constructs of gender. Notions of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are continuously being contested by dominant social discourses that vie with each other to fix the meaning of these constructs permanently. Rather than viewing individuals as being at the mercy of these competing discourses, speakers are multiply positioned in terms of their agency to adapt to, negotiate, contest or overturn dominant subject positions. More proactively, people can take up subject positions within oppositional discourses, and this is how substantive social and material changes can occur.

Thus, an FPDA approach aims to describe and critique competing versions of subjectivity available to a person. In a recent paper (Baxter 2014), I showed how women political leaders are often constructed in negative or demonised ways in the news media because women as a social category are still not socially accepted within a male-dominated political world. However, I argued that there is enough ‘wriggle room’ for the readers/audience to read such articles ‘against the grain’ and thereby to produce more positive and life-enhancing versions of female subjectivity from these articles. Such critical readings can offer an explanation of where our experiences have come from; why these are often contradictory or inconsistent; and how versions of reality can be ‘read against the grain’ or changed if necessary. In other words, knowing that subjectivities are discursively constructed does not limit or prescribe a person’s agency but simply becomes a precondition for understanding the possibilities for ‘breakthrough’ action and change.

One radical element of the feminist poststructuralist perspective on subjectivity is its refusal to accept the modernist view that all women are necessarily victims of patriarchy. This refusal is predicated on the broader poststructuralist perspective that subjectivities should not be conceptualised in binary terms as male/female, young/old, villains/victims and so on. This is because feminist poststructuralism appreciates the unevenness and ambiguities of power relations between males and females. Indeed, FPDA questions the way biological sex is classified
as a binary, reconceptualising this as a powerful gendered discourse among others. Individuals identifying as female are perceived to be multiply positioned as powerful or powerless within and across a range of competing discourses. During the course of a conversation, for example, they might shift between subject positions of power or powerlessness according to the discourses circulating within that context. This mobility offers women/girls some agency to escape victimhood because they are rarely trapped permanently within a powerless subject position.

The feminist poststructuralist perspective does not consider males and females to be equivalently positioned in terms of the ways in which power is negotiated through gender relations. Its focus is upon the pervasiveness of gendered discourses (Sunderland 2004), which often conspire with other institutional discourses to ‘fix’ women/girls in positions of relative powerlessness, despite breakthrough moments of resistance. FPDA is thus concerned to equip analysts with the thinking to ‘see through’ the ambiguities and confusions of particular discursive contexts where females are located as simultaneously powerful and powerless. For example, in my study of a student classroom (Baxter 2003), I show that classroom discourses provide a range of quite powerful subject positions for girls (such as ‘peer and teacher approval’ and ‘collaborative talk’), but yet, at the same time, a discourse of ‘gender difference’ is constantly working to undermine the possibilities of greater girl power. An FPDA approach can highlight and critique the contradictions and tensions girls experience as subjects/speakers in the classroom. It can also foreground the ways in which girls take up (or can be encouraged to take up) subject/speaking positions that allow them to contest or resist more powerless ways of being.

Discourse analysts such as Kamada (2010) have used FPDA to analyse the relationship between language and identity from a poststructuralist perspective. Kamada explores the intersectional, linguistic construction of ethnic identities among six Japanese-Caucasian girlfriends. She includes ethnicity alongside gender in her exploration of how these multi-ethnic girls are simultaneously positioned as relatively powerful and powerless within a range of dominant discourses. She demonstrates how, on the one hand, the girls feel disempowered because they stand out at school as different and consequently experience isolation, marginalisation and bullying. On the other hand, they are able to take up empowering positions within a discourse of ‘foreigner attractiveness’ or ‘a white-Western female beauty’ discourse, which provide them with a certain cachet among their Japanese-only peers. They thus achieve an agency that enables them to overcome negative social constructions by others of their identities as only ‘half-Japanese’.

**The enunciative pragmatics (EP) perspective**

This relatively recent approach to poststructuralist discourse analysis provides a tangential yet illuminating perspective on the relationship between language and identity. Rather than directly considering how identity is theorised as it is associated with living, breathing human beings, the EP perspective focuses on the multitude of voices to be found within written texts and considers how such texts orient readers to identify and interpret these voices. Written texts offer an array of competing voices, or identity positions that the reader is required to disentangle and interpret. In simpler terms, we cannot speak or write without mobilising a range of different voices or points of view, some of which appear very ‘close’ to us and others much further away. A text never expresses a single, obvious meaning; it always says more than the author means to say. Rather than drawing on a unified source of meaning, texts unintentionally let many voices speak, which means that interpreting discourse is often a finely judged process.

The EP perspective has its roots in theories of discursive polyphony (e.g. Bakhtin 1981), which posits that a discourse mobilises many different voices, even in the case of a single author.
or in statements made by a single speaker or writer. For Bakhtin (1981), the literary work, especially, consists of a plurality of voices, social styles and languages. Through language, the subject of the text is constantly producing and reproducing itself in different forms and occupying ever-changing positions.

Angermuller (2012) has developed the EP method of discourse analysis inspired by the post-structuralist critique of the speaking subject who is presumed to be self-contained, unique, relatively predictable and consistent in speech and action. He advocates a method whereby the analyst scans the text for markers reflecting ‘discursive heterogeneity’ (2012: 118). Angermuller’s method coheres with the poststructuralist perspective on agency outlined above: namely, individuals (speakers, readers, writers, characters) can simultaneously act upon discursive practices while being subject-positioned by those same practices. Rather than a text delivering its meaning in a direct and transparent way, which the reader then decodes, Angermuller (ibid.: 120) argues that:

the text allows the reader to attribute its various contents to different ‘subject positions’ such as the author (locutor) and the Other (allocator or addressee) of discourse. The locutor and allocator are not physical individuals; they are communicative instances which allow the reader to reduce the many voices of discourse to a limited number of discursive positions.

Further to this, Angermuller suggests that texts provide ‘enunciative markers’ that enable readers to spot ‘markers of polyphony’ such as negators (e.g. not, un−) and argumentative devices (but, however …), both of which trigger at least two voices (the play between the allocator and the locutor). This is not a structuralist perspective ‘by the back door’; Angermuller argues that readers are crucial to the process of interpreting such enunciative markers as guided by the circumstances of their immediate, local context. He understands the reading of the competing voices within a text as ‘the product of active readers trying to understand the message by contextualising the text according to its formal instructions’ (ibid.: 119). Angermuller exemplifies his approach in a range of different ways including a complex, multi-staged analysis of the unintentionally conveyed, competing voices within works by Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and others. He also shows how in a radio broadcast of a speech by Russian President Vladimir Putin that a range of anonymous voices, beings and speakers populate the spoken words. Readers can produce two conflicting discourses from the speech – ‘internationalist’ on the one hand and ‘sovereignist’ on the other – which do not necessarily presuppose that Putin is offering an ambiguous message. Rather, the use of such multi-voiced speech is that ‘readers understand that Putin understands’ that he can reach listeners/readers with contrasting values and agendas and allow them to produce either or both readings within the same moment. Identity according to this perspective is understood in terms of the ways in which listeners/readers can resist the impetus of monological discourse and discover the voices in a text that produce alternative or resistant meanings.

Issues and ongoing debates

In this section, I will explore one of the central debates within applied linguistics, which questions how the relationship between language and identity can best be described, analysed, interpreted and explained. While there is a diversity of applied linguistic approaches to the topic, three of the most influential are: (1) ethnomethodological, which underpins discourse analytical
approaches such as conversation analysis (CA); (2) critical, which supports approaches such as critical discourse analysis (CDA); and, of course, (3) poststructuralist, in the form of poststructuralist discourse analysis (PDA), encompassing in principle all four perspectives discussed in the previous section. There has been very little agreement over the last three decades about which analytical approach most fittingly explains the relationship between language and identity, and on the whole, applied linguists agree to differ. Drawing on my own work, I will now explore the differences (and points of intersection) between the three analytical approaches, arguing what advantages the poststructuralist position might offer over the other two.

In many ways, PDA is closer to CDA than CA, but there are a number of quite obvious differences. All three approaches are social constructionist in spirit and question the essentialist view that human identity is unique, fixed and coherent. They all assume that identities are constructed through the dynamic process of linguistic interaction. However, unlike CA, both CDA and PDA are explicitly interested in the discursive contexts in which identities are constructed, although each approach conceptualises this rather differently. CDA assumes language and discourse to interact dialectically with the material world (e.g. Fairclough and Wodak 1997). So for example, a discursive event such as a student demonstration may ultimately impact on material practices such as an increase in student grants, but the nature of student demonstrations may also change as a consequence of such material effects. In contrast, PDA tends to adopt an anti-materialist stance to context in its view that social ‘realities’ are discursively produced, so students’ identities as actors and demonstrators are produced through discourse, and rarely outside it. So if students go out into the world to try and change material conditions, those ‘material conditions’ are principally understood through discourses on student protest and government policy. PDA acknowledges that real material conditions exist and affect people physically and emotionally (Weedon 1997), but such conditions are also a function and effect of discursively formed viewpoints. The extent to which discursive effects interact with the material world is a point of strong debate between critical and poststructuralist thinkers (see Block, this volume). Norton (2006) is one scholar who has bridged the critical/poststructuralist gap by arguing that material hardship does impinge upon discursive identity construction and that it should be acknowledged as such.

Another point of difference between the three approaches is in relation to power. A CA approach relies closely upon analysing the meanings and interpretations of the participants and draws upon the ‘common sense’ narratives cropping up in naturally occurring data, aiming to interpret the participants’ expressions of their identities in their own terms. For CA, with its bottom-up approach, power relations are therefore never assumed, although they may be constructed through the process of linguistic interaction (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). For CDA and PDA, in contrast, power relations are inscribed within social or institutional discourses, which permeate every linguistic interaction. While CA exponents argue that power relations between individuals, if they exist, will emerge ‘naturally’ from data analysis, both CDA and PDA consider such a data-centred approach to be methodologically ‘naive’ (Billig 2000). Working from the opposite pole to CA, CDA starts from ‘the experiences and opinions of members of [dominated groups] and supports their struggle against inequality’ (van Dijk 2001: 96). In contrast, PDA does not support this type of emancipatory approach to discourse analysis because (as discussed in the previous section) ‘a will to truth’ leads to ‘a will to power’, which will ultimately transpose into its own ‘grand narrative’ (Foucault 1980). However, PDA is not apolitical, but rather tends to back small-scale, bottom-up, localised social transformations that are vital in order to challenge and contest ‘grand narratives’ that oppress people. So Kamada’s (2010) analysis based on a small, ethnographic case study of six half-Japanese girls enabled her participants to challenge the negative perceptions that they and others shared of their ethnic and gendered identities.
To illustrate this difference between CDA and PDA, CDA linguists might locate a group whom they had identified as victims of oppressive power, such as stay-at-home mothers, and deconstruct the ways in which this group is perceived to be victimised through institutional language. PDA linguists would analyse how mothers are multiply located in a stretch of data, and cannot be dichotomously cast as powerless and disadvantaged or as victims. The value of PDA over CDA, in my view, is that identities are constructed as multiple, dynamic, fluid and ever-changing, and these are not perceived as fixed within a single, static, powerless position. PDA therefore restores a sense of agency to those individuals or social groups considered to be disadvantaged or disempowered. They are never permanently positioned within a dichotomous villain–victim relationship, but can self-reflexively transform their identity position through acts of negotiation, challenge, self-reflexivity and resistance. This was illustrated by a recent case in the British news media where a woman, Judith Tebbut, who was kidnapped while on holiday in Somalia, described her six-month ordeal thus:

Everything was conspiring to turn me into a woman without an identity, without freedom, without co-ordinates, and no comprehension of what might happen to her. It was a very frightening place to be, a very disturbing present tense. In spite of it all, I still believed I was Jude the social worker, wife, mother, and this saved me.

(Tebbut 2013: 69)

Finally, PDA is arguably a necessary antidote to CA and CDA, in that it offers a supplementary approach, simultaneously complementing and undermining other discourse-analytical methods. It does not claim to be a complete method or the best method, but simply one that might be fit for purpose. Within applied linguistics, there is much value to be gained from a multi-perspectival approach that combines different methodological tools in a functional way as befits the task in hand. The textual interplay between competing terms, methods and sets of ideas allows for more multiple, open-ended readings of language and identity data. Thus while CDA in principle seeks to deconstruct how hegemonic power relations position individuals or groups, and in so doing may produce a single, oppositional reading that may eventually become authoritative, a poststructuralist, supplementary approach encourages the possibility of several competing readings. This means that no single reading of a text is regarded as fixed, but that every reading can be reviewed and perhaps contested in the light of competing voices, perspectives or methods of analysis.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed poststructuralist perspectives of language and identity that all share similar philosophical origins in postmodernism; language and the construction of meaning; and the discursive construction of identities. The chapter explicates four diverse poststructuralist perspectives of language and identity: performativity; positioning; feminist poststructuralist; and enunciative pragmatics. I touch on some of the criticisms levelled against poststructuralism, such as its focus on discursivity, its anti-materialism and its apoliticism. By comparing three methods of analysis, ethnomethodological, critical and poststructuralist, the chapter concludes by arguing that PDA has much to offer the study of language and identity in the future – both as a stand-alone and as a supplementary methodology.
Related topics
Ethnomethodological and conversation analytic approaches to identity; Discursive psychology and the production of identity in language practices; Critical discourse analysis and identity; Language and gender identities; Language and non-normative sexual identities; Beyond the micro–macro interface in language and identity research; Language, gender and identities in political life: a case study from Malaysia; Intersectionality in language and identity research.

Further reading

References


