Beyond the micro–macro interface in language and identity research

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Introduction

The fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics developed in the 1960s, at a time when generative linguistics was prominent and linguistic research tended to conceptualise language in a formulaic way. Juxtaposed to this view, research in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics regards language as part and parcel of social life and accordingly has drawn on cognate work in the social sciences, including in particular sociology, anthropology, psychology and education studies. Research in applied linguistics was driven by the goal of finding solutions to real world problems in which language was considered to be a central issue (perceived or real) (Brumfit 1995); initially this focused largely on language policy and planning, second and foreign language education and language in the workplace. In this way, applied linguistics was cast as complementary to theoretical linguistics.

With the boom in identity studies in the 1970s and 80s, work in applied linguistics sought to explore the interface between language and identity and the scope of applied linguistic research broadened. In the 1990s, this research increasingly took on a critical orientation that drew upon social theory and sociological insights (e.g. Pennycook 2001; Tollefson 2001; Block 2003), thus dovetailing even more closely with the field of sociolinguistics (Coupland et al. 2001). This research raised the issues of power, access and (in)equality. The subsequent focus on the interface between language, identity and power in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics has served as an impetus for researchers to grapple with links between micro and macro levels of language use, which are often cast respectively as interactional patterns or language choice and regulatory mechanisms or language policy. In this vein, reference to the micro–macro continuum in applied linguistics has the potential to serve as an analytical device, in that it can orient the focus of research towards interactional discourse, individual actions and speech-events on the one hand, or towards institutions and social structures on the other (Wortham 2012: 129).

In other social sciences, the micro and macro levels of social life are similarly conceptualised as an analytical continuum consisting of a range of small to large-scale phenomena. Definitions vary according to the theory, approach and outlook. In the simplest and most fundamental terms in sociology, the micro level is considered to be that which relates to the individual, whereas
the macro level concerns structured organisations. These group dynamics, which are essential to understanding the construction and negotiation of identities, are located between the two end points of the micro–macro continuum. Tickameyer and Li (2000: 1703) state that micro-level research focuses on ‘individual thought, action, and interaction, often coinciding with social-psychological theories and models’, while macro-level research deals with ‘social structures and those forces that organize as well as divide individuals into political, social or religious organizations, ethnic populations, communities, and nation-states’. In terms of approaches, there are two key sociological paradigms: ‘symbolic interactionism’ and ‘structural functionalism’; the former is generally considered to be more micro-oriented, while the latter is regarded as macro-oriented.

The issue of how to conduct comprehensive research that bridges the micro and macro levels of social life has been flagged up as a key concern in the social sciences, in particular over the last three decades. The aim of this chapter is to evaluate the relevance and usefulness in applying a micro–macro framework to research on language and identity, with a focus on sociological, social theoretical and sociolinguistic trends that have shaped these debates. Particular consideration will be given to the fact that the predominantly discourse-based approaches to identity research go beyond strict compartmentalisation into one or the other conceptual sphere, ultimately leading to the issue of whether a micro–macro dichotomy is a suitable analytical device for research in applied linguistics that specifically focuses on the interface between language and identity.

In light of the aforementioned influence of social theory and sociology on research in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics, the following section will present an overview of leading approaches to this issue in sociology, including parallel discussions on agency and structure, and how they have been applied explicitly to research on language and identity. Following this, there will be a discussion of selected studies in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics that have grappled with the relationship between the micro and macro, in particular those that examine in some detail the relationship between language practices and policies; language and context; and/or agency and structure. The final section will sum up key points and highlight points for future language and identity research in applied linguistics.

**Overview**

Although the terms micro and macro may be useful for succinctly establishing the focus of a study as on a narrower or broader context, attempts have been made to retreat from a strict polarity between the micro and the macro. Debates on this issue gained prominence in the early 1980s. In some cases, the debates focused on how to integrate micro and macro levels of analysis. In other cases, the emphasis centred on the agency–structure interface rather than on the relationship between micro and macro levels.

As a means of bridging the analysis of the micro and macro levels of social life, a number of integrative approaches developed in sociology. One of the most well known is the integrated sociological paradigm developed by Ritzer (1981). He plots two continua that consist of ‘micro–macro’ and ‘objective–subjective’ levels of analysis. Ritzer’s first continuum bears parallels to work in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics that attempts to link the analysis of linguistic practices (micro) and policies (macro). The second, ‘objective–subjective’, continuum resonates with work on language attitudes (micro) and ideologies (macro). An additional, highly prominent integrative approach entails the introduction of a middle level of analysis, referred to as the ‘meso’ level, that allows for the exploration of how structural organisations impact on specific interactions and how these interactions potentially may shape aspects of structural organisations. This is of particular relevance to applied linguistics scholars who examine language and identity.
in institutional settings, as several of the case studies in Part IV of this volume attest to (see e.g. Andrew; Hjörne and Evaldsson; Morton; Nelson; Preece; Rock, this volume). Approaches that include a meso level have been adapted and fleshed out by various scholars, but the terminological coinage in sociological literature is often credited to Maines (1979).

Rather than concentrating on a perceived gap between micro–macro issues, other paradigms focus on the relationship between agency and structure. The theory of structuration developed by Giddens (1984) is one of the most prominent theories along these lines, although Bourdieu’s (1984) conceptualisation of the habitus may also be regarded as mediational between structure and agency. Giddens postulates agency and structure not as discrete poles of a dichotomy but rather as connected components that mutually affect one another. From this outlook, structure is described as being both a restricting and an enabling factor for agency. Individual agency is situated in relation to social structure and is therefore also restricted by it. However, at the same time, it is the social structure that makes the activity possible, which serves to reproduce or potentially challenge structure.

To varying degrees, research on language and identity has been influenced by sociological paradigms that engage with the interface between agency and structure or the micro and macro levels of social life. A paramount example of the former is the ethnographic work carried out by Heller and her team of researchers in a French-medium school, the École Champlain, in the Anglophone province of Ontario, Canada (2006 [1999]). Dealing with tensions and contradictions between the linguistic practices in the school and the official language policies of the state, this study is informed by Giddens’s (1984) duality of structure. Through this theoretical lens, human agency and organisational structure are not viewed as distinct entities but rather in a mutually dynamic relationship. Although agency is to some extent restricted (and acted upon) by organisational structures, agency is enabled by these structures and can even ultimately have (not always intentional) structural repercussions.

The École Champlain that constituted the focus of Heller’s study had a highly heterogeneous school population that consisted of three main groups: speakers of French as their L1, middle-class Anglophones wanting to become bilingual for instrumental reasons, and new immigrants, including individuals from Somalia and Haiti, who are speakers of French as an L1 or L2. The school offered two streams: a more advanced one, where many of the middle-class Francophone and Anglophone students could be found, and a more vocational or general stream, attended by many working-class French Canadians, as well as new French-speaking immigrants from Somalia and Haiti. In the latter stream, Heller found that a much wider range of vernacular and contact varieties of French was used and there was frequent code-switching into English by both students and teachers. Although teachers were expected to implement a system of linguistic surveillance, promoting the use of standard European French, they were not able to implement this in all cases. In exploring the interface between individual and societal multilingualism, Heller was able to demonstrate how the students’ linguistic practices played a role in partially shifting the institutional policy of the school towards increased inclusiveness of linguistic diversity and flexible multilingualism.

Importantly, Heller maintains that regarding language as discourse, or language-in-use, as opposed to an abstraction, as a named language, is pivotal in the relationship between agency and structure. As Heller argues, this is because linguistic practices are the means by which people go about drawing on, reproducing and building new knowledge (ways of organising relationships and building social categories, as well as producing and distributing resources). For this reason, research on language and identity in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics is optimally positioned to grapple with the interface between agency and structure.
While also emphasising the key role of discourse, other research on language and identity has taken an integrative approach to exploring the interface between the micro and macro levels of social life. Based on an analysis of workplace conversations in a travel agency in Cardiff, Wales, Coupland (2007: 112–121) develops a macro-, meso- and micro-level framing model as a theoretical basis to discuss the stylising of social identities. Here, he draws on Goffman’s (1974) seminal work on framing in order to look into factors that determine the ways in which specific identities are made relevant or salient. Framing is one of five processes (the others being ‘targeting’, ‘voicing’, ‘keying’ and ‘loading’; see Coupland 2007 for an explanation) that Coupland considers useful when looking at how people construct identities in the process of social interaction. The observations of the verbal interactions, social frames of relevance and projections of identity are discussed in relation to their relevance for matters concerning social class, general principles of public discourse and what he calls the Cardiff sociolinguistic ecosystem.

Coupland explains that ‘socio-cultural framing ([regarded as] macro-level social frames)’ is relevant for the broader evaluation of identity inscriptions, such as social class, gender, sexuality, age and/or ethnicity. ‘Genre framing ([seen as] meso-level social frames)’ applies to the current context of the genre of talk that is taking place, for example formal versus informal contexts or professional versus casual settings. Participant roles and generic constraints are aspects that are typically relevant in this context. He points out that there may be differences in the way specific linguistic features characterise social identity between the macro-level and meso-level framing, for example a particular linguistic feature that would index a social identity in the sociocultural frame might resonate differently in the generic frame. For ‘interpersonal framing ([viewed as] micro-level social frames)’, Coupland describes the positioning strategies of the interactants themselves in the course of their talk on a personal and relational plane. In this way, a ‘sociolinguistic feature that might otherwise bear, for example, a social class or a participant role significance might do personal identity work in the interpersonal frame’ (Coupland 2007: 113–114).

As in the case of sociological research, the above studies explicitly deal with addressing micro–macro issues (Coupland 2007) or with agency and structure (Heller 2006 [1999]). However, unlike the majority of sociological research, Coupland and Heller emphasise the key role of discourse and contextualisation in their respective analyses (also see Blommaert et al. 2001). This emphasis opens pathways for applied linguistics and sociolinguistics to contribute to interdisciplinary research given the predominance of social constructivist approaches to identity in the social sciences, which invoke the importance of discourse and contextualisation. In the following section, we provide an overview of predominantly micro- and macro-oriented areas of research and illustrate how the interface between the micro and macro or agency and structure has been addressed in a number of studies.

Transcending the micro–macro in language and identity research

In this section, we synthesise examples of key studies on language and identity that are often regarded as predominantly micro or macro in their point of orientation. We start by discussing research that is focused on identity in linguistic interaction. This body of work may appear to be micro-oriented due to the focus on the social positioning of the individual as well as the fine-grained details of linguistic utterances. Then, we shift focus to identity in language politics, which may seem to be more macro-oriented in scope due to its focus on the construction of group identity and broader patterns of socio-political organisation. However, we show how
certain studies in both of these strands share commonalities in that they prioritise the role of discourse in shaping the interface between linguistic features or named languages and various conceptualisations of identity.

Identity, the individual and linguistic interaction

Studies focused on identity in linguistic interaction and related areas, such as individual multilingualism and language attitudes, are often regarded as micro-oriented in that they concentrate on the finer details of the picture rather than the bigger context. However, there have been attempts in this line of research to consider macro as well as micro levels of linguistic interaction with reference to identity and/or structural organisation. Attempts to take a more holistic approach are often expressed in terms of discourse and contextualisation. These attempts reflect the increased interest in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics with the wider socio-political field in which interactional events are situated.

Recognition of the dynamic interface between individuals and broader social structure is instrumental for researchers to achieve a well-rounded understanding and interpretation of the role of identity in interactions. Specific interactions (akin to the micro level) simultaneously shape and are shaped by broader structural aspects of the social world (akin to the macro level). Kiesling (2006) underlines how identity emerges through interactions, while also pointing out that these interactions simultaneously play a reciprocal role in constructing identity:

Identities are created and re-created when speakers are actually talking to each other, but the way these identities emerge is contingent on the speakers’ sociocultural discourses and ideologies … Because identities are relational, a person has no single fixed identity, only identities constructed and contextualized in interaction (and to the extent that an identity is psychologically real, it is based on the self’s conception of its place in psychologically idealized models of interaction).

(Ibid.: 495–496)

In their landmark article, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) similarly espouse a holistic approach that is aimed at transcending the dichotomy between micro and macro as well as agency and structure. They discuss five principles for tackling the question of identity from a linguistic interactional perspective: ‘emergence’, ‘positionality’, ‘indexicality’, ‘relationality’ and ‘partialness’ (see Bucholtz and Hall 2005 for an explanation of these principles). Bucholtz and Hall use these principles to show how speakers construct identity in discourse. Indeed, the indexical properties of discourse (see Jones, this volume, for a discussion of indexing) play a key role in positioning speakers in relation to certain social groups, stereotypes and cultural phenomena:

The interactional view that we take here has the added benefit of undoing the false dichotomy between structure and agency that has long plagued social theory (see discussion in Ahearn, 2001). On the one hand, it is only through discursive interaction that large-scale social structures come into being; on the other hand, even the most mundane of everyday conversations are impinged upon by ideological and material constructs that produce relations of power. Thus both structure and agency are intertwined as components of micro as well as macro articulations of identity.

(Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 607)
In her research on language varieties spoken in Pittsburgh and their relevance to local identity, Johnstone (2007) looks into positioning, stance-taking and the sources the participants in her study draw on, indirectly or directly, when describing their identity as Pittsburghers. The data consist of interviews conducted in Pittsburgh, during which the participants are encouraged to talk about the local dialect. Relevant details, such as certain phonological variables, particular lexical choices and the way the speakers interact, are taken into consideration and examined within the context of the Pittsburgh dialect and its role in the identity of being a Pittsburgher.

Johnstone (ibid.) observes how the participants in the conversation make references to a variety of local phenomena in order to support their stance in the interaction, including souvenirs, local dictionaries and regional magazines. The objects selected by the informants play a key role in shaping the relationship between the local spoken variety and being from Pittsburgh. Johnstone brings the content of these observed interactions together with the history of Pittsburgh’s industrial background, the role of social class and patterns of migration. In so doing, the micro-level analysis of this interactional data is undertaken with reference to the macro-level circumstances surrounding the discussions. This is necessary for evaluating which discourses are informing the participants’ positioning with regard to dialect and identity in Pittsburgh. The necessity for analysis on a number of contextual levels is underlined by Johnstone, who discusses the notion of identities as being ‘culturally circulating, frequently adduced ways of categorizing groups of people that are often oriented to as being relevant outside of and prior to the interaction as well as inside it’ (ibid.: 52).

Analysing interaction within stretches of recorded conversation forms the basis of Liebscher and Dailey-O’Cain’s (2009) identity-themed project (Inter)acting identities in dialect and discourse: migrant western Germans in eastern Germany, where they investigate the expression of attitudes towards spoken German in Saxony, while looking into how these attitudes develop within the speakers’ interactions both with the researchers and with one another. The group interviews undergo a detailed analysis, for which Liebscher and Dailey-O’Cain suggest three levels of investigation. The first level is content-based approaches, which ‘have frequently been used to analyse directly-expressed language attitudes as they appear within discourse, often to lend weight to a quantitative analysis’ (ibid.: 197). Turn-internal semantic and pragmatic approaches, which constitute the next level of inquiry, ‘analyse the same sort of data as can be found in the content-based approaches, but require the researcher to examine the specifics of the linguistic features used in individual expressions of these attitudes’ (ibid.: 198). The third level of analysis, interactional approaches, uses concepts from interactional sociolinguistics and conversation analysis to provide further insight into the expression and formation of the observed language attitudes.

The analysis focuses on the ways in which language attitudes arise from and are part of the argument structure in these discussions about local speech. In addition, speakers are shown to position themselves with regard to discursive and social identities through the expression of these attitudes. The analysis also reveals that ideology in the form of the discourse of the stigmatisation of the local Saxon dialect is a factor in the way language attitudes are constructed and negotiated (ibid.: 202). Finer points, such as the use of particular conjunctions, the labels the speakers suggest for the varieties they describe and the flow of the dialogue with each interaction, form the micro-level evaluation of the recorded interviews. The authors frequently relate their findings to the wider macro-level context of language ideologies and the general social context in which the speakers’ positionings are situated. They emphasise the importance that the speakers attribute to the conversational context, which includes factors such as where the
conversation takes place and how well the speakers know each other, as this can have a large bearing on the ways in which attitudes and stances are formed (ibid.: 201). The authors also find inspiration in discourse analytic approaches (see Blommaert 2005), as these can be related to the ways in which ideologies and social discourses inform the construction of identities, perspectives and attitudes in interaction.

When looking closely at the stylisation of dialect in radio shows and projected identities, Coupland (2001) provides another relevant example for our discussion when he associates the micro-level analysis of radio talk with the macro-level concepts of Welsh cultural practices, rural Welshness and contemporary issues in Wales. Coupland selects snippets of radio shows and explores them for instances of dialect stylisation which contribute to the presenter’s projection of being ‘audibly a “really Welsh” presenter’ (ibid.: 351). Some characteristic ethnolinguistic examples of this that Coupland emphasises are traditional Welsh first names, specific references to Welsh culture and a number of distinctive phonological and prosodic features.

The styles that Coupland detects in these radio shows are on a variety of levels, so that there is not just a stylisation of being Welsh but also styles that transcend different spoken formats, behaviours and genres, such as switching to a gossip genre (where historical events are described in a manner of ‘over the garden fence’ gossiping) and at other times to a self-stylisation of being ‘camp’ in line with a lengthy tradition of similar styled affectations in British radio shows. The detailed breakdown of the transcribed speech of the presenters (in this case the portrayal of history in the form of a gossiping duo) is discussed with reference to the more general themes of long-established radio practices, general performances of dialect and subjects largely familiar to the daily life of most Welsh people. Commenting on such performances and the projected identities, Coupland reaches the conclusion that speakers design their talk according to their awareness of alternative possibilities and likely outcomes and they ‘perform identities, targeted at themselves or others, when they have some awareness of how the relevant personas constructed are likely to be perceived through their designs’ (ibid.: 146). The social groups, discourses and stereotypes indexed by the speakers’ performances, adopted styles and projected identities only become meaningful in relation to the wider social context in which these interactions are situated.

A further study that underlines the importance of grappling with the interface between discourse and context is Deumert’s (2010) work on patient–provider interactions in public hospitals in the Western Cape, South Africa, which focuses on linguistic barriers that have arisen between English/Afrikaans-speaking providers and isiXhosa-speaking patients. By monitoring these interactions closely, Deumert recognises the difficulties faced by both patients and medical staff who sometimes do not have sufficient competence of each other’s respective language(s), as the following extract from Deumert’s fieldnotes illustrates:

A female doctor in her late 20s steps out of her consulting room into the waiting area of the outpatients department. She looks at the name on the folder in her hand: Ngx.?, Ngx.?, trying to pronounce the African surname of the patient [/ngx/ represents a voiced, unaspirated lateral click preceded by a nasal], Ehm, ehm, ehm, oh here! Kushman [the first European name of the patient], that is better! An old man in his 70s gets up slowly (Hospital A).

(Ibid.: 57)

The wider referential repercussions of this interaction are explained by Deumert, who calls attention to the doctor’s use of the European-sounding first name of the patient, which is one of two names held by many older black South Africans (i.e. a Europeanised ‘name of work’
and an African ‘name of home’). In South Africa, the ‘name of work’ used by the doctor ‘is strongly associated with out-group contact, labour exploitation/oppression, and the invisibility of African heritage’ (ibid.). Such contextualised analysis characterises the manner in which Deumert considers the wider economic, historical and social framework in which the communication between the individuals is embedded, thus enabling her to reach the following conclusion: ‘Such everyday practices are profoundly stigmatizing and contribute to the reproduction of the racist legacies of colonialism and apartheid in South Africa’s post-1994 health system’ (ibid.).

To sum up, in all of the studies discussed in this section, there has been an acknowledgement of the ever-widening spheres of relevance for the interaction at the micro level. Rather than considering the macro and micro levels of analysis as binary opposites, they are interpreted in terms of being interrelated and central to the construction and negotiation of identity, for example through indexical stance-taking and references made by speakers to certain indexed styles and performances. In the following section, we turn to a discussion of identity in relation to nation and language policy, which will elaborate further on ways in which the micro–macro interface has been transcended in recent research on language and identity.

Identity, the nation and language policy

Research dealing with identity in language policy and related areas, such as societal multilingualism and language ideologies, is often regarded as macro-oriented in that the aim is to provide an overview of the bigger picture rather than provide a fine-grained analysis of a particular set of interactions. However, there have been attempts in this area of research to consider the relationship between the micro and macro with reference to identity and/or the interface between agency and structure. Studies that address questions on a macro scale but are nevertheless fine-grained are often conducted by means of ethnography and/or (critical) discourse analysis, enabling so-called top-down language policies to be linked with bottom-up language practices. There has been a broad paradigmatic shift in language policy and planning (LPP) to focus on these interrelated processes, which in turn has led some contemporary researchers in the field to refer to their work as language politics.

LPP research initially prioritised the study of activities at the level of the state and was intended to regulate societal language use, with society frequently conceptualised as synonymous with the (nation-) state. LPP scholarship traditionally encompassed the two prongs of status (i.e. uses of language) and corpus (i.e. forms of language) planning, viewing them as the crux of state language policy and largely perpetuated by means of state-sanctioned language-in-education policy. Although not exclusively the case, it is worth noting that much of the work on identity and language policy has focused on linguistic minorities that have been marginalised by the state or on states that are officially multilingual. On the whole, this research has shown how named languages can function as a symbol of national identity and how this symbolism often becomes increasingly salient in times of societal change or contestation. For all of these reasons, scholarship on language and identity at the more macro level has been bound up with work on LPP and, more recently, language politics and language ideologies.

Ricento’s (2000) overview of LPP scholarship is roughly divided into three phases: the 1960s, the 1970s to the late 1980s, and the late 1980s to the present. Ricento underlines the gradual shift away from the dominance of structuralist paradigms based on assumed foundational structures that presupposedly organise social life that characterised the first phase of LPP towards critical approaches foregrounding social processes which were a hallmark of the second
phase. Scholarship in the third phase of LPP has been marked by influences from poststructural approaches that engage with the dynamics between structure and agency as well as the discursive construction of identity categories. According to Ricento, the third phase of LPP is marked by the discursive turn and is informed by insights from critical theory. Ricento maintains that it is agency or ‘the role(s) of individuals and collectivities in the processes of language use, attitudes and ultimately policies’ (ibid.: 208) that distinguishes many recent studies on language policy from previous work in the field.

With the increased emphasis on agency and related interest in the interface between language, identity and power in LPP, Baldauf (2006) flags up the growing acknowledgement among researchers that LPP is operational at multiple levels of social life, which he refers to as the macro, meso and micro levels. Underlining the move away from the predominantly macro-oriented orientation of LPP scholarship, he queries the implications of the shift towards more micro-oriented issues. In this vein, Spolsky (2003) considers the family unit to be the most basic level of LPP. He maintains that research in this domain is fully within the ambit of LPP, and does so without explicitly labelling family language policy as ‘micro’.

Broadening the scope of inquiry and taking a more holistic approach to LPP constitutes a priority in the field. Shohamy (2006) prompts us to engage with multiple devices used to implement language policy, which she refers to as language policy ‘mechanisms’. On a visual diagram, she situates these mechanisms at mid-level between policies and practices. The mechanisms could perhaps be regarded as situated at the meso level of social life, although they are not labelled in this way, nor are the terms micro and macro used. In considering the role of mechanisms, the goal is to explore the complex interface between language policies and practices, a point that has been taken up in multiple studies. For example, the ethnographic and discourse analytic studies in a special issue of Language Problems and Language Planning (Horner 2009) explore compliance and resistance to language policy in a variety of interpersonal, educational and workplace settings in Luxembourg. In her commentary in this issue, Shohamy (2009) stresses the importance of studying language policy in terms of human experiences, especially as this enables us to shed light on the interface between top-down policy and bottom-up practices (see Kaplan and Baldauf 1997). Moreover, Shohamy underlines the potential applications of this kind of research in relation to the implementation of language policy:

These people, the consumers of policy, who use or resist the languages dictated to them from the top down, have something to say from the bottom up: their voices need to be heard and incorporated in the formulation of policy. There is an urgent need to observe, study and interpret language experiences in various phases of people’s lives in multiple domains. Such an effort may lead to a more valid type of language policy.

(Ibid.: 188)

Taking a top-down/bottom-up integrativist approach that prioritises discourse allows us to discover nuances, tensions and disjunctures in LPP. With the symbolic function of language often being central to national identity, researchers frequently grapple with the labelling and discursive construction of the status of the language itself, in addition to prescriptivist ideologies concerning what the language ought to be like. In his study on the construction of the Scots language in the context of UK devolution, Unger (2013) analyses official texts (top-down) and transcripts from focus group sessions (bottom-up), in addition to examining political and policy developments. The starting point for his study is the overall low evaluation of Scots, as well as the fact that many people, even Scots speakers themselves, consider it as a dialect rather than a language. Unger finds that Scots
has increasingly become part of the political agenda over the last 20 years, although this top-down discourse has not translated into the implementation of language activists’ goals, such as the provision of uniform bilingual signage. Unger explains how the discursive ‘double-voiced’ strategies that are deployed by focus group participants closely resemble those of official discourse, thus presenting myriad challenges for altering language policy. These discourses simultaneously value and devalue Scots, constructing it as part of cultural identity but not necessary for national identity. On a broader level, Unger asserts that the mutually constitutive relationship between discourse and social practices is ‘nowhere more apparent than in the area of language policy’ (ibid.: 155).

Another study focused on identity and linguistic minorities in Europe is Jaffe’s (1999) seminal work on language ideologies on Corsica, which provides a fine-grained ethnographic study of minority language activism. Similar to Unger, Jaffe encounters patterns of ‘double discourse’ in her fieldwork, with the same speakers sometimes positively and negatively evaluating Corsican. One of the central issues that she explores is the way that the Corsican language itself is discursively and strategically constructed. For example, Jaffe notes how activists construct Corsican as different from Italian so that it can be perceived as a language in its own right and therefore stand up as a valid competitor to the hegemony of French. Her research centres upon issues of material and symbolic linguistic domination, including language-in-education policy and the teaching of Corsican. Jaffe concludes that the promotion of Corsican does not constitute an example of either successful or failed language policy. However, in her subsequent research, she shows how a flexible language-in-education policy is adopted, which in turn appears to support the use of Corsican and allows children to build on their multilingual resources (Jaffe 2011).

Central to Jaffe’s research on Corsica is the way that agency intersects with structure, with language ideologies playing a key mediational role in the process.

Also taking a language ideological approach, Bokhorst-Heng and Wee (2007) sketch how top-down government policy has to a large extent impacted on linguistic practices in Singapore. Language is regulated on many levels in the small multilingual country whose official discourse constructs national identity as multilingual and recognises four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil. Since the 1980s, bilingual education aims for all students to master English plus their ascribed ‘mother tongue’. Each person is assigned to one of three language groups based on their father’s ethnicity. In addition to this, there exist further layers to language policy, including the regulation of Chinese itself. The ‘Speak Mandarin’ campaign has largely homogenised the use of Chinese, with people having switched from other Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hokkien and Teochew to speaking Mandarin only, and also to exclusively using Hanyu Pinyin, the Romanised version of Mandarin. However, there has been resistance to this policy with regard to personal names, with individuals continuing to give their children dialect names rather than Hanyu Pinyinised ones, as stipulated by official requests. To illustrate this resistance, Bokhorst-Heng and Wee cite a poem by Tan (1982) published in the Straits Times, the last stanza of which reads as follows:

When you determined what language I
should speak,
I complied.
Now, you want me to change my name after
four generations in Singapore …
it’s tough, it’s real tough!
A proud, a very, very proud Tan.

(Bokhorst-Heng and Wee 2007: 335)
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Bokhorst-Heng and Wee maintain that the Hanyu Pinyinising of personal names was regarded as going too far, in that there was no evident purpose to this policy and that it would create a break with ancestral ties. Furthermore, such a change would involve altering pronunciation as well as orthography. They show how the discourses of pragmatism and communitarianism, linked to Confucianism, that had enabled the government’s implementation of the shift from other Chinese dialects to Mandarin in nearly all areas of social life, functioned in the opposite way when it came to the practice of personal naming. From this, Bokhorst-Heng and Wee stress the importance of considering language policy in ‘the context of the broader discourses operant in a nation, and in its ideological framing’ (ibid.: 339). The discursive frame beyond the level of the state facilitates agency on the part of individuals who wish to resist the naming policy that is stipulated by state organisations.

The conclusions drawn by Bokhorst-Heng and Wee in their study, which emphasise the role of discourses beyond the level of the state, resonate with commentary on sociolinguistics and globalisation (see Coupland 2003). Blommaert’s (2010: 32) discussion of sociolinguistic scales is particularly illuminating here, as he points out that ‘events and processes in globalization occur at different scale-levels, and we see interactions between the different scales as a core feature of understanding such events and processes’. Scales refer not only to spatial but also temporal dimensions and are conceptualised as interlocked ‘SpaceTime’ that is inherently social and contextualised via semiotic processes. Blommaert’s discussion is informed by Wallerstein’s (2004) work on world-systems analysis as a means of prompting us to explore the interface between local (micro) and global (macro) scales, with specific reference to issues in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.

This line of thought takes us full circle back to Heller’s work on language, identity and nation, primarily in Canada. In a reflective monograph, Heller (2011) provides a discussion of 30 years of ethnographic work in multiple sites in Canada and beyond, including factories, schools, community associations, Christmas markets and so on, in order to explore the linkages and disjunctures between local and global sociolinguistic phenomena, with the state as the potential intermediary in these processes. With regard to the issue of bridging the macro and micro, Heller cogently lays out her rationale for adopting Giddens’s (1984) stance that the macro–micro dichotomy is non-existent and that there are instead:

Observable processes that tie local forms of social action into durable, institutionalized frames that constrain what can happen along chains or flows of interactions: they constrain the distribution of resources, the mobility of social actors, the shape activities can take and where and when they can unfold.

(Ibid.: 40)

Drawing on her extensive ethnographic experience and findings, Heller reminds us that the concepts of language, identity and nation are by no means natural objects but rather are concepts constructed over space and time. This is perhaps becoming all the more obvious in the period of late modernity that is marked by accelerated globalisation, with the centrality of the (nation) state in the organisation of social life and linguistic practices being increasingly challenged. Most importantly, she highlights the need for us to continue to scrutinise the methods and theories of social science. In this way, research on language and identity in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics can play a leading role if scholars – as Heller encourages us to do – take up the challenge to ‘break down the false dichotomy of structure and agency to reveal agents involved in the construction of social order, using the resources they find at hand’ (ibid.: 193).
Beyond the micro–macro interface

Summary

Scholars in the social sciences have long grappled with the perceived gap between the micro and macro levels of social life and the parallel concern of the interface between agency and structure. Debates on this issue have gained in prominence since the 1980s and new paradigms have been developed to address the relationship between the macro and micro and structure and agency. In this context, theoretical models were developed that aimed to bridge the micro–macro levels of analysis, mainly by means of integrative approaches, some of which proposed the introduction of an intermediary, meso level of inquiry. On the other hand, some researchers do not recognise the existence of micro and macro levels of social life. This latter approach is advocated by Anthony Giddens (1984), whose theory of structuration emphasises the mutually constitutive relationship between agency and structure and notably prioritises the role of discourse as pivotal in the dynamics of social life.

In this light, research in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics has considerable capacity to lay bare the ways that agency and structure intersect. As Heller (2011: 34) puts it, studies that focus on issues of language and identity are especially well suited to this purpose due to ‘the complex role of language in constructing the social organization of production and distribution of the various forms of symbolic and material resources essential to our lives and to our ability to make sense of the world around us’. This chapter discussed how studies in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics that examine identity in some way have grappled with issues of contextualisation as they relate to the study of specific instances of interactional discourse. We then showed how contemporary research on language policy has been influenced by the discursive turn and discussed the growing emphasis on exploring the interface between top-down policy and bottom-up practices and the identities that are implicated in this interface. We have also observed how studies on language and identity that employ discourse analytic and ethnographic methods are an optimal means of linking fine-grained observations of spoken interaction with the functioning of broader social, political and economic structures.

Related topics

Historical perspectives on language and identity; Language and identity in linguistic ethnography; Language and ethnic identity; Linguistic practices and transnational identities; Class in language and identity research; A linguistic ethnography of identity: adopting a heteroglossic frame; Constructing age identity: the case of Mexican EFL learners; The significance of sexual identity to language learning and teaching; An identity transformation? Social class, language prejudice and the erasure of multilingual capital in higher education; Being a language teacher in the content classroom: teacher identity and content and language integrated learning (CLIL); Disability identities and category work in institutional practices: the case of a ‘typical ADHD girl’; ‘Comes with the territory’: expert–novice and insider–outsider identities in police interviews; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.

Further reading

Kristine Horner and John Bellamy

Bucholtz, M. and Hall, K. (2005). ‘Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach’, Discourse Studies, 7(4/5): 585–614. (Bucholtz and Hall present a clear and detailed analysis of identity as it is constructed in interaction, focusing on the importance of micro and macro approaches in identity research, as well as related issues of agency and structure.)

Coupland, N., Sarangi, S. and Candlin, C.N. (eds) (2001). Sociolinguistics and social theory. London: Longman. (This volume underlines the need for sociolinguistics to engage with social theory. See the chapters by Coupland and Heller for discussion of the micro–macro interface and related debates on the agency–structure interface.)


References


Deumert, A. (2010). ‘“It would be nice if they could give us more language”: serving South Africa’s multilingual patient base’, Social Science and Medicine, 71: 53–61.


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