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The future of identity research

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The future of identity research
Impact and new developments in sociolinguistics

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the impact of identity research and possible future developments it might take. Although we focus on sociolinguistics, the issues that we discuss are of relevance for applied linguists with an interest in language and identity. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 1) were the first to highlight potential problems with the use of ‘identity’ as a concept in social science research, proclaiming that identity ‘tends to mean too much […] too little […] or nothing at all’. Now, nearly two decades later, the concept of identity is more relevant and prominent than ever (as this volume illustrates) and it continues to gain momentum in the field. This growing interest reflects current concerns and experiences with globalisation and increasing contact between cultures on the individual and societal level. These developments are strongly influenced by factors such as migratory movements and new technologies, which have facilitated the environment for identity work.

Based on a systematic review of recent work, we propose to map the complexities of identity in the heterogeneous and interdisciplinary field of sociolinguistics and to explore the many ways in which identity research has a significant impact in a variety of societal contexts. In particular, we will address three issues that we deem are crucial for achieving theoretically and methodologically sound future work on identity: authenticity, fluidity of identities and the role of the researcher and research ethics. The first issue for discussion is authenticity, especially with regard to authentic data and authentic speakers or participants. We will discuss this issue with reference to the multiplicity and performative aspect of identities. The second main issue that we will address in this chapter is fluidity of identities. In this section we will explore how categorisation and performativity contribute to identity creation. The third main development in current identity research affects the role of the researcher and research ethics (also see Hultgren et al., this volume; Giampapa, this volume). With reference to an increase in research on online communities, we will argue that the multiple identities of the researcher can have significant implications for research ethics. In particular, we will suggest that there is a significant amount of overlap between these different strands of development, sometimes so much that it is difficult
to distinguish between them. For example, the issue of performativity affects all three issues; it is a means of expressing the fluidity of the multiplicity of identities available to us, which has a substantial influence on what determines authenticity in action. At the same time, researchers have (potentially) an increasing number of identities at their disposal, which they need to negotiate, coordinate and perform in specific settings, particularly in virtual environments.

While we can only give a very tentative prediction about the direction in which language and identity research is heading in sociolinguistics, we do believe that the topics discussed in this chapter need to be addressed if we are to make further progress in identity research, especially within the context of globalisation and new media.

**Current issues and future directions**

**Authenticity and identity**

Among the current issues in identity research, the concept of authenticity is one of the most central ones. Therefore, it is only appropriate that this is the first issue we address in this chapter. Traditionally, authenticity has been a central issue in linguistics – and especially in sociolinguistics – where the authenticity of the participants and the data that they provide are regarded as vital to the success of research projects. Yet, the very concept of what constitutes authentic data or authentic speakers has received relatively little attention until fairly recently. In a noteworthy paper by Bucholtz (2003) on the authentication of identity, she suggests that ‘authenticity underwrites nearly every aspect of sociolinguistics’ and, crucially for readers of this volume, ‘sociolinguistic investment in authenticity [is] an implicit theory of identity’ (p. 398). We will not reiterate her criticism here; rather, we will offer an overview of different perspectives on authenticity and how authenticity interacts and overlaps with other concepts discussed in this chapter to underline its complexity.

Authenticity is, very much like fluidity (which we will discuss later), an important and widely discussed issue in identity research both inside and outside linguistics; for example, in studies on race and ethnicity (e.g. Johnson 2003) and sex and gender (e.g. Holt and Griffin’s 2003 study on authenticity in the lesbian and gay scene). These studies emphasise the influence of the global on the local (especially Holt and Griffin 2003) and the possible implications of the ‘arbitrariness of authenticity’, when our very beliefs of what constitutes (in)authentic behaviours impede communication and cultural change (Johnson 2003: 3).

In sociolinguistics we often seem to assume that our readers intuitively know what is meant by ‘authenticity’. Lindholm (2008: 2), however, argues that authenticity is a combination of two overlapping modes: ‘origin’, which refers to the genealogical and the historical level, and ‘content’, which includes identity and communication. Applied to our (socio)linguistic context, the ‘origin’ would be the history of the observed individual or group, for example their ethnicity or regional origin, whereas ‘content’ might refer to the personal identities and the language patterns in whichever form of communication we choose to observe. Lindholm (2008) admits that these two modes are not always compatible and they may not always be involved in the same way depending on the situation. In fact, especially with regard to language, there is evidence that people use the content level (e.g. speech patterns) to construct alternative narratives about their origins to their actual ‘authentic’ personal history (or biography) in order to negotiate a new and more desirable identity.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to regard authenticity as constructed from the linguistic and paralinguistic features available to the actor to do identity work during interaction. Here the
process of styling, i.e. all the strategic actions and performances that individuals use to construct
their identities (Coupland 2007), gains particular relevance. Styling is part of how social identi-
ties are constructed, for example by deliberately changing the tone of voice, dialect or bodily
gestures (Coupland 2001). In this way, styling ‘creates social meanings around personal authen-
ticity and inauthenticity’ (Coupland 2007: 25) where ‘inauthenticity’ can be used as a stylistic
element to portray a different identity, for example by putting on a different accent. Such
changes in language use are well known from variationist sociolinguistic studies where partici-
pants have been observed to – consciously or subconsciously – adopt a more formal style in
interview settings as compared to, for example, in interactions involving gossip. However, this
kind of styling can also be used to cross social boundaries, for example as an expression of loyalty
to the intended in-group, or as a ‘denaturalizing move’ to emphasise differences between groups
(Bucholtz 2011: 70). To be viewed as authentic, the actor has to select the most relevant type
and the ‘right’ amount of authenticity features in order to be convincing (termed ‘enoughness’
in Blommaert and Varis 2011). The notion of authenticity is well illustrated in Bucholtz’s (2011)
study on the use of African-American language features by European-American students. Their
knowledge and use of linguistic features associated with African Americans expressed loyalty
to a certain kind of lifestyle, influenced by music which developed in predominantly African-
American communities (in this case, particularly rap and hip hop). Members of outgroups, such
as students who did not subscribe to this lifestyle, perceived this language use as a group marker.
However, on closer inspection some of the African-American language features used by these
European-American students did not fully conform to the way they would normally be used in
African-American English. Therefore, while their use of African-American English was con-
vincing enough for other (outgroup) European-American students, it may well be regarded as
inauthentic and ‘not enough’ by African-American students.

This process of constructing authenticity in communication illustrates that the issue of
authenticity in identity research is closely connected to the fluidity of identities. Given the re-
levance of the notion of fluidity in discussions of identity and globalisation, it is no surprise that
the concept of authenticity has received increased attention in discussions and research on lan-
guage and globalisation. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, globalisation is generally regarded
to lead to a multiplicity of identities, greater variation of identities and the idea of hybridity
and uniformity in identities (see e.g. Heller 2003). At the same time, however, authenticity is
relevant when global phenomena become localised and, in the process, lose some uniformity. A
good example of this kind of transformation is given in Pennycook’s (2007) paper on the locali-
sation of hip hop culture where, in a first wave, hip hop rooted in African-American culture
spread globally but proved to be inauthentic and hence unsuitable for many local hip hop artists
in countries such as Malaysia and Korea (Pennycook 2007), Germany (Androutsopoulos 2003),
China (Wang 2013) and Russia (Ivanov 2013). One major theme in all of these discussions on
the localisation of hip hop is the use of language – mostly English versus local languages – and
the use of code-switching. Interestingly, in this particular context, the use of English can be seen
as a remnant of the global aspect of the hip hop phenomenon. This happened within a context
in which there was an increasing use of the English language internationally and locally and
growing bilingualism and multilingualism with English and other languages.

Many discussions of bilingualism and multilingualism rest on the assumption that the ‘native
speaker’ is the most authentic representative of a language. This is apparent, for example, in
the well-established focus on studying native speakers and in fact on only very specific groups
of these native speakers in variationist sociolinguistic studies (see Bucholtz 2003 for a critique).
In the domain of second language acquisition, sounding more ‘native-like’ is often associated
with sounding authentic (e.g. Flege 1991; Bongaerts et al. 2000; Singleton 2001). However, it is notoriously difficult to define the concept of ‘native speaker’; moreover, public perception differs greatly from scholarly definitions in sociolinguistics. In public perception, native speakers are regarded not only as the ‘stakeholders’ of ‘their’ language, but also as the people who intuitively know what is correct and what is incorrect language use (Davies 2003: 2). The native speaker concept is also closely related to the perceived cultural and national background of the speaker. For example, in one of our studies (Beinhoff 2008), first language speakers of English from the Caribbean were rated as sounding less like native speakers of English than German and Greek second language speakers of English. This study revealed that the concept of native speaker is more related to a specific model of what a native speaker should sound like. Similarly, a study by Adolphs (2005) showed that what is perceived to be a native speaker changes over time and is therefore an unstable concept even on an individual level.

No wonder then that, in discussions of the native speaker, authenticity is an important aspect. This is especially the case in sociolinguistics, where the idea of a native language is a central component of individual and social identity. However, Myhill (2003) argues that for some individuals and communities (e.g. Armenian, Jewish, Greek and Chinese communities) a native language is not necessarily a means of identification. Based on the above assumption, however, members of these communities who do not speak the communities’ assumed ‘native language’ may – from an outsider’s perspective – not count as ‘authentic’ members of their relevant community, which could leave them vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination (ibid.).

While we may perceive a trend towards multilingualism globally, Blommaert (2006) points out that regionally (and to some extent also nationally) monolingualism may be enforced, e.g. by prescribing the use of one particular language in official contexts. Here, language is considered to be a vehicle of authenticity and – regional or national – values, as Blommaert’s (ibid.: 243) example of ‘Flemish nationalism’ vs ‘Belgian-Francophone imperialism’ illustrates. Language policies such as these can be seen as attempts at ‘purifying’ language and making it appear more authentic in the local context and indicate a move towards local monolingual identities. Authenticity is also a highly relevant issue in indigenous language education. The link between identity and indigenous/heritage languages is particularly strong in this area. The main concerns here are what level of knowledge constitutes a heritage language identity, i.e. to what level do the children of migrants have to be proficient in their heritage language(s)? Since the use of heritage languages is often restricted to particular environments (e.g. at home versus professional/work settings), the question is what level of use has to be achieved to pass as an ‘authentic’ speaker and representative of the relevant community. For example, in their study on Korean heritage language provisions in Montreal, Park and Sarkar (2007) found that Korean parents saw the main benefits of their children learning to speak Korean not only in their ability to speak with their grandparents, but also in future economic opportunities. To achieve this, a relatively high level of proficiency and a linguistic repertoire that went well beyond a single (i.e. home or professional) setting was necessary. On the other hand, heritage language learners can regard themselves as authentic members of their heritage community without high levels of proficiency in all aspects of their heritage language (Giangreco 2000 in Carreira 2004). This raises questions related to cultural and ethnic identity such as who is given access to language classes in indigenous or heritage languages and whether these are restricted to people from the specific heritage background (and whoever is included in these groups) (see Henze and Davis 1999). For example, in German schools, language classes in Turkish used to be only accessible for children of Turkish ancestry (Gogolin and Reich 2001).
So far we have introduced the wide and varied approaches to authenticity and related issues. Although it is not possible to cover the entirety of such a complex concept in this chapter, the discussion has shown how authenticity is central to identity construction and – as in the case of styling – can change identities temporarily, which will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

Fluidity and multiplicity of identities: categorisation vs performativity

The second issue to be addressed in this chapter is fluidity and multiplicity of identities. It is a well-established view that identities are not fixed but rather context-dependent (see Baxter, this volume). However, while some theories assume that an individual’s identity is relatively stable (e.g. self-schema theory in Markus 1977), the idea that identity is highly variable seems to have gained more supporters in recent decades based on more compelling evidence (see e.g. Onorato and Turner 2004). This is especially the case for studies in language and identity in both socio- and applied linguistics but extends to other areas of research that inform the theoretical underpinnings of linguistic research.

These issues have become particularly relevant with the rise in the use of social media, as well as within the context of globalisation more generally, as more potential identities are made available to us, leading to the idea of a multiplicity of identities. Such multiplicity of identities, we argue, increases the likelihood that identities become more hybrid and fluid on an individual level, which needs to be considered in research design and methodologies.

One of the most widely accepted approaches to identity construction is the theory of categorisation or self-categorisation as coined by Turner (1987) following Tajfel’s social identity theory (Tajfel 1978). This theory suggests that, in particular social situations, specific categories of an individual’s self are more salient than others, and this saliency changes depending on the context. For example, we are conscious that our identities as members of the academic community are highly salient as we write this chapter, which is represented by the academic register we employ. In other contexts, say, when we are with our families, our identities as daughter, son or sibling will be salient and this will be indexed in our linguistic behaviour.

Closely related to categorisation is the concept of ‘performativity’. Following Butler (1990), Pennycook (2004: 8) defined performativity as ‘the way in which we perform acts of identity as an ongoing series of social and cultural performances rather than as the expression of a prior identity’ (see Baxter, this volume). This understanding of performativity is based on the observation that salient categories of the self emerge in ongoing interactions and other embodied presentations, such as ways of dressing, walking and so on (Woodward 2002). The main idea of performativity and its relationship with identity goes back to Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis, which highlights the performative aspect of social interaction; this informed Butler’s (1990) groundbreaking work on the performativity of gender. Since then, the idea of performativity has permeated research on identity and informed the idea of hybridity and fluidity of identities. This has become particularly relevant in recent years, as seemingly a multiplicity of identities have become more available to us (although see Block, this volume) and modes of interaction have changed, as is evident in the growing body of research on the representation and negotiation of identity in social media (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2006; Bamman et al. 2014).

The increasing multiplicity of identities along with the notion of fluidity has received a lot of attention with regard to race as an identity inscription, where categories are seen as being
socially constructed rather than as genetically endowed; this has led to an increasing blurring of racial categories, particularly in heteroglossic contexts such as the United States (Rockquemore and Arend 2002). In addition, Bucholtz (2011) emphasises that all available identity categories are constantly negotiated and navigated in social interactions, which means that ‘one’s assigned social category is not always the same as one’s social identity’ (p. 1). For example, in another of our studies, Rasinger (2012) illustrates how a Polish migrant living in the United Kingdom constructs her Polish identity while simultaneously separating herself from the local Polish community and ‘everything [that] is Polish’ (p. 42). However, there seem to be limits to this fluidity and multiplicity, as studies in gender and sexual identity suggest that traditional categories (as operationalised through sexuality labels like ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘bisexual’) still prevail as identity categories (see Russell et al. 2009).

Kendall (1998) also challenges the assumption of a greater fluidity and multiplicity especially in online interactions, suggesting that people prefer not to view themselves as performed characters. Thus, there may be a discrepancy between how people view themselves and how they are seen by others. This is in line with Blommaert’s (2006: 238) notion of an ‘inhabited’ and ‘ascribed’ identity, where the inhabited identity is one that people claim for themselves, whereas the ascribed identity is imposed on them by others. Such a divergence between the inhabited and ascribed identity is particularly relevant in second language acquisition contexts, where language learners are especially vulnerable to being categorised on the basis of their linguistic competence and assumed cultural background in second language environments (see e.g. Preece 2009; Block 2014 [2007]). This is illustrated in our own work in which Beinhoff (2013) found that German and Greek second language speakers of English were considered to be significantly less educated and intelligent than southern British English first language speakers based on their accents. Interestingly, and possibly in line with current stereotypes, the German speakers were rated more favourably regarding their level of education and intelligence than the Greek speakers. Such assumptions and judgements about the speaker’s identity (i.e. the ascribed identity) can be a threat to the speaker’s inhabited identity.

Increasing multilingualism – and resulting multiplicity of identities – challenges traditional frameworks and methods for linguistic investigation, such as social network analysis, which is based on the assumption that individuals have a first language and that this is a central part of a collective cultural identity. Lanza and Svendsen (2007) argue that multilingual communities are more complex than traditional (and often monolingual) social networks, which were originally the basis for this approach. For this reason, the social network approach may not necessarily be applicable in multilingual and multicultural communities. This is particularly the case in urban areas, characterised by superdiversity and heteroglossia, where these traditional models of communication are no longer adequate. Otsuji and Pennycook (2010), for example, have coined the term ‘metrolingualism’ to describe the linguistic practices of the bi/multilingual denizens of urban settings. They suggest that metrolingualism ‘does not assume connections between language, culture, ethnicity, nationality or geography, but rather seeks to explore how such relations are produced, resisted, defied or rearranged; its focus is not on language systems but on languages as emergent from contexts of interaction’ (ibid.: 246). This approach, then, takes as its point of departure how bi/multilingual linguistic repertoires are deployed in specific contexts and social interactions and how these index identities rather than starting with relatively fixed entities like ethnic communities, professional groups or first-language background.

Other well-established frameworks, such as the notion of motivation in second language acquisition, are also challenged by the notions of fluidity and multiplicity. For example, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) emphasise that motivation in second language acquisition can be strongly...
influenced by linguistic and sociocultural fluidity and diversity arising from globalisation. This potential for change in motivation is very much initiated by the shift of ‘ownership’ of the second or target language, especially in English as a global language, where the concept of integrative motivation (which relies on a target group of first language of ‘native’ speakers of the language; see Piller 2002) is challenged when such a target group or speakers does not exist any more, or loses its significance (for a discussion on the concept of ‘ownership’ in language learning see Norton 1997).

In addition, an increasing fluidity and multiplicity of identities can also affect the ‘L2-self’. The L2-self has at its core the notion of the learner’s ‘ideal self’, i.e. the ‘attributes that someone would ideally like to possess’ (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009: 4). However, this ideal self may in some contexts compete with a multitude of identities. For example, within the context of English as a global language, second language learners of English may have to decide whether their ideal self is part of the global English community or whether it is more orientated towards acquiring a first language variety of English as fully as possible. Indeed, it seems that it is difficult – if not impossible – to decide between the two, which can lead to uncertainties about the desired aim in acquiring the second language (Jenkins 2007) and can result in changes in motivation (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009).

To sum up, in this section we saw how, in social interactions, identities are constantly negotiated. Identities are fluid and may also be hybrid, and this fluidity and hybridity may affect the way individuals perform their identities in different domains. However, so far, the identities of the researchers who are conducting identity studies have not been taken into consideration. It is our view that, in identity research, the researcher’s own identity can potentially shape the findings considerably; we will look at this issue in the following section.

Ethics of identity research and the role of the researcher

The first part of this chapter discussed the theoretical and methodological complexities associated with researching linguistic identities. The issues involved are considerable: on the one hand, personal identity may be, in the words of Riley (2007: 72), ‘unanalysable’; on the other, social identities are constructed, or played out/perform, in social interaction. Within this context of methodological challenges linked to the empirical study of identity sits the concept of research ethics. A marked shift towards safeguarding research participants, researchers and institutions has resulted in considerable attention being paid to what constitutes ‘ethical’ research. At the same time, recent developments in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis have seen research increasingly moving from physical contexts to virtual or digital communities, which brings particular methodological and ethical challenges.

The concept of ethics is difficult to define, let alone to operationalise. Hammersley and Traianou (2012: 16) define the term as: ‘A set of principles that embody or exemplify what is good or right, or allow us to identify what is bad or wrong.’ Along similar lines, research ethics may best be defined as ‘a type of applied ethics – between morality and legality’ (Esposito 2012: 1); in other words, something that encompasses both the – increasingly important – aspect of legalistic research governance and judgements about what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ from a moral point of view.

The rise of a litigation culture in the UK over the last two decades has seen considerable efforts being made in the development of robust research ethics procedures. Professional organisations, such as the British Association for Applied Linguistics, the British Sociological Association and the British Psychological Society, publish ethical guidelines and guides for
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good practice. Research concordats lay out protocols that ensure research integrity and ethical principles. Legislation with regard to research ethics is complex: in the United Kingdom alone, linguistic research involves, at a minimum, the Data Protection Act (1998) and, potentially, the Mental Capacity Act (2005). In addition, universities and other research institutions have often sophisticated ethics protocols and approval processes, 'which can be both a help and a hindrance in fostering ethical practice' (Eckert 2013: 11). Within the UK, research involving the National Health Service and Social Care has to go through their separate and often lengthy approval processes, as does research that includes organisations falling under the remit of the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Defence. Studies involving young or vulnerable participants, or 'sensitive' research sites, are subject to researchers obtaining clearance from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). The Equality Act (2010) protects people from discrimination based on age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation; libel laws offer protection to those subject to libellous behaviour. The UK Research Integrity Office's 'Code of Practice' (UKRIO 2009) stipulates seven principles researchers and research organisations ought to adhere to, among them honesty and integrity.

In the midst of what appears to be – and often is – a legal minefield is the identity researcher, attempting not only to explore the hard-to-explore, but also to do so trustworthily, that is, to conduct research that is based on a ‘set of standards that demonstrates that a research study has been conducted competently and ethically’ (Rallis and Rosman 2009: 264). The aim of this section is not to discuss the mechanics, let alone the intricacies, of ethics in linguistic research (see Eckert 2013 and Rasinger 2013 for overviews of key issues and procedures), but to put the emphasis firmly on what research ethics means to us as identity researchers. The role of the researcher is inextricably linked to the issues discussed in the chapter so far: linguistic fieldwork, particularly fieldwork where the researcher interacts with participants, places us in a position that requires the negotiation of multiple identities at the same time while also catering for diverse requirements. The quest for authentic linguistic data, as discussed above, takes place within a context in which we ‘should do [our] utmost to ensure the accuracy of data and results’ while complying ‘with all legal and ethical requirements’ (UKRIO 2009: 7). Data collected through interaction with participants inevitably means that the researcher’s identity, or identities, becomes an integral part of the fieldwork and data-generation process; and the need for data requires us to adopt, or emphasise, identities that are performed as part of the process. Norton and Early (2011: 432), in their discussion of a digital literacy project in Uganda, provide insights into how their ‘researcher identities were subject to constant negotiation and change’, leading to a multiplicity of identities they adopted as part of the process. The notion of authenticity, then, does not only concern the data produced, but also those who elicit it.

Online research: multiple identities, trust and deception

In this final section, we aim at bringing together the three strands of our argument by looking in more detail at cyberspace as a context for researching identity. The rise of research on online communities in the form of digital (or virtual) ethnographies has resulted in an additional layer of complexity to be added. Rallis and Rosman (2009) draw up a set of dichotomies inherent to research ethics: privacy and confidentiality; deception and consent; and trust and betrayal. In the context of online research, these dichotomies become, potentially, intensified. Eynon et al. (2014) provide a thorough discussion of the ethical issues particular to online research, and highlight, in addition to the issues Rallis and Rosman raise, the specific role that researchers play in online settings. At the time of writing this chapter, a scandal involving the social networking site
Facebook has been making global headlines. As part of a research project into users’ emotions, Facebook manipulated user entries to see what effect this had on users’ emotions. Having failed to obtain consent from the participants involved, informed consent being at the very core of research ethics, such manipulation was highly unethical.

However, ethical issues in online research can be much more subtle. In their guidelines on ethical decision-making in Internet research, Markham and Buchanan (2012) highlight that, as Internet-based research is likely to include human participants at some point (an issue that is of course particularly prevalent in identity research), the same ethical principles apply that would be used in traditional research. As Markham and Buchanan suggest, particular emphasis needs to be paid to the contextualised nature of norms, risk and harm, as what is socially acceptable and legal in the local context of the researcher may not be acceptable in the location of the participants. In other words, despite the researcher(s) and the participants sharing virtual space, they may be physically located thousands of miles apart and subject to different legal and moral frameworks.

Driscoll and Gregg (2010) discuss how online identity – or identities – can mean different things for different people. For some, online identities can be very different from their ‘real life’ identity, whereas for others their online identities are an extension of their identities in work and/or home domains. This pertains to both the researcher and those being researched. In their discussion of LGBT dating websites, Driscoll and Gregg take up the issue of self-categorisation in online profiles. While identity in the physical world is constructed over time in face-to-face interaction, most online profiles allow – or force – users to self-categorise into discrete categories. Mowlabocus’s (2012) study on the gay dating website Gaydar demonstrates how user identities are created by clicking ascribed categories, with templates supporting this construction. Similarly, Hughey (2008), while discussing the ‘disembodied identities’ in a virtual community of Black Greeks, suggests that screen names function as textual monikers to ‘represent specific forms of identity’ (p. 540). Identities within the community are far from static, being both dynamic and shaped by both the constraints of the online and text-based communication, as well as real-life experiences.

Static self-categorisation brings with it the problem of pre-defined perceptions of other users. For example, Baker (2005) describes how particular characteristics are openly deemed undesirable in gay men’s dating ads, which he illustrates by beginning his 2008 volume with a fieldwork anecdote: ‘some people get really angry about the male and female labels’ (Baker 2008: 1). This element of static identity inscriptions in online sites is in stark contrast to the dynamic aspect of identity construction in the physical world.

Multiple identities and authenticity are, of course, not only a problem for researchers, but can also be tools. Both authors of this chapter are White Western Europeans and both of us have an interest in migration issues, often involving people that are not part of our own ethnic, linguistic or social group. Entering a fieldwork site in the real world poses considerable questions – issues exhaustively discussed in related research. On the surface, researching online communities, for example by means of a digital ethnography, facilitates access. Online profiles also allow each of us to be whoever we would like to – or pretend to – be. One of our colleagues, for example, has two profiles on a popular social networking site: a private one, with clear access controls, presumably only shared with close family and friends, and a public one, clearly marking her as a professional academic. Issues regarding access aside, the use of personal profiles, as opposed to professional, research-specific ones, raises the problem of the boundaries between personal and professional spaces being increasingly blurred, and in particular, in the context of social networking sites, this includes not only the researcher, but also the researcher’s personal – as opposed to professional – social networks.
To an extent, this is the modern equivalent of a problem anthropologists and ethnographers have always faced: how to gain access to a site without our own, personal identity overshadowing our research interests. What is new in digital ethnographies is the ‘non-presentness’. As discussed above, online communities allow users to inhabit whatever identities they choose. This is not only a problem where researchers actively engage with online communities, for example in the form of discussion boards, but also where the role is that of an observer. If membership in an online community implies shared characteristics, pretending to be a member may trick other users into revealing information that they otherwise would keep concealed. Participant consent, if given on the wrong premise, does not solve the issue. Similarly, Duncombe and Jessops (2012) discuss the problem of the ‘commodification of rapport’ (p. 110) and ‘faking friendships’ (pp. 118 f.). Experienced fieldworkers, especially those working with qualitative methods such as interviews, are well versed in establishing a rapport with participants – a rapport that may seem personal to the participant, but may possibly be a mere, albeit valuable, skill for the researcher. The physical remoteness of research in the virtual world may exacerbate this issue, with potentially striking effects not only in terms of ethical issues but also those related to authenticity. In her study on cyber communities, Donath (1998) identifies, among others, two elements of online deception that resonate here: ‘category deception’ (p. 46), where online users claim to be who, in reality, they are not; and the more elaborate ‘trolling’ (p. 43), whereby users deliberately steer discussions through negative, often disparaging, contributions. For the researcher carrying out language and identity studies online, both categorical deceit and trolling pose significant problems. Donath (ibid.: 29) argues that ‘in the disembodied world of the virtual community, identity is also ambiguous’. What may read like the contributions of an adolescent may in reality be that of an adult using a style associated with a much younger age-group, or it may be indeed that of an adolescent and hence authentic – an issue that does not arise in traditional face-to-face interaction.

A superficial scan of the readers’ comments section in the online editions of the Guardian newspaper, traditionally on the left side of the political spectrum, finds several instances where some readers are ascribed the identities of ‘trolls’ by other users, a categorisation that is based on opinions voiced that are not in line with what is perceived to be that of a typical Guardian reader. ‘Don’t feed the troll’ posts are aimed at discouraging other users from engaging with the troll, hence de facto excluding them from the interaction. Conversely, posts on the website of the Telegraph newspaper, generally pursuing a conservative agenda, identify those who post overtly ‘liberal’ opinions as ‘Guardianistas’ – the counterpart to the ‘Tory troll’. The phenomenon on trolling and its perception by online communities is a fascinating one, and one that poses considerable challenges for any researcher who encounters such a community for the first time. In their discussion of trolling on a feminist Internet forum, Herring et al. (2002: 372) point out that trolling is generally aimed at ‘luring others into pointless and time-consuming discussions’ by posting deliberately provocative messages – messages that are, as Donath (1998: 45) points out, also a ‘game about identity perception’. Crucially, experienced members of such a community are able to, or purport to be able to, identify trolls through non-compliance with the prevailing ideology. However, to no extent is it clear whether such non-compliant behaviour is a case of deliberately provocative trolling, or the honestly held opinion of the user posting the message.
In terms of authenticity, it is difficult to judge such posts as being authentic, or unauthentic, in order to steer the interaction. The spatial and temporal remoteness of online interaction, where users communicate asynchronously and may, at any given point in time, disengage from the interaction abruptly, exacerbates the issue. If the alleged troll only posts a single initial message, it is nearly impossible to come to any reliable conclusions about their identity.

**Summary**

In this chapter, we have attempted to sketch both the status quo and the future of research on identities in sociolinguistics, with particular focus on the notions of authenticity, performativity and multiplicity. What has emerged is a complex picture, where these notions, together with regulatory, legal and moral constraints, pose challenges in both theoretical and methodological terms. In this era of globalisation, an increasingly complex world with developments often subsumed under the term of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007), a plethora of identity options appear to exist, although it is important to note that individuals do not have equal access to all identities. New modes of communication and the intangibility of the virtual world require identity researchers to carefully balance personal and professional identities without losing sight of the actual research aims while negotiating tensions and the needs of all those involved in the process.

**Related topics**

Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language and gender identities; Ethics in language and identity research; The politics of researcher identities: opportunities and challenges in identities research; Straight-acting: discursive negotiations of a homomasculine identity; Styling and identity in a second language; Language and identity in the digital age.

**Further reading**


Coupland, N. (2007). *Style: language variation and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Drawing upon the concept of style, Coupland discusses how linguistic variation is used to create, and perform, identity in social interaction.)


References


The future of identity research


