Part II

Categories and dimensions of identity
This page intentionally left blank
Language and ethnic identity

Vally Lytra

Introduction

In his introductory remarks to *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Eriksen (1993: 2) argues that ‘ethnicity and nationalism … have become so visible in many societies that it is impossible to ignore them’. He opens his subsequent brief historical account by stating how ‘in the early twentieth century, many social theorists held that ethnicity and nationalism would decrease in importance and eventually vanish as a result of modernisation, industrialisation and individualism’ (ibid.). Yet, subsequent decades saw the emergence and proliferation of internal and external ethnic conflicts, processes of nation-building in former colonies and the political mobilisation of territorial indigenous minorities, hitherto largely marginalised, demanding that their ethnic identity be recognised by nation states. More recently, ethnic identities have come to the forefront of political debate due to the rapidly changing conditions of late modernity. Processes of globalisation involve flows of people, goods, services and ideas within and across international borders at an unprecedented scale. While such global movements are neither a new nor a unique phenomenon in human history, what is new is that they have reached previously unimaginable levels enabled by profound developments in communication technologies. These global flows are creating ‘global interactions of a new order of intensity’ (Appadurai 1996: 27), leading to new degrees of connectedness and opening up new possibilities for contact, communication and social identification. They bring to the forefront several questions about the relationship between language and ethnic identity in a globalised world, such as: How is ethnic identity imagined and performed but also imposed in discourse and social activity? What is the role of the nation state and its institutions, such as schools and the media, in the social reproduction of ethnic categorisation? Whose linguistic and identity practices are considered authentic and whose are not, and who decides?

I was alerted to some of these questions during my own doctoral research in the late 1990s. In 2007, I reflected on some of my early encounters as an ethnographer with the children I came to work with (Lytra 2007). The research site was a state primary school in a socio-economically deprived neighbourhood in the city centre of Athens, Greece, with an unusually high percentage of children with diverse linguistic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Almost
half of the children spoke a language other than Greek at home. The overwhelming major-
ity of these children were of Roma heritage and spoke a variety of Turkish originating from
the region of Western Thrace, which borders Bulgaria and Turkey in the north east of the
country. Historically, the members of this Turkish-speaking community are part of an indig-
enous religious minority officially called the ‘Muslim minority of Western Thrace’ whose
origins can be traced back to the Ottoman conquest of Greece (1354–1715) (Asimakopoulou
and Christidou-Lionaraki 2002). The legal status and linguistic, cultural, educational and reli-
gious rights of minority members are protected by the Lausanne Treaty signed by Greece and
Turkey in 1923. The Muslim minority of Western Thrace consists of ethnic Turks as well as
Muslims of Pomak and Roma descent, some of the latter being Turkish-speaking and others
Romani-speaking. Economic migration from Western Thrace to Athens in the 1970s and early
1980s led to the settlement of this Turkish-speaking minority community of Roma heritage
in the city centre. Being a beginner learner of standard Turkish at the time, I often asked the
children about the meaning of words and expressions I heard them use in the playground and
at lunchtime. In the early days of my fieldwork children would come up to me and invari-
ably ask the following set of questions in quick succession in Turkish: ‘Adın ne?’ <what’s your
name?>, ‘kaç yaşında?’ <how old are you?> and ‘nerelisin?’ <where are you from?>. My swift
responses in Turkish would generate surprise and delight on the children’s part: ‘κυρία
μιλάς Τουρκικά!’ <Miss you speak Turkish!> they repeatedly said, switching to Greek. One day, at
the end of a long day of observations in the grade 6 classroom, Bahar, an outspoken 12-year-
old bilingual Turkish-Greek girl, came up to me and asked me: ‘κυρία, Turk mi Rum mu?’ <(in
Greek) Miss (switching to Turkish), are you Turkish or Greek?>. Possibly reflecting regional
Turkish language use, Bahar employed the ethno-religious label ‘Rum’ which was used in the
Ottoman period to refer to the Greek Orthodox Christian populations of the Empire, rather
than ‘Yunan’, which is currently used in standard Turkish for a Greek national. Without much
hesitation, I responded in Turkish, ‘Rum’ <Greek>.

My encounters in the field illustrated how a focus on the relationship between language
and ethnic identity can provide a lens for the investigation of processes of social categorisation
and boundary demarcation. The examination of language practices such as language choice or
the use of the ethnic labels Greek and Turk enables us to explore how language users define
and perceive ethnic membership, and how they construct, maintain and police ethnic group
boundaries and exclude those who are not seen as belonging to the group. At the same time,
an attention to language practices allows us to investigate how ethnic boundaries may not
be given once and for all but may be negotiated, resisted and contested. As Pavlenko and
Blackledge (2004: 4) aptly put it, ‘languages may not only be “markers of identity” but also sites
of resistance, empowerment, solidarity and discrimination’. In addition, the examination of the
relationship between language and ethnic identity demonstrates how language use is intrinsically
linked to societal and individual beliefs about languages (influenced by political and historical
conditions); to asymmetrical relations of power; and to language users’ own views of how they
see themselves and each other. Furthermore, as García argues, the co-focus on language and
ethnic identity ‘illuminates processes of cultural change and continuity’ (2010: 519) in that it
highlights not only how individuals and groups construct group membership through language
practices, but also how group membership has changed or stayed the same and the role of lan-
guage practices in these processes.

In this chapter, I take an applied linguistics perspective to the investigation of language and
ethnic identity. According to Brumfit (1995: 27), applied linguistics is defined as ‘the theoretical
and empirical investigation of real-world problems in which languages is a central issue’. This
widely quoted definition reveals the broad scope and coverage of the field of applied linguistics from well-established areas of language study such as language teaching and learning to the media, language and the law, and language and ageing, to mention a few (see the collection of papers in Simpson 2011). Ethnicity from an applied linguistics perspective has been less studied (Harris 2011); however, as I argue in this chapter, in today’s globalised world, ethnic identity is still a salient category for self- and other-ascription and it continues to matter for many people. More specifically, in this chapter, I trace how our understanding of the term ethnicity has changed in the social sciences and how language has developed as a primary marker of group identity. I consider two views of language and ethnic identity, broadly defined as essentialist and constructionist. The first acknowledges that language and ethnic identity are fixed and bounded categories preimposed on individuals and groups in a given interaction. Language is, thus, understood as a marker of an inherited ethnic identity. The second regards language and ethnic identity as social constructs and how these seemingly natural categories are relational and negotiable. In this sense, language and ethnic identity are recognised as historically, contextually, socially and discursively constructed in discourse. While these views have been presented as being exclusive of one another, in practice the conceptual boundaries are not distinct and the relationship between the two views is more nuanced (Harris and Rampton 2003). I discuss key studies that have examined the intersection of language and ethnic identity across different contexts and conditions and highlight some of the main concepts that have informed these studies. Finally, I review some major areas of past and ongoing investigation.

Overview

The word ethnic is derived from the Greek ethnos. Originally meaning ‘number of people living together, company, body of men, band of comrades’, later in antiquity the word came to refer to ‘nation, people’, and in its plural form, ethnē, it was used to denote ‘foreign, barbarous nations’ as opposed to ‘Greeks’ (Liddell and Scott 1940). Influenced by the etymology of the word, ethnic groups have been viewed traditionally as internally consistent with clearly defined boundaries delineated by language, culture, heredity and other attributes. Although the meanings of ethnicity and ethnic groups may appear clear and unambiguously reflecting an objective self-evident social reality, they are in fact complex and emotionally charged concepts (Nash 1989). Fishman (2010: xxv–xxvi) critically reflects on the ‘polysemic’ role of the term ethnicity in the English language and discusses how ethnicity is understood in terms of binary oppositions: i.e. in ‘self-perceived positive and self-perceived negative poles’, between ‘us’ and ‘them’. He alerts us to the centrality of power in self- and other-ascriptions by asserting that ‘ethnicity is a characteristic that can only be attributed to certain others, the contextually more powerful party taking the lead … because its main desideratum power, is by no means consensually allocated or commended’.

Anthropological work has been influential in the ways we have come to think about ethnicity and ethnic groups. Earlier anthropologists saw cultures as independent, bounded units and ethnic groups neatly mapping onto distinct cultures (Levine and Campbell 1972). However, studies by Leach (1977 [1954]) among the Kachin and Shan of Northeast Burma and Moerman (1965, 1974) among the Lue in Thailand, for instance, shifted analytical attention from identifying objective criteria for ethnic affiliation to the importance of the labelling practices of the groups themselves. As Barth (1969: 14) further argued in his seminal introduction to the edited volume Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, ‘the features that are taken into account are not the sum of “objective” differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant’. Barth’s
Vally Lytra

(1969) investigation of ethnic groups and their place in society focuses on group boundaries and the processes by which ethnic groups are generated and maintained. He emphasised that the object of inquiry is ‘the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses’ (ibid.: 15). In this respect, ethnic boundaries organise social life. When interacting with others, ethnic groups maintain their identity by developing criteria that determine membership and exclusion; in other words, who is granted and who is denied membership in the group and by whom. Ethnic identity becomes a matter of self- and other-ascription in social interaction. Ethnic boundaries are viewed as constructed and negotiated by individuals and groups ‘not only by a once-and-for-all recruitment but by continual expression and validation’ (Barth 1969: 15). In this respect, ethnicity is understood as a process, and the boundaries created by ethnicity as porous and flexible and not as fixed by birth. Moreover, rather than being regarded as the essence of the group, certain symbols, including language, are used to distinguish and signal ethnic affiliation.

In the Introduction to The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader, Harris and Rampton (2003) critically discuss essentialist and constructionist views with regard to ethnicity. They consider the former view, which conceptualises ‘ethnicity-as-fixed-and-formative-inheritance’, and the later ‘strategic’ view, which ‘gives more credit to free will and active agency’ and is often referred to ‘as a “roUtes” rather than a “roOts” conception of ethnicity’ (ibid.: 5). However, they contend that the ‘strategic’ view of ethnicity bears traces of the ‘ethnicity-as-inheritance’ view in that it allows individuals and groups one of three sets of possibilities for self-identification: ‘(a) embracing and cultivating their ethno-cultural/linguistic legacy, (b) trying to downplay and drop it as a category that is relevant to them, or (c) drawing attention to the different ethnicities of other people (most often in negative stereotyping)’. They argue for the relevance of a fourth option, ‘(d) taking on someone else’s ethnicity, or creating a new one’, which draws on recent research on hybridity and new ethnicities. Rather than making ethnicity as a social category cease to exist, this fourth option emphasises ‘processes of mixing, blurring and cross-identification’ and brings forth ‘issues like authenticity, entitlement and expropriation’ (ibid.). For instance, Harris’s (2006: 1) examination of language use and ethnicity among British-born South Asian youth illustrates how many of the young people he worked with, ‘while retaining both diasporic and local links with a variety of traditions derived from the Indian subcontinent, are nevertheless fundamentally shaped by an everyday low-key Britishness with new inflections’. He proposes the combined category ‘Brasian’ to highlight the coexistence of both British and South Asian elements in the young people’s meaning-making practices and identity performances (ibid.: 1–2).

Historically, the pre-eminence of language as a primary marker of group identity is closely associated with the rise of the ideology of nationalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Similar to ethnicity, nationalism has been perceived in essentialist terms. The idea of a nation understood as natural and fixed to a particular territory and a particular people who speak a particular language has been attributed to the German Romantics and in particular to the work of the German philosopher Johann Herder. In 1783, Herder outlined the close connection between language and nationality as follows:

Has a nationality anything dearer than the speech of its father? In its speech resides its whole thought domain, its tradition, history, religion and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its eternal good … With language is created the heart of the people.

(Herder in Fishman 1989: 105)
Language and ethnic identity

Nationalism is, thus, based on the one nation–one language paradigm where a language is seen as a whole and bounded system that indexes peoplehood. The understanding of a language as the marker of an inherited national identity and allegiance is reinforced by states and their representatives through language policy and language planning efforts. A case in point is the Turkish language reform that was initiated in the aftermath of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the modern Turkish state in the late 1920s. It sought to replace Ottoman Turkish (Osmanlıca), which was saturated by Turkish, Arabic and Persian vocabulary and grammatical structures, with Öztürkçe (Pure Turkish, where ‘öz’ means both pure and own). Ottoman Turkish had developed into the administrative and literary language of the Ottoman Empire; however, ordinary people did not use it in their everyday speech (Lewis 1999). While the basis of the new standard was the vocabulary, morphology and the phonology of the Turkish variety of Istanbul, it incorporated elements from other Turkish varieties as well as invented new words. The declared aim of the state and its representatives was to rid the Turkish language of the yoke of foreign languages (Arabic and Persian) and break away from its Ottoman heritage by creating a new standard that was designed to function as the language of education, the media and the government as well as constructing a new modern, Western and secular Turkish national identity.

In the Introduction to the *Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, Fishman (1999: 4) reflects on the link between language and ethnic identity thus: ‘Although language has rarely been equated with the totality of ethnicity, it has, in certain historical, regional and disciplinary contexts, been accorded priority within that totality.’

Due to the context-dependency of language and ethnic identity, Fishman continues, it becomes pertinent to examine ‘how and when the link between language and ethnic identity comes about, its saliency and potency, its waxing and waning, its inevitability and the possibility of its sundering’ (ibid.). A focus on different contexts, conditions and perspectives allows us to understand how the dialogic relationship between language and ethnic identity is (re)produced, contested or modified. García (2010: 519) employs the terms ‘languaging’ and ‘ethnifying’ for language and ethnicity respectively. She contends that the use of these terms draws analytical attention to ‘people – individuals and groups – who use discursive and ethnic practices to signify what it is they want to be’ (ibid.), that is, how individuals and groups construct and perform their identities through language in social interaction.

The shift from code and community as bounded units to language users and their languaging and ethnifying practices is premised on the conception of language as a social construction. Makoni and Pennycook (2007: 1) persuasively argue that languages are inventions and that their naming and development has been the outcome of social and semiotic processes. This assertion resonates with Heller’s (2007: 2) view that language is seen as ‘a set of resources which circulate in unequal ways in social networks and discursive spaces, and whose meaning and value are socially constructed within the constraints of social organisational processes, under specific historical conditions’.

Central to this view is a focus on language ideologies as ‘sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use’ (Silverstein 1979: 193). Beliefs about language are never neutral; rather, they provide a window to investigating how individuals and groups make sense of their own language activity, how some languages, language varieties or linguistic forms are more valued than others and how ascribed values may be accepted or resisted. Acknowledging that language and ethnicity are social and cultural constructions allows us to explore how individuals and groups mobilise linguistic resources and beliefs about languages to define themselves and others in ethnic terms in social interaction.
At the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge that individuals bring their past histories and stereotypes into social encounters which may inform their thought and action. For instance, Callahan (2012) documented how service workers identified physical appearance, i.e. ‘looking Spanish’, as one of the main criteria for addressing their customers in Spanish, pointing to the salience of a priori ethnic and racial categories in short one-time service encounters.

Issues and ongoing debates

Key concepts

The relationship between language and ethnic identity has been examined from a range of fields, theoretical approaches and disciplinary traditions (see the collection of papers in Fishman and García 2010, 2011). In this section, I take an applied linguistics perspective and discuss key studies at the intersection of language and ethnic identity, focusing on different contexts and conditions, and highlight some of the main analytic concepts that have informed these studies.

Early studies on language and the negotiation of ethnic identity focused on code-switching (see e.g. Blom and Gumperz 1972; Gumperz 1982; Auer 1984). As Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982: 1) have argued, ‘to understand issues of identity and how they affect and are affected by social, political and ethnic divisions we need to gain insights into the communicative processes by which they arise’. In their classic study of a bi-dialectal community in Hemnesberget, Norway, Blom and Gumperz (1972) observed the everyday language use of individual speakers across different interactional contexts and identified two types of code-switching practices, namely situational and metaphorical. The former refers to a switch from one language to another as the outcome of a change in the situational context, such as a change in participant, setting or activity type. The latter refers to a change in language in order to achieve a particular communicative effect (e.g. to indicate co-membership in a local social network or to emphasise status). Gumperz (1982) further developed the social symbolism of metaphorical code-switching by distinguishing between ‘we code’ and ‘they code’ to represent the in-group and out-group respectively. He explained that ‘the tendency is for the ethnically specific, minority language to be regarded as the “we code” and become associated with in-group and informal activities, and for the majority language to serve as the “they code” associated with the more formal, stiffer and less personal out-group relations’ (Gumperz 1982: 66).

Although Gumperz’s distinction between the we code and the they code is interactionally produced through participants’ language choice and code-switching practices, a common critique is that it assumes a more or less homogeneous speech community and a stable relationship between language and ethnic identity (De Fina 2007). However, early work by LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985) on language and ethnic identity in the Caribbean highlighted that this relationship is neither stable nor easily predicted. More recently, work on ‘crossing’ has shown that interactants may move across social or ethnic boundaries and negotiate identities drawing on linguistic resources of groups to which they are not thought to belong (Rampton 1995; Cutler 1999; Lo 1999; Lytra 2007; Rampton and Charalambous 2012). Even though interactants are seen to be using linguistic resources associated with distinct codes, studies on ‘crossing’ have raised issues of legitimacy and authenticity and have shown how boundaries, including ethnic boundaries, are permeable and ambiguous. Moreover, they have further highlighted the complexity of speakers’ communicative repertoires and language practices as well as the different ways these language practices are embedded in broader social, historical, political and economic contexts.
In addition, the assumed stable link between language and ethnic identity has been further disrupted by research on multilingual language use in conditions of superdiversity. This line of inquiry has shown how speakers draw on the full range of their linguistic repertoires for communicative and identificational purposes (Blommaert and Backus 2011). For instance, García (2009: 45) proposes the term ‘translanguaging’, defined as ‘multiple discursive practices in which bilinguals engage in order to make sense of their bilingual worlds’. She views translanguaging as ‘go[ing] beyond what has been termed code-switching, although it includes it, as well as other kinds of bilingual use and bilingual contact’ (ibid.). In a similar vein, Blackledge and Creese (2010) employ the term ‘flexible bilingualism’, while, following Bakhtin (1986), Bailey (2007: 257) uses the concept of ‘heteroglossia’ to show ‘(a) the simultaneous use of different kinds of forms or signs and (b) the tensions and conflicts among those signs, based on the sociohistorical associations they carry with them’. Otsuji and Pennycook (2010: 244) put forth the term ‘metrolingualism’ to ‘describe the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language’, and Saxena (2014) coined the notion of ‘lifestyle diglossia’ to examine how the language choices (such as language change or shift) people make are closely connected to chosen lifestyles. These concepts provide lenses to theorise how language users move fluidly and flexibly across languages in social contexts. By redefining what counts as language competence, ‘ranging from fully formal language learning to entirely “informal” encounters with language’ (Blommaert and Backus 2011: 2), they question the assumed stable relationship between language, community and ethnicity on which much of the earlier code-switching research was predicated.

In applied linguistics, social constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives have been influential in the study of language and ethnic identity. These theoretical approaches emphasise the multiplicity and fragmentation of language and identity practices as they are affected by local and global contexts (see Baxter, this volume). Studies drawing on social constructionism and employing approaches to discourse such as conversation analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and ethnographic discourse analysis conceptualise identities as performed, negotiated and interpreted in discourse. These studies have shown that identity categories and their social meanings are not taken for granted, nor are they located in the individual or the group. They are locally constructed in discourse and through the interactants’ social and embodied behaviour in everyday interactions. Central to the social constructionist paradigm are the interactants’ language practices and the linguistic strategies they deploy in order to make identity claims. As Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 4) argue, ‘rather than being reflected in discourse, identity is actively, ongoingly, dynamically constituted in discourse’ (italics in the original). A social constructionist perspective emphasises interactants as social actors who align or distance themselves from social categories of belonging in different discursive environments. This means that in doing identity work participants may foreground particular identity categories, or they may downplay and ignore others. The role of the analyst is not to presuppose which social categories the interactants will orient to or are relevant in a given discourse context, but rather to examine the interactants’ own identity claims as ‘who we are to each other, then, is accomplished, disputed, ascribed, resisted, managed and negotiated in discourse’ (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 4; also see Benwell and Stokoe, this volume). The context-dependency of identities has been aptly captured by Moerman (1974: 62) in his study of Lue ethnic identity in the following remark: ‘The question is not “Who are the Lue?” but rather when and how and why the identification of “Lue” is preferred.’

Language and identity studies drawing on poststructuralism and employing approaches to discourse such as Foucauldian discourse analysis and feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis have emphasised the role of power and inequality in processes of social identification. As
Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004: 10) maintain, ‘poststructuralist theory recognizes the sociohistorically shaped partiality, contestability, instability, and mutability of ways in which language ideologies and identities are linked to relations of power and political arrangements in communities and societies’.

Studies drawing on poststructuralism have foregrounded the uneven distribution of linguistic resources and the structural constraints within which speakers have to act. According to Block (2007: 13), poststructuralist approaches allow for ‘more nuanced, multileveled and complicated framings of the world around us’. This resonates with Kroskrity’s (2001: 108) caution ‘against any approach to identity, or identities, that does not recognize both the communicative freedom potentially available at the microlevel and the political economic constraints imposed on processes of identity-making’. For instance, Heller’s (1992, 1999) ethnographic explorations of the use of French and English in Ontario and Quebec, Canada, at a time of socio-political and economic transformations, demonstrated that access to linguistic resources is linked to access to material resources and that language choice can no longer be unproblematically linked to a particular ethnic identity. Heller illustrated how language can act as a mechanism for social inclusion and exclusion. In the context of her study, mastery of the valued variety of French and English became a marker of elite status in the new economy. Heller illustrates how this placed some individuals at an advantage over others when it came to gaining access to learning the two codes (French and English) and to maintaining and/or establishing networks that open doors to positions of privilege and power.

In addition, social constructionist and poststructuralist paradigms have enabled language and identity researchers to investigate the interanimation of different identity aspects and how participants may take up, highlight or downplay particular identity categories. Scholars have been able to acknowledge that while some identity aspects may be subject to negotiation in given situations, others may be found to be non-negotiable because individuals and groups may be positioned in ways they do not choose by more powerful groups in society. In this context, individuals and groups may question, resist or transform accepted identity options and may draw upon their linguistic resources more or less strategically to negotiate a ‘third space’ (Bhabha 1994) where new and hybrid identities can be performed and maintained. As such, ethnicity is not examined on its own but as it intersects with and is shaped by other social categories, such as gender, age, social class, religion, geographical location and so on (see Block and Corona, this volume, for a discussion on intersection). For example, Doran (2004) showed how young people used Verlan (a code characterised by syllabic inversion, borrowings from minority languages and prosodic and phonemic differences from standard French, spoken by young people of different ethnic backgrounds in suburban Paris) as a resource to perform hybrid identities that diverged from dominant discourses available to mainstream French society. Doran (2004: 95) maintained that ‘speakers’ choices to use, or not to use, Verlan in particular settings were tied to various aspects of identity, including ethnicity, class, cultural values, and the relation to the stereotypical figure of the suburban youth street culture, la racaille’.

Many scholars investigating the intersection of language and identity draw on both social constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004: 13) cogently argue that such an analytical framework brings together ‘the social constructionist focus on discursive construction of identities’ and ‘the poststructuralist emphasis on the role of power relations’. Both perspectives on language and identity presuppose that ethnicity is negotiated, fluid and malleable. However, May et al. (2004: 13), in their introduction to the edited collection Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights, remind us that these conceptualisations of language and ethnicity may not resonate with the personal and collective experiences of many
people and identify the following disjunction between theory and the reality on the ground that ‘there is something strange going on when theorists proclaim that ethnicity is invented and set out to “decentre” it, while at the same time the news is full of ethnic cleansing and genocide’. In a similar vein, Edwards (2009: 48) maintains that ‘[f]or most societies throughout history, ethnocentrism, hostility and prejudice towards “out-groups” have been the norm’. In this context, May et al. (2004) caution that it is important ‘to explain why ethnicity does seem to continue to mean something to so many people’ (ibid.).

The stability of ethnic boundaries and ethnic classifications in the lives of many people can be witnessed in the multifarious roles played by heritage language or complementary schools (Blackledge and Creese 2010; Lytra and Martin 2010; Lytra 2014), ethnic churches (Han 2011; Souza et al. 2012) and ethnic community associations (De Fina 2007; Angouri 2012) for individuals’ self-identity and their group membership. This line of research has foregrounded the importance of not simply dismissing essentialist views of ethnic identity, but rather making them the focus of analysis and examining them synchronically as they emerge in social interaction as well as diachronically by charting, for instance, how they may vary within and across groups in a diaspora community or how they may have developed and changed over time and across countries, continents and generations. Joseph (2004), for instance, examined the interplay of ethnic and religious identities in Lebanon and historically traced the ebbs and flows of Arab-French bilingualism as a key signifier of Lebanese (mainly Maronite and Catholic) Christian identity, suggesting that during periods of political upheaval French-speaking Christians expressed a weak connection to the Arabic language to demarcate themselves from the Arabic-speaking Muslims.

**Key areas of investigation**

Research on language and ethnicity centres on indigenous and language minority contexts. Fishman (1999: 4) refers to the last third of the twentieth century as a period of ‘ethnic revival’ where language has played a key role in ethnic mobilisations around the world. Indigenous and language minority movements have often drawn implicitly or explicitly upon a structuralist–functionalist paradigm (Ferguson 1964; Fishman 1968) where languages and language varieties neatly map onto separate domains of language use connected to social activities, such as education, the family, work and religion, to safeguard and demand linguistic minority rights and autonomy (see Jaffe 2007; Patrick 2007). This paradigm has also been used to inform studies on language assimilation, language shift and language loss or endangerment (see studies in Fishman and García 2011) and nation-state efforts for language policy and language planning (see studies in Spolsky 2004).

While the structuralist–functionalist paradigm has been productive for studies of language and ethnic identity in indigenous and ethnic minority contexts, it is based on the assumption of languages and communities as whole, bounded systems and of a one-to-one relationship between language and ethnic identity. More recent research in indigenous and language minority contexts has emphasised the negotiation of multiple, hybrid or ambiguous affiliations and the recognition of historical, social, cultural, political and economic forces in shaping language practices, language ideologies and forms of individual and collective identification. For instance, taking the French island of Corsica in the Mediterranean Sea as an example, Jaffe traces historical shifts in the discourse of Corsican language revitalisation: from Corsican monolingualism, premised on the belief that only one language can be the legitimate marker of ethnic affiliation, to recognising ‘French not just as a language of past domination, but as a permanent part of the
Corsican communicative repertoire’. Jaffe also illustrated the shift in the view of bilingual competence as ‘added value’ through minority language bilingual education (2007: 55–56) to more recent views in which bilingual competence is linked ‘to values of tolerance, inclusion, cultural relativity that are the prerequisites for global, not just European, citizenship’ (ibid.: 63). By focusing on the process of becoming bilingual, Jaffe (ibid.: 67) claims that these new discourses ‘carry far fewer risks of alienating or undermining the cultural legitimacy of Corsicans who are not native speakers of the Corsican language’. They highlight the internal differentiation in what might be considered as a single ethnic community and reposition the link between the Corsican language and Corsican ethnic identity.

Also focusing on indigenous and language minority contexts, García explores the link between language, ethnic identity and language policy and planning efforts. García asserts that for language maintenance and revitalisation efforts to succeed a group must have developed what Fishman (1977) calls a strong ‘ethnolinguistic identity’ as well as strong language practices, language ideologies and language management arrangements that support the effort (García 2012: 88). By juxtaposing case studies of different ethnolinguistic groups, García illustrates how the interplay of these components shape the outcome of language planning efforts, leading in some cases to language maintenance and development and in other cases to language endangerment and language shift.

For instance, García contrasts the case of Luxembourgish in the Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg to the case of Gallo in France. The author identifies how the link between Luxembourgish and a Luxembourgish national identity was established and how it was strengthened due to specific socio-economic conditions (e.g. Luxembourg’s privileged position as a centre for private banking worldwide and the seat of several European Union organisations). While Luxembourgish coexists alongside French and German in home and institutional settings, this multilingualism has not threatened its preservation and development. Citing a recent study by Fehlen and Giles (2009), García (2012) argues that it is because of the country’s multilingual tradition and its non-diaglossic relationship with French and German that a Luxembourgish ethnolinguistic identity remains dominant and language management efforts have been successful. In the case of Gallo (a Romance language and one of the two regional languages in Brittany, in France), recent language management efforts, such as developing a standard orthography and introducing it as an optional subject in schools, have been unsuccessful in reversing the rapid language shift to standard French. The small number of Gallo speakers, coupled with the lack of official recognition of Gallo by the French state as a language in its own right because of its closeness to French and its perceived competition with the other regional language, Breton (seen by Breton activists as the quintessential marker of Breton identity), have positioned Gallo as an ‘extremely threatened’ language and Gallo ethnolinguistic identity as severely weakened (García 2012: 99). Both examples highlight the role of what García (2012: 88) refers to as ‘external authoritative powers’, often advanced through education, in supporting or disrupting language management efforts.

Studies on ethnicity and language use have also been concerned with immigrant and transnational communities and how ethnic co-membership is negotiated and constructed through socially meaningful practices. For instance, De Fina (2007: 378) examines how the members of an all-male card-playing club uniting Italian-born and US-born adults of varying ages in the Washington DC area ‘construct the club as essentially Italian and frame a great deal of its activities as responding to Italian traditions’. Through the close analysis of the negotiation of ethnicity among club members, the author illustrates how among group members who are dominant English speakers and have varying competences in and preferences to Italian (the standard and its
Regional varieties) language alternation is in general highly negotiable. However, De Fina (ibid.: 384–385) argues that certain types of code-switching to Italian are enforced:

players establish a strict association between card-playing and speaking some Italian, so that it is tacitly understood that a good card-player in the club needs to be able to speak at least the basic words of the game in the native language. As a result, when neophytes learn the game they are also taught some of the terms for the cards and moves that characterize the game, and are expected to learn them.

De Fina shows how the situational identity of ‘card-player’ is continually associated with the collective Italian identity through code-switching to Italian. Elsewhere, in *Multilingual Identities in a Global City: London Stories*, Block (2006) puts multilingualism, multiculturalism, migration and the global flow of people at the centre of his analysis as he explores the stories of four immigrant/ethnolinguistic groups living, working and learning in twenty-first-century London, namely Japanese graduate students, French foreign language teachers, Spanish-speaking Latinos from South America and Caribbean and British Asian students (Preece 2006). He situates the stories in the socio-historical context of each immigrant community and examines how individual members negotiate different subject positions, including their ethnic, racial, social class and language identities as well as ‘how they “do being” a Londoner’ in a global city like London (2006: ix).

Other studies of immigrant and transnational communities have emphasised how ethnic identities are relationally produced and how participants conform to or resist dominant positionings, racial and ethnic dichotomies and stereotypes circulating in society at large. In the introduction to a special issue on the discursive construction of Asian Pacific American identities, Lo and Reyes (2004: 118) argue that:

there is no Asian Pacific American without Caucasian American, no African American without Latino, no self without the other. This focus on the situated and relational unfolding of identity reveals how participants position themselves with regard not only to each other, but also to the ways in which they are defined by discourses of race and ethnicity which circulate through mass media, institutions and everyday contexts.

Quoting Tuan (1998), Lo and Reyes (2004) claim that dominant discourses appear to represent Asian Pacific Americans as either ‘forever foreigners’ or as ‘honorary whites’ (Tuan 1998 in Lo and Reyes 2004: 116). Both discourses are equally problematic. On the one hand, they emphasise heritage language use, which is often compared to an idealised native speaker norm, and code-switching practices that ignore the fact that frequently English is the primary means of communication. On the other hand, they imply an assimilation to white middle-class American norms that erases the experience of non-middle-class Asian Pacific Americans. These representations are further complicated by the fact that, unlike other ethnic groups, Asian Pacific Americans do not speak a distinct form of English, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Chicano English, but rather speak with ‘some kind of “accent” which is seen as the product of foreign language interference’ (ibid.: 117).

The findings of studies such as these challenge the mapping of language onto ethnicity and race in a binary fashion. For instance, Bucholtz (2004: 127) discusses how two Laotian American girls in a multiethnic high school in California exploit linguistic resources from AAVE and youth slang ‘to produce linguistic and cultural styles that position them partly inside and partly
outside of the school’s binary black/white racial ideology’. By employing divergent linguistic and youth cultural practices, they partly align with or distance themselves from ‘two contrasting stereotypes of South Asian Americans: the model minority nerd and the dangerous gangster’ (ibid.). The ideological power of stereotypes is also exemplified in the use of stereotypical discourse to explicitly mark ethnic or racial difference. Examples of such discourse include what Hill (1998) has called ‘Mock Spanish’ and Chun (2004) refers to as ‘Mock Asian’ to index a stereotypical Spanish and Asian identity respectively. However, Chun (2004: 263) shows how a Korean American comedian turns the tables, so to speak, by appropriating ‘Mock Asian’ to challenge ‘the ideologies that legitimate this racializing style’. 

To conclude, the studies discussed in this chapter have sought to highlight the relationship between language and ethnic identity across different contexts and conditions. They have showed that while applied linguistics draws on theoretical perspectives of ethnicity that regard ethnic identities as an ongoing process, negotiated and constructed in discourse and emphasizing the multiplicity and fragmentation of language and identity practices as they are affected by local and global contexts, there has not been a full-scale replacement of essentialist views of ethnicity – at least in practice. In the face of the increasing mobility of people and languages as a result of globalisation, ethnic boundaries and ethnic classifications linked to essentialist notions of authenticity continue to persist in people’s lives. Rather than viewing them in binary opposition, future studies at the intersection of language and ethnic identity will benefit from examining further the interplay between fixed and fluid ethnicity categories.

Related topics

Historical perspectives on language and identity; Positioning language and identity: poststructuralist perspectives; Language, race and identity; Linguistic practices and transnational identities; A linguistic ethnography of identity: adopting a heteroglossic frame; Styling and identity in a second language; Construction of heritage language and cultural identities: a case study of two young British-Bangladeshis in London; Minority languages and group identity: Scottish Gaelic in the Old World and the New.

Further reading


References


