

## CHAPTER 10

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# IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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WHEN a language learner asks, “Who am I? How do I relate to the social world? Under what conditions can I speak?” she is seeking to understand the complex relationship among identity, language, and learning. When a language learner interacts with a member of the target language group, he is not only searching for words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions; he is asking to what extent he will be able to impose reception on his interlocutor. When a language learner writes a poem, a letter, or an academic essay, she considers not only the demands of the task but how much of her history will be considered relevant to this literacy act. Language learning engages the identities of learners because language itself is not only a linguistic system of signs and symbols; it is also a complex social practice in which the value and meaning ascribed to an utterance are determined in part by the value and meaning ascribed to the person who speaks. Likewise, how a language learner interprets or constructs a written text requires an ongoing negotiation among historical understandings, contemporary realities, and future desires. Thus, language learners are not only learning a linguistic system; they are learning a diverse set of sociocultural practices, often best understood in the context of wider relations of power.

In this chapter, we defend this bold set of claims with reference to a growing body of research that seeks to develop a textured understanding of the relationship between the language learner and the sociocultural world. Such research is inter-

ested in the multiple identities of learners as, for example, gendered/raced/classed persons with diverse histories and identifications.<sup>1</sup> In search of insight, researchers have, in recent years, shifted their attention from the field of social psychology (see McNamara 1997) to those of anthropology, cultural studies, feminist theory, and sociology.<sup>2</sup> Further, in shifting from psychological to sociocultural conceptions of identity, researchers have sought to distance themselves from what Kubota calls "fixed, apolitical and essentialized cultural representations" (1999: 9). In this spirit, contemporary applied linguistic researchers have been drawn to literature that conceives of identity not as static and one-dimensional but as multiple, changing, and a site of struggle (Bordo 1990; Butler 1990; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, and Walkerdine 1984; Weedon 1997). In recent language learning research, conceptions of identity are congruent with prevailing theories of language and learning. Thus, in order to understand current conceptions of identity and language learning, it is necessary to understand current theories of language and learning, and how these are related to theories about learners and their identities. A discussion of these follows.

## THEORIES OF LANGUAGE

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Poststructuralist theories of language are becoming increasingly attractive to researchers of identity and language learning. These theories build on, but are distinct from, structuralist theories of language, associated predominantly with the work of Saussure. Saussure's (1966) distinction between speech (*parole*) and language (*langue*) was an attempt to provide a way of recognizing that, despite geographical, interpersonal, and social variations, languages have shared patterns and structure. For structuralists, the building blocks of language structure are signs that comprise the signifier (or sound-image) and the signified (the concept or meaning). Saussure asserted that neither the signifier nor the signified pre-exists the other and that the link between them is arbitrary. He saw the linguistic system itself as guaranteeing the meaning of signs and each linguistic community as having its own set of signifying practices that give value to the signs in a language.

One of the criticisms poststructuralists have leveled at this notion of language is that structuralism cannot account for struggles over the meanings that can be attributed to signs in a given language. The signs /feminist/, /research/, /SLA/, for example, can have different meanings for different people within the same linguistic community. Witness, for example, debates over the meaning of "SLA theory" in the field of applied linguistics (Beretta, Crookes, Gregg, and Long 1994;

Gebhard 1999; Lantolf 1996; Van Lier 1994). Thus, while structuralists conceive of signs as having idealized meanings and of linguistic communities as being relatively homogeneous and consensual, poststructuralists take the position that the signifying practices of societies are sites of struggle and that linguistic communities are heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power. Three poststructuralist theorists whose work has been influential in recent research on identity and language learning are Mikhail Bakhtin, Pierre Bourdieu, and Gunther Kress.

Unlike the structuralists, Bakhtin (1981, 1984) takes the position that language needs to be investigated not as a set of idealized forms independent of their speakers or their speaking but rather as situated utterances in which speakers, in dialogue with others, struggle to create meanings. For him the notion of the individual speaker is a fiction, as he sees all speakers constructing their utterances jointly, on the basis of their interaction with listeners, in both historical and contemporary, actual and assumed communities. Thus, language for him is "not a neutral medium . . . [but rather] populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (1981: 294). Any one utterance is for him a link in the chain of speech communication, as the context of any one utterance is past, present, and future utterances on the same topic. Bakhtin's ideas about how speakers come to participate in discourse with others help us understand why he rejects the notion that utterances are individually created, either out of their own individualized psychological reality or through application of the rules of a syntactic system. For him, language development is a matter of appropriating the words of others. Bakhtin stresses that this appropriation of the words of others is a complex and conflictual process: Because the historical, present, and future positioning of speakers and those of their interlocutors are expressed in the 'very words' of utterances, words are not neutral but express particular cognitive predispositions and value systems.

Rather than SLA as a gradual individual process of internalizing a neutral set of rules, structures, and vocabulary of a standard language, Bakhtin's work offers us ways to think about the learning of language within particular discourses and with particular interlocutors. Speakers need to struggle to appropriate the voices of others and to "bend" those voices to their own purposes. What others say, the customary discourse of any particular community, may privilege or debase certain speakers. Finding answering words for the words of others, joining the chain of speech communication, is as much a social as a linguistic struggle.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984), a contemporary French sociologist, focuses on the often unequal relationships between interlocutors and the importance of power in structuring speech. In arguing that "speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it" (1977: 652), Bourdieu suggests that the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks and that the person who speaks cannot be understood apart from

larger networks of social relationships. He argues that, when a person speaks, the speaker wishes not only to be understood, but to be "believed, obeyed, respected, distinguished" (1977: 648). However, speakers' abilities to "command a listener" (1977: 648) are unequally distributed because of the symbolic power relations between interlocutors. To redress the inequities between what Bourdieu calls legitimate and illegitimate speakers, Bourdieu argues that an expanded definition of competence should include the "right to speech" or "the power to impose reception" (1977: 648). Like Bakhtin, then, Bourdieu reminds the SLA theorist that language cannot be idealized and that we cannot take for granted that good faith will prevail between participants in oral or literate activities.

Gunther Kress's (1989, 1993) notion of "discourse" and "genre" is complementary to that of Bourdieu in that he sees social relationships as central to his theory of language: "Language always happens as text; and as text, it inevitably occurs in a particular generic form. That generic form arises out of the action of social subjects in particular social situations" (Kress 1993: 27). In Kress's terms, a genre is constituted within and by a particular social occasion that has a conventionalized structure and that functions within the context of larger institutional and social processes. In this formulation, the social occasions that constitute a genre may be formulaic and ritualized, such as a wedding or a committee meeting, or less ritualized, such as a casual conversation. The important point is that the conventionalized forms of these occasions, along with the organization, purpose and intention of the participants within the occasion, give rise to the meanings associated with a specific genre. Drawing on Foucault, and echoing Bourdieu, Kress (1989) argues that the power relations between participants in an interaction have a particular effect on the social meanings of the texts constructed within a given genre, whether oral or written. Like Bourdieu, Kress stresses the importance of recognizing that theories of language cannot be developed apart from an understanding of social relationships and that social relationships are rarely constituted on equal terms.

Kress's (2000) more recent work on new theories of representation offers particularly exciting possibilities for future research on identity and language learning. (See Stein 2000.) Working within the context of the Multiliteracies Project (New London Group 1996), Kress argues that, given the rapid pace of change in social, cultural, economic, and technological domains, there has been a concomitant change in the semiotic landscape that necessitates new theories of meaning. He argues, in particular, that an exclusive and extensive focus on the written word does not do justice to the multimodality that is becoming increasingly common in the electronic age. For this reason, he suggests, we need to pay greater attention to the extent to which humans, out of individual and social interest, transform the resources available to them, becoming, in this process, not critics of a stable semiotic system but designers of an ever-changing future: "An adequate

theory of semiosis will be founded on a recognition of the 'interested action' of socially located, culturally and historically formed individuals, as the remakers, the transformers, and the re-shapers of the representational resources available to them" (Kress 2000: 155).

## THEORIES OF LEARNING

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Davis, in discussing the use of psychological research paradigms in language learning research, notes that many "theorists and researchers tend to view SLA as a mental process, that is, to believe that language acquisition resides mostly, if not solely, in the mind" (1995: 427–428). More recent work has attempted to investigate language learning as a socioculturally situated social practice. This research conceptualizes second language learning as relational activity that occurs between specific speakers situated in specific sociocultural contexts. Drawing, in different measures, on Vygotskian notions of the sociality of learning (Vygotsky 1978), these studies contest views of language learning as individual minds acquiring linguistic, or even sociolinguistic, competence. (See, for example, Kramsch 2000b; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000.)

A shift from seeing learners as individual language producers to seeing them as members of social and historical collectivities moves observers toward examining the conditions for learning, for appropriation of practices, in any particular community. The anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger argue that "learning [on the part of all] is an integral and inseparable part of social practice" (1991: 31) as newcomers participate in attenuated ways with old-timers in the performance of community practices. Their notion, legitimate peripheral participation, represents their view that communities are composed of participants who differentially engage with the practices of their communities and that this engagement or participation in practice is 'learning.' Stressing the importance of local analysis of communities, Lave and Wenger (1991) point out that conditions vary with regard to ease of access to expertise, to opportunities for practice, to consequences for error in practice, and so on.

From this perspective, then, educational research might focus not so much on assessing individual 'uptake' of particular knowledge or skills but rather on the social structures in particular communities and on the variety of positionings available for learners to occupy in those communities. Bakhtin asserts that language learning is a matter of appropriating the language practices of others and

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Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that it is through coparticipation in community practices that learners learn. Put together, this view of language learning stresses the importance of newcomers or learners having access to the words of others in community practices. As the sociocultural theorist Ray McDermott puts it: "Language and culture are no longer scripts to be acquired, as much as they are conversations in which people can participate. The question of who is learning what and how much is essentially a question of what conversations they are part of, and this question is a subset of the more powerful question of what conversations are around to be had in a given culture" (1993: 295). From this point of view, second language researchers are interested in questions that might include the following:

- How do community practices facilitate or block access to experienced speakers?
- How do community practices structure "possibilities for selfhood"? (Ivanič 1998)
- What kinds of utterances are available for newcomers to appropriate?

Toohy (2000) investigates just these questions with respect to young English language learners. As Faltis (1997) and McGroarty (1998) argue, this sociocultural perspective offers interesting theoretical perspectives for future research in language and education.<sup>3</sup>

The more recent work of Wenger (1998) on learning, meaning and identity has been influential in the development of the concept of "imagined communities" with respect to the nonparticipation of learners in language classrooms (Norton, 2001).<sup>4</sup> In many language classrooms, all of the members of the classroom community apart from the teacher are newcomers to a set of language practices and to a community that includes those language practices in its activities. The question that arises then is, What community practices do these learners seek to learn? What, indeed, constitutes "the community" for them? Norton draws on her research with two adult immigrant language learners to argue that, while they were initially actively engaged in classroom practices, the realm of their community extended beyond the four walls of the classroom. This imagined community was not accessible to the teacher, who, unwittingly, alienated the two language learners, who then withdrew from the language classroom. Norton's research suggests that learners have different investments in particular members of the target language community and that the people in whom learners have the greatest investment may be the very people who represent or provide access to the imagined community of a given learner. Of central interest is the extent to which such investments are productive for learner engagement in both the classroom and the wider target language community.

## THEORIES OF THE LEARNER

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Much research on language learning has traditionally had the objective of uncovering the personalities, learning styles, motivations, and other unique characteristics of individual learners. This work sees the identity of second language learners in terms of relatively fixed and long-term traits or characteristics. Norton (2000) argues that SLA theory needs to develop a more textured understanding of the relationship between the language learners and the social world. Along with scholars such as McKay and Wong (1996) and Siegal (1996), Norton has found feminist poststructuralism, particularly the work of Christine Weedon, helpful in formulating new conceptions of the learner in the field of second language learning. Weedon appropriates the poststructuralist theory of "subjectivity," defining it as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" (1997: 32). Furthermore, like other poststructuralist theorists whose ideas inform her work, Weedon foregrounds the central role of language in her analysis of the relationship between the individual and the social: "Language is the place where actual and possible forms of social organization and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed" (1997: 21).

Weedon (1997: 32) notes that the terms "subject" and "subjectivity" signify a different conception of the individual than that associated with humanist conceptions of the individual dominant in Western philosophy. While humanist conceptions of the individual—and many definitions of the individual in SLA research—presuppose that every person has an essential, unique, fixed and coherent "core" (introvert/extrovert; motivated/unmotivated), poststructuralism depicts the individual—the subject—as diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space. Further, in taking the position that subjectivity is multiple and a site of struggle, feminist poststructuralism highlights the changing quality of a person's identity. As Weedon (1997: 33) notes, "the political significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change." This is a crucial point for second language educators in that it opens up possibilities for educational intervention.

Recent work by Gentil (2000) considers how hermeneutic perspectives on identity articulated by Taylor (1989, 1991) and Ricoeur (1992) might articulate with feminist poststructural notions of the self and, in so doing, might provide productive possibilities in investigations of second language learning. Gentil notes that moral philosopher Charles Taylor sees language as "made and remade in conversation" (1989: 525) and, further, that Taylor sees selves or identities as di-

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alogically created in those conversations. From this perspective, one comes to understand oneself dialogically, that is, through specific conversations (Ricoeur would stress, through narratives of the self), and the specific character of those conversations or narratives over time would define for agents a moral "horizon" of commitments, values, and identifications against which they might define themselves. Gentil argues that this examination of the historical construction of a self offers potential for understanding individual agency and at the same time recognizing the complex and pervading constraints offered by social worlds.

In the field of language learning, there has been increasing interest in linking poststructuralist conceptions of identity and human agency with the notion of 'investment' (Angelil-Carter 1997; McKay and Wong 1996; Norton Peirce 1995). Departing from current conceptions of 'motivation' in the field of language learning, the concept of investment signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. Investment is best understood with reference to the economic metaphors that Bourdieu uses in his work—in particular the notion of "cultural capital." Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) use the term "cultural capital" to reference the knowledge, credentials, and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. They argue that cultural capital is situated, in that it has differential exchange value in different social fields. If learners "invest" in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. As the value of their cultural capital increases, so learners' sense of themselves and their desires for the future are reassessed. Hence the integral relationship between investment and identity.

## TOWARD THE FUTURE

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In the field of applied linguistics, interest in language and identity is growing, reflected, in part, by the number of journals with special issues on the topic. In 1996, Martin-Jones and Heller (1996) edited two special issues of *Linguistics and Education* on discourse, identities, and power, and Sarangi and Baynham (1996) edited a special double issue of *Language and Education* on the construction of educational identities. These were followed by a special issue of *TESOL Quarterly* on language and identity, edited by Norton (1997a), a special issue on gender issues in language teaching for the Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT)



journal, *The Language Teacher* (Smith and Yamashiro, 1998), and a theme issue of *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* on authenticity and identity, edited by Henze and Davis (1999). Such interest has encouraged Ricento and Wiley to found and edit the new *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*, which, at time of writing, has yet to go to press. We anticipate that this momentum will continue well into the new millennium.

The goal we see for future research on identity and language learning is to develop understandings of learners as both socially constructed and constrained but also as embodied, semiotic and emotional persons who identify themselves, resist identifications, and act on their social worlds. Learners' investments in learning languages, the ways in which their identities affect their participation in second language activities, and their access to participation in the activities of their communities, must all be matters of consideration in future research.

## NOTES

1. There has been a great deal of recent research on identity and language learning from a variety of perspectives and using diverse methodologies. Apart from researchers mentioned elsewhere in this chapter are: Auerbach 1989; Benesch 1998; Blackledge 2000; Canagarajah 1997; Corson 1998; Cummins 1996; Davison 2001; Duff and Uchida 1997; Ehrlich 1997; Goldstein 1997; Harklau 1999; Heller 1999; Hunter 1997; Janks 1997; Kanno 1996; Leung, Harris, and Rampton 1997; Lin 1999; Liu 1999; Maguire 1998; Miller 1998; Morgan 1998; Mohan, Leung, and Davison 2001; Nelson 1999; Pennycook 1998; Piller 1999; Rampton 1995b; Schecter and Bayley 1997; Schenke 1996; Sharkey and Layzer 2000; Skilton-Sylvester 1997; Starfield in press; Thesen 1997; Vandrick 1998; Willett; Solsken, and Wilson-Kennan 1998.

2. Applied linguists have found useful the work of the following: Bhabha 1994; Clifford 1988; Eisenhart 1995; Foucault 1980; Gee 1990; Hall 1996; Luke 1988; Ochs 1992; Rosaldo 1993; Simon 1992.

3. See for example, Dagenais and Day 1999; Day 1999; Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopes, and Tejeda 1999; Hall 1998; Haneda 1997; Manyak 2000; Toohey 1996, 1998.

4. Similarly, Holland et al. (1998) write about action within "figured worlds"—to explain "people's abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized 'as if' realms" (p. 49). Ibrahim (1999), picking up on Anderson (1983), uses the term "social imaginary" to reference continental African youths' appropriation in Canada of Black American stylized English, music, bodily habitus, and other communicative performatives.