

## Identity theory

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Discussions of identity in second language acquisition research have been informed by a variety of disciplinary and theoretical traditions. Common to most contemporary definitions of identity, however, is the notion that identity is a subjective experience of holding and/or act of claiming a set of characteristics and/or a social position that distinguishes one from other persons, and is important to one's sense of self (Leets *et al.*, 1996).

Identity theories in SLA can be broadly differentiated according to the relative emphasis they place on the socio-structural and socio-constructive aspects of identity. The socio-structural (or "intergroup") perspective partly came about in response to World War II and various civil rights movements and as a reaction to predominant social psychological theories that generally explained these large-scale intergroup dynamics in terms of individual traits or interpersonal interactions. Scholars from this perspective emphasize how the structural relations of groups within a society relate to identity patterns and intergroup behavior, including discrimination, collective action, and social change. For instance, Giles and his colleagues (see Noels and Giles, 2009, for an overview) maintain that we tend to categorize people, including ourselves, into different social groups (e.g., ethnolinguistic, gender, age), and compare these groups on socially important dimensions. Because we know to which

groups we belong (termed "social identity"), we also know how our group (and implicitly, ourselves) compares with other groups. We are assumed to have a tendency to see our own group in a relatively positive light and strive to maintain that positive distinctiveness. When a speech style (e.g., language variety, accent, etc.) is a valued component of identification, it can be gainfully used to differentiate one's own group from other groups. If the intergroup comparison results in an unfavorable evaluation of our ethnolinguistic group, then we may try to learn the other language in order to move into the more socially valued group, engage in strategies to overcome the inequities between groups, or reframe the comparison in order to see our group in a more favorable light. Other frameworks, including Lambert's (1978) discussions of "additive and subtractive bilingualism," Gardner's (2010) discussion of the "integrative orientation," and Clément's (1980) discussion of "fear of assimilation" and patterns of identity "integration" and assimilation" also draw on the idea that the relative socio-structural status of groups and intergroup relations have important implications for identity, motivation, and language learning and use.

Socio-constructionist (or "sociocultural") perspectives on identity in SLA refer to a range of conceptualizations that are informed by post-structuralist and critical theory (see Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004; Ricento, 2005, for overviews). This perspective became prominent partly in response to colonization and increasing globaliza-

tion and transnational immigration, as well as concerns that some structural theories portray persons as being determined by the social conditions in which they live, and as having relatively immutable characteristics associated with the social groups to which they belong (Block, 2007). At least three themes characterize this perspective, including the interpersonal construction of identities, the indeterminacy of the relation between language and identity, and power and positioning within real and/or imagined communities.

A first theme is that identities are negotiated through face-to-face or mediated interactions between individuals. Identity is assumed to be a relational and dialogical phenomenon, such that we construct identities through our discursive practices, positioning ourselves and others in order to claim or deny particular identities. Moreover, we generally negotiate multiple, intersecting identities (e.g., language, gender, age) simultaneously. Thus, identity work involves continual positioning and repositioning of the self and others during any given social interaction and/or across different interactions with the same or other people.

A second theme underscores that interactants can use language in diverse, creative ways to make identity claims; eschewed are assumptions of homogeneous language groups with distinct boundaries and of a one-to-one correspondence between language and identity. For instance, some learners live in multilingual contexts, where they might regularly use the target language, but not at all identify with that ethnolinguistic group (e.g., in some ESL contexts). Some learners might use the language to denote identities other than an ethnolinguistic identity (e.g., a professional identity). In addition, learners might create hybrid identities, in which aspects of different ethnolinguistic identities are combined in new ways, perhaps as a way to cope with feelings of ambivalence and conflict that might arise from the instability and contestability of identity positionings. Thus, a multiplicity of language and identities relations are possible.

A third theme is that the positioning of identities occurs within particular contexts, or "communities of practice" (e.g., a language classroom, a language community). Depending on their position within that community, each person is assumed to have

more or less "capital," or resources, to make desired identity claims. Identities, then, are shaped by social interactions within a particular social structure, but reciprocally identity negotiations shape those social conditions. Moreover, our understanding of our relationship to others in our social world includes not only our positioning and experience of interactions in the here-and-now, but also how we imagine ourselves to be in the future. Norton (2000) maintains that this vision of a future self in an "imagined community" has considerable motivational significance, as it indicates how much we should "invest" in learning other languages – to the extent that we can envision ourselves as being participants in that community and acquiring the kinds of capital associated with that community, we may be more willing to invest time and energy into learning that group's language. Norton's work highlights learners' agency to make language and identity choices and their capacity to resist identity ascriptions, within the constraints and affordances of the social context and the learner's available resources.

**See also:** acculturation model, communities of practice, individual differences in SLA, investment, motivation, social and sociocultural influences on SLA

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