



Language variation and ethnic identity: A social psychological perspective



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ABSTRACT

In the interest of promoting discussion between sociolinguists and social psychologists, this paper offers a social psychological perspective on some of the themes surrounding ethnicity and language that are raised by the authors of the papers in this issue. I present three psychological approaches to ethnic identity and suggest how each of these theoretical models might lead to different research questions regarding the relation between language and ethnicity. I also suggest some caveats regarding the use of self-reports of ethnic identity, particularly quantitative responses to closed-ended questions, that research on language and ethnicity suggests we should be attentive to. I conclude with some discussion of how social psychological and sociolinguistic researchers might jointly advance understanding of the link between ethnicity and language, particularly through a more fully articulated analysis of the “social context”.

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1. Introduction

The relation between language and ethnicity has long interested sociolinguists and social psychologists alike. Variations in linguistic patterns are argued to be influenced by speakers' ethnicities, and, in a reciprocal fashion, language use has been suggested to create and substantiate ethnicity. It is perhaps fair to say, however, that each of these disciplines has tended to centre its analytic focus on different sides of the language–ethnicity relation. As a psychologist who often finds herself sitting in a liminal position between social/cultural psychology, on the one hand, and applied/sociolinguistics on the other, I would like to see even greater rapprochement between these disciplines which share a common pursuit, if not passion. It seems to me that the windows provided by other disciplines can widen our own field of vision. For a long time, social psychologists have pondered the self in its social context, but for some reason, with only a small group of exceptions (see [Robinson and Giles, 2001](#) for an overview), they have paid little attention to the language and communication processes that are the glue that holds the “social context” together. I can't speak with as much confidence about how sociolinguists could benefit from a social psychological perspective, but it seems to me that some of the social psychological discussion about the social factors that sociolinguists use to account for language variation would be relevant to their endeavours, and perhaps inspire new avenues for reflection and research. Moreover, I assume that all of our research would be richer by sharing our methodological approaches so that we have a wider diversity of analytical tools to answer a broader range of questions regarding the relation between language and ethnicity.

As a point of departure for this interdisciplinary dialogue, I will discuss some social psychological issues that the papers in the present issue raise in my mind. To begin, I wish to give a psychological perspective on ethnic orientation, and in so doing, provide sociolinguists with an understanding of some of the issues that many psychologists are dealing with as they work in this area, and highlight some of the theoretical and methodological implications of these issues for studying the interplay

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between language and ethnicity. I also try to flag some of the aspects of sociolinguistic research that are raised by the authors of the papers in this issue that I think social psychologists would do well to consider. I conclude with what I feel are important directions for future social psychological and sociolinguistic research on the topic of ethnicity and language use.

2. The landscape of ethnic identity research in psychology

Researchers across a variety of sub-fields in psychology have addressed the issue of ethnic orientation, which I define here as a loosely connected cluster of thoughts, feelings and behaviours pertaining to a person's orientation towards their ancestral ethnic group and/or any other relevant ethnic group. The focus of this discussion of ethnic orientation will be on ethnic identity, as increasingly scholars in both social psychology and sociolinguistics are drawing on notions of the self and identity to account for language practices and/or suggest how language practices constitute the self and identity. Broadly, I refer to ethnic identity as a speaker's construction of a sense of self within her/his social world that pertains to ethnic group membership. Based on their systematic review of studies in various readily available academic databases, [Leets et al. \(1996\)](#) found that early work tended to assess ethnicity through researcher-ascribed social characteristics and categories defined along the lines used in governmental censuses, including religious background, national origin, native language, and so on. Over the decades, however, researchers have come to see problems with assuming homogeneity within such large categories and with assuming that there is a necessary correspondence between ascribed categories and self-reports of identity. It is now common practice for ethnic identity to be assessed through subjective assessments of personal experience (but see [Devos, 2006](#)).

For this paper, I will concentrate on quantitative indices of ethnic identity because there seems to be an interest in using such measures among several of the authors of the papers in this issue. Quantitative self-reports usually involve explicitly responding to a series of statements according to an interval scale (usually ranging from 5 to 9 points to allow for relatively nuanced assessments) that reflects the degree to which the participant endorses that statement regarding identity. Quantitative data offer some benefits for concisely documenting social and psychological constructs, and lend themselves well to statistical analysis of the relations between language and social variables. When well designed, they can also provide valuable information that is useful for comparison across data sets from different studies. That said, I wish to underscore that such data are only appropriate for answering certain questions, and that I believe that any account of the relation between ethnicity and identity would be most complete when this methodological approach is used alongside qualitative methods (which are also used in the research reported in this issue).

There are at least three subfields within psychology that address ethnicity and ethnic identity. This wide-spread interest has yielded a range of theoretical and empirical work on the psychology of ethnicity, but regrettably it is often the case that researchers across these subdisciplines have little interaction and are unfamiliar with the conceptual frameworks and research findings of the other. Although ethnic identity is recognized to be a subjective experience, researchers differ in their conceptual and operational characterizations of identity. In their review of collective identity, [Ashmore et al. \(2004\)](#) emphasized that identity is a multi-faceted construct that includes self-categorization, evaluation, importance, attachment, a sense of interdependence, social embeddedness, behavioural involvement, content and meaning. Although Ashmore and his colleagues suggest that all of these aspects should be included in assessments of identity, theoretical and practical considerations often guide researchers to focus on a narrower subset.

Perhaps most widely known among sociolinguists is the work of social psychologists such as Howard Giles, whose theories of communication accommodation and ethnolinguistic identity account for language and identity variation from an intergroup perspective (e.g., [Sachdev et al., 2012](#)). From this standpoint, ethnolinguistic identity is one kind of social identity, defined as “that part of the individuals' self-concept that derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership” ([Tajfel, 1981, p. 255](#)). Following this definition, [Cameron's \(2004\)](#) measure of social identity reflects a tripartite model including: (1) the centrality or the importance of the identity to one's sense of self (e.g., “I often think about the fact that I am a member of my ethnic group”); (2) affect, or one's sense of esteem associated with this membership (e.g., “Generally, I feel good when I think about myself as a member of my ethnic group”); and (3), ties or a sense of connectedness to the group (e.g., “I have a lot in common with other members of my ethnic group”). These kinds of dimensions have been shown to differentially relate to aspects of intergroup relations, including experiences of prejudice and discrimination and well-being ([Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992](#); [Zhang and Noels, 2012](#)), and in a parallel manner we might think that some are more or less relevant to language use, as will be discussed further below.

Developmental and counselling psychologists have also been interested in ethnic identity, particularly as it relates to ethnic minority group members' well-being, but they articulate quite different identity constructs than do social identity theorists. Drawing from [Erikson's \(1950, 1968\)](#) theory of psychosocial development and its extension by [Marcia \(1966\)](#), developmental psychologists maintain that identity issues become highly salient during adolescence, a period during which many people are hypothesized to undergo a process of exploration to better understand who they are within their social world. This so-called “moratorium” for identity exploration is followed by commitment to a particular identity, signalling the achievement of a mature identity. To capture the dynamics of this developmental theory, [Phinney and Ong \(2007\)](#) devised a measure that taps ethnic identity exploration (e.g., “I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions and customs”) and ethnic identity commitment (e.g., “I feel a strong attachment to my ethnic

group”). Others have argued that, depending on an adolescent’s stage and resolution of identity issues, including diffused, foreclosed, moratorium and achieved identity statuses, different outcomes for behaviour and well-being are likely (e.g., Yip, 2013).

Given that adolescence/young adulthood is a period during which exploring alternative identities and establishing one’s sense of self is a particularly salient developmental task, it is no surprise that several seminal sociolinguistic studies target adolescent and emerging adult speakers (e.g., Bigham, 2010, 2012; Eckert, 1989; Mendoza-Denton, 2008; Rickford and McNair-Knox, 1994), as does Wagner in the present collection (see Fix, 2014, for a similar discussion of how language practices may be contingent on the changing world experience of speakers as they age). Consistent with the developmental psychologists, Wagner (2014) notes that “the extent to which speakers feel ethnic, perform ethnic identity, and reflect ethnicity in their speech may be dependent on the age of those speakers, and the peer group norms within in which they situate themselves”. Her work does not focus on exploration or commitment, but rather on the shifting meanings of identity. The women in her study initially constructed ethnicity in terms of the local context, with reference to social class and neighborhood residence. During the college years, as several of the women left home to pursue their educational goals, the reference to neighborhood localities was no longer useful for constructing ethnicity with people unfamiliar with the home town, although socio-economic status was. From a psychosocial perspective one might pose other questions. For instance, how committed to these identities were these young women? During their transition to college, as they presumably explored identities in this new social world, were there any changes in patterns of variation (e.g., greater exploration of speech styles)? Did the salience of ethnicity as a facet of self-definition decline as speakers resolved their exploration of these issues, and settled into another (possibly more mature) kind of identity, and if so could such a dynamic be evident in speech patterns?

These examples underscore another critical point with regards to the study of ethnicity and language, that the different facets of identity described by social identity and psychosocial developmental theorists may have different implications for language use and linguistic variation. For instance, although a social identity researcher might speculate that the centrality of an ethnic identity to one’s sense of self might predict moderately well the adoption of linguistic characteristics of that ethnic community, strong feelings of connection with ethnic group members might much better predict language choices. Alternatively, a researcher with a psychosocial perspective might hypothesize that although strong identity commitment might be connected with exclusive use of language features that index that particular ethnic group, identity exploration might be associated with more code-switching and mixing between languages. A similar point is expressed in Nagy and her colleagues’ (2014) observation that it is tenuous to conclude that there is a “best” measure of ethnic orientation for predicting linguistic variation because different findings are evident depending on how the researcher decides to measure ethnic orientation. Extending this point, such methodological decisions are tied to theoretical decisions of how to construe ethnic orientation in the first place, and different conclusions might be reached depending on both these theoretical and analytical choices.

A third line of psychological research that examines the notion of ethnic identity is that conducted by (cross-)cultural psychologists who are interested in acculturation, or the process of change that occurs as a result of first-hand contact between members of different ethnocultural groups. According to Berry (2005), at least four broad modes of acculturation are possible, depending upon the extent to which speakers prefer to maintain their heritage culture and identity and the extent to which they desire interaction with the mainstream society. These dimensions are assumed to be orthogonal, such that one might reject the former and embrace the latter, a mode termed “assimilation, or the converse, “separation”. Alternatively one might wish to engage in both cultures simultaneously, an orientation termed “integration”. Finally, one might not feel a part of either group, an experience corresponding with “marginalization”, in which one feels alienated from either group, or perhaps “individualism”, in which people refuse to identify themselves in ethnic terms but rather in terms of personal qualities (rather like Becker’s (2014) informant Lisa, who uses a diverse set of linguistic resources to support her claim that she, like everyone else, is tinted “brown”). This model highlights that when considering ethnic groups in contact, researchers need to assess not only one’s orientation to the heritage group but also to any other relevant reference groups. As many studies have shown, including those in the current issue, an orientation to one group is not necessarily negatively related to the orientation to other groups nor does it preclude multiple foci for identification.¹ For instance, some of Wagner’s (2014) participants reported having both Italian and Irish identities; it could be informative to consider whether and how a bi-ethnic identity relates to their language use (see below for further discussion).

Other research shows that these kinds of identity profiles relate in different ways to language behaviour. For example, Montaruli et al. (2011) found that, compared with people with other kinds of profiles, people who identified themselves as both Spanish and belonging to a group from an autonomous region within Spain (i.e., “integrated” identifiers) were more likely to be proficient in both Spanish and the language of the autonomous region, and best suited to act as cultural and linguistic brokers. Other research emphasizes that different assessments of ethnic orientation can lead to different conclusions about ethnicity and language use. Gauthier et al. (1993) found that native speakers of Canadian French who were bilingual in French and English expressed that they would ideally prefer to integrate Francophone and Anglophone cultures and identities, but when asked about their identity across various everyday activities, those who regularly used French endorsed a stronger Francophone than Anglophone identity (i.e., a “separated” identity profile) whereas those who regularly used

¹ Multiple ethnic identities are further complicated by a consideration of other social categories that intersect with ethnicity, including gender, age, socio-economic status, and so on.

English showed a stronger Anglophone than Francophone identity (i.e., an “assimilated” identity profile). Hence these French Canadians’ attitudes towards integrating two languages and cultures were not consistent with their identity as experienced on a day-to-day basis.

Not only is a speaker’s sense of ethnic identity a multi-faceted, subjective experience defined in terms of multiple ethnic reference groups, it is also contextually variable, in that it is linked to differences in macro-social, group-related characteristics (e.g., relative ethnolinguistic vitality, immigration generation) and the immediate social situation in which interaction takes place. In our situated ethnic identity approach, [Richard Clément and I \(1992\)](#) argue that, like language use, identity varies depending upon the person with whom one interacts, the setting and the activity/topic of conversation in which one is engaged, among other features (cf. [Hymes, 1974](#); [Brown and Fraser, 1979](#)). Support for the contention that identity varies depending on the situation comes from diverse sources. Experimental studies of bicultural persons demonstrate that

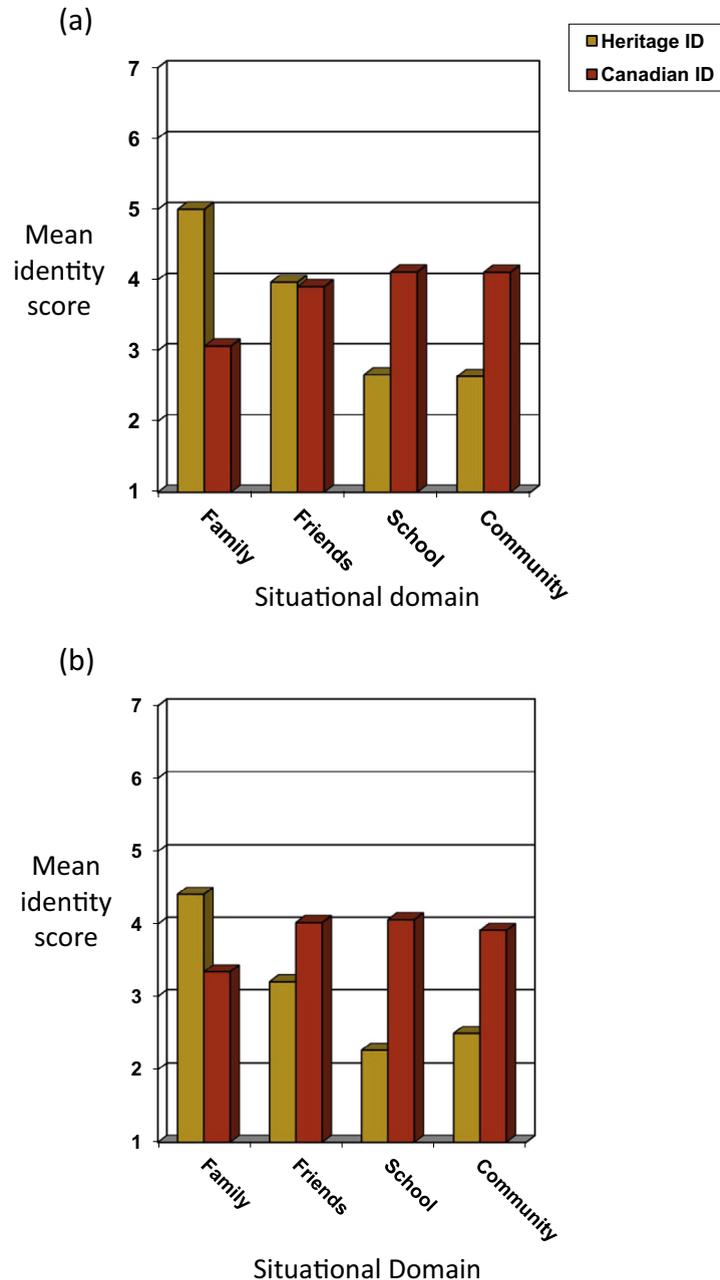


Fig. 1. Identity as a function of target identity, situational domain and immigrant generation (based on [Noels et al., 2013](#)): (a) First-generation Canadians. (b) Second-generation Canadians.

cultural primes, such as iconic images of the American flag or of Confucius, can cause bicultural/bilingual people to shift the way in which they think in a manner that corresponds with the normative tendency of that specific group as determined through comparisons with monocultural/monolingual members of that ethnolinguistic group (Hong et al., 2000). Language can be thought of as one such cultural prime, and identity is one “way of thinking” that has been demonstrated to shift as language (or other cultural signifiers) is experimentally manipulated (e.g., Ross et al., 2002). Conversely, when identity threat is manipulated, language use can accentuate differences between groups (e.g., Bourhis et al., 1973; Chen and Bond, 2007), consistent with the tenets of Communication Accommodation Theory (Sachdev et al., 2012). Within sociolinguistics, the work of Hay and Drager (2010) and Scobbie (personal communication) has underscored the important implications of even very subtle primes, by demonstrating that having a toy ‘accidentally’ fall out of a closet or having a particular soccer pennant pinned to the wall can influence speakers’ claimed linguistic attitudes and/or sociophonetic production.

Lab experiments, of course, are quite removed from daily life experiences, and so other methods help us to better understand how identity shifts occur across everyday situations. In their diary and palm pilot studies of first- and second-generation Chinese Americans, Tiffany Yip and her colleagues have found that identities tend to correspond with the ethnicity of the people with whom we interact and the languages we use (Yip and Fuligni, 2002; Yip, 2005). More specifically, her study revealed that when participants were with family members or other Chinese Americans and/or using Chinese they were more likely to identify as Chinese. Because these experience-sampling studies randomly prompt people to report their experiences throughout a given time period, they are perhaps among the most valid ways to collect information about daily variations in identity and other variables of interest. Perhaps one day a software application for mobile devices could be created in which speech samples are taken along with identity measures (with proper ethical precautions, of course!); the papers in this volume hopefully will help develop a set of conventions bringing us closer to such a goal.

In the meantime, an alternative is to use paper-and-pencil questionnaires to capture these variations across situations. To that end, Richard Clément and I, along with our colleagues and students, have developed such a measure (Clément and Noels, 1992; Noels et al., 2004, 2013). From focus group interviews and open-ended questionnaire surveys we derived a taxonomy of situations that reflected the everyday experiences of students and nonstudents from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The most common situations included interactions with family, friends, in the university or work context, and in the local community or neighborhood. Other domains were also mentioned (e.g., religion, leisure, etc.) but these four were the most commonly reported domains across different ethnic and age groups, and they satisfactorily represented relatively intimate/private and relatively task-focused/public domains. For each domain we created four hypothetical scenarios (e.g., “You are at home talking with your mother about household matters”), which we then presented to first- and second-generation immigrant young adults. For each scenario, we asked them to tell us the extent to which they identify with their heritage group and, independently, the extent to which they identify with other relevant ethnic groups (which is usually the mainstream majority group). The results generally show that heritage identity tends to be strongest and Anglo/Euro-Canadian identity weakest in family domains, and the converse is true in more public domains. In the friendship domain, the difference between identities is generally attenuated, and the relative importance of the two identities depends on factors such as whether one is a first- or second-generation Canadian (see Fig. 1). This pattern is consistent with self-reported language use, such that English tends to be spoken at work/university or in the local community, but the heritage language tends to be used at home, and to a lesser extent with friends (Noels et al., 2013).

We should rightfully question whether these hypothetical scenarios and self-reports of language use parallel actual language use. To address such a concern, Côté and Clément (1994) presented French Canadians in Ottawa with similar but elaborated scenarios, including interactions between friends and interactions in a service encounter. For each of these hypothetical situations, a Francophone and an Anglophone interlocutor provided a first and second speech turn, respectively, and the participant assumed the role of the Francophone interlocutor to provide the third speech turn. They found that the participants overwhelmingly switched to English, converging with the Anglophone despite the situational norms and their beliefs about their group’s ethnolinguistic vitality. Thus, the situational norm seems to have been superseded by other concerns, perhaps the perception (rightly or wrongly) that the Anglophone interlocutor was not capable of continuing in French, or the belief that it would not be appropriate to speak French with an Anglophone.

The measures discussed so far assess identification with each relevant reference group on separate dimensions. Such measures tell us the strength with which people endorse each identity, but they do not tell us how people integrate their two identities together. Benet-Martinez and her colleagues suggest that identity integration can be defined along two dimensions, including how much conflict between identities a person experiences and the degree of overlap or distinctiveness between the two identities (e.g., Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, 2005). In a similar vein, Ruxandra Comanaru and I (2013) found five dimensions that describe profiles of bicultural identity. These include a conflict orientation, similar to that described by Benet-Martinez and Haritatos (e.g., “There is a conflict within myself between the two cultures I belong to”; a monocultural orientation in which one identity is predominant (e.g., “I feel I must decide which of my two cultures is more central to my identity”); an alternation orientation where identities are compartmentalized into different arenas of daily life and thus one switches from one identity to the other (e.g., “My ethnic identity varies depending on who I am with”); complementarity, in which the two identities, although distinct, are compatible (e.g., “My ethnic identity pairs nicely with my Canadian identity”); and hybridity, in which the two identities are blended or fused to create a new, third identity (e.g., “I feel my identity is a mix of two cultures”). Chen et al. (2008) found that greater bicultural identity integration (that is, greater overlap between identities and less conflict) correlated with greater self-reported English proficiency and use in

Chinese students, and with greater Cantonese proficiency in mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, suggesting that competence in a second language facilitates identity integration.

3. Methodological considerations

In addition to these theoretical considerations, there are a host of methodological challenges to developing and delivering effective self-report instruments, particularly those that can be answered using a numerical scale. I would like to draw attention to a set of concerns that arises when one considers that ethnoculturally linked aspects of communication style can have implications for response styles, and point out ways that these concerns might be linked to the study protocols used in this issue. First, echoing the experimental findings on cultural frame-switching discussed earlier, Harzig's (2006) examination of over 3000 people from 25 countries found evidence of cultural accommodation, such that participants adjust their responses in a way that reflects the cultural norms of the group associated with that language. That is, bilingual participants' responses to questionnaire items in English (particularly those pertaining to culturally loaded values) tend to be more similar to an English comparison group than to a native language comparison group, and the converse was true when the questionnaire items were presented in the native language. Such findings underscore that the language used in an interview or in a questionnaire will likely affect how people describe their experiences, including the attitudes and identities that language researchers are most interested in correlating with linguistic variables. This important point that even seemingly trivial characteristics of the interviewer can influence participants' speech is underscored by Fix (2014), who discusses sartorial strategies she used to avoid appearing as an outsider to the women she interviewed. Given that participants' responses often vary with the ingroup or outgroup membership of the researcher, it seems clear that researchers should specify whether interviewers are in- or outgroup members vis-à-vis the participant and whether the participants perceive them in this manner. These concerns emphasize that researchers must be careful not to underestimate nor under-report the influence of the interviewer on the kinds of information that is elicited (cf., Davies and Bentahila, 2013).

There is considerable variation in how individuals respond to survey and interview questions, and it is not always easy to determine whether self-reports reflect the participants' actual opinions or a systematic response style that has little to do with the participants' personal thoughts about the topic at hand. For instance, some individuals tend to answer using the extreme ends of a numerical scale whereas others tend to respond towards the middle of the scale (the so-called "extremity" and "moderacy" biases, respectively) and still others tend to agree with most statements, regardless of their valence ("acquiescence" bias). Some research suggests that these tendencies not only reflect individual differences, but also systematic ethnocultural group tendencies (Smith, 2011). Heine (2010) indicates that Latinos and African Americans generally use more extreme, and Asian Americans less extreme, response styles relative to White Americans. It is an open question whether such response styles should be regarded as biases that must be statistically controlled or ethnolinguistic differences that should be preserved in the data for a detailed analysis. When one is looking at only one ethnolinguistic group, these response tendencies may not be particularly problematic, but when comparing across groups with different ethnolinguistic backgrounds they need to be addressed.

Self-reports can also elicit unintended reference group effects. When asked to describe themselves, people often evaluate themselves in relation to similar others. For people living in multicultural and multilingual contexts, the number of potential reference groups is larger, and the possibility that participants' in a study might use different points of comparison is therefore greater (Heine et al., 2002). In a related vein Morren et al. (2012) found that first- and second-generation immigrants differed in whether they drew from their own personal experience or incorporated their beliefs about tendencies in their ethnic group and beliefs about the majority group. People who either include or exclude personal experience were more likely to show a response bias than those who incorporated all three types of information into their response. Although concerns about response biases are generally raised with regards to the use of rating scales, if these patterns do represent cultural differences in communication styles, they might also be evident in verbal responses to open-ended interview questions.

These kinds of response and reference group biases may have been avoided to some extent in several of the studies presented in the current issue. Rather than requesting participants to rate their ethnic orientation on a numerical scale, Fix (2014) and Nagy et al. (2014) used researcher-assigned scores to code their participants' open-ended responses. Because the researchers are familiar with the responses of all of the participants, they are in a better position to use a common reference point to assign scores, and to more accurately index the relative position of each participant within the sample. This is particularly likely to be true in studies such as Fix's (2014) that use ethnographic observation to develop an in-depth understanding of participants in their social context. That said, a counter-argument to this approach is that the assessment is only indirectly that of the participant. Given that ethnic identity is, to a large degree, a personal, subjective experience, it would be an informative exercise to include both the participants' and the researchers' perspectives in the assessments of identity.

4. Integrating social psychological and sociolinguistic research on language and ethnicity

As I read through the articles in the current issue, I was struck (yet again) by the considerable insights that greater collaboration between social psychologists and sociolinguistics could potentially yield. On one level, there are measurement and analytic techniques that could bolster each others' understanding of the ethnicity–language link. For instance, I lament

the relative paucity of linguistic data that informs much social psychological research on the relation between identity and language. All too often “language” is operationalized through self-evaluation of reading, writing, speaking and understanding skills or through self-reports of the variety of domains in which a target language is used. Although some of these measures correlate to some extent with other proficiency measures (e.g., standardized test scores), they have also been demonstrated to be associated with affective variables such as anxiety using the language (e.g., [MacIntyre et al., 1997](#)). As a result, we cannot be sure that the correlations between identity and language capture an association between self-representation and linguistic practices or rather an affective response to using the language, that, although interesting, fails to capture the kinds of parallels in identity and language variation that we wish to understand. Although these broad indications of language behaviour could be useful in some cases (indeed [Nagy and her colleagues \(2014\)](#) wonder if “the very act of speaking the heritage language is sufficient for identity-marking”), a more nuanced linguistic assessment would provide a more convincing demonstration of the subtle ways through which people indicate and construct their ethnicity through language.

This kind of interdisciplinary collaboration might help to improve the predictive power of the studies that all of us design. For instance, [Nagy and her colleagues \(2014\)](#) used a variety of factor analytic strategies to construct ethnic orientation scores and then correlated them with several linguistic variables. The resulting 234 analyses yielded only a few statistically significant relations. Although an even larger sample size and/or possibly a larger scalar range in the ethnic orientation scores might result in greater power to detect significant effects, Nagy and her colleagues offer another plausible reason for the lack of significant relations. Drawing from the results of a study of Russian and Ukrainian speakers in which an association between ethnic orientation and linguistic variation was found, they suggest that indices of ethnic orientation may relate to linguistic patterns only when that linguistic variable is a recognized sociocultural index of generational status and, implicitly, acculturation to the mainstream. I wonder if some aspects of identity not measured by the ethnic orientation index used in this study might likewise prove to be better predictors of linguistic variation (as discussed above; see also [Fix, 2014](#)). Moreover, is it possible that the relation between ethnic orientation (and particularly ethnic identity) and linguistic variation is not direct but mediated through other, unmeasured variables? For instance, Nagy her colleagues suggest that language learning experience might explain generational differences in patterns of correlations. Such experience might implicate the participant’s identity as a language learner. Many social psychological and social constructionist accounts of second language acquisition posit that identification with the target language community is important for academic and social engagement in language learning and use, which in turn is critical for target language competence (see [Noels and Giles, 2009](#), for review). Perhaps similar motivational and affective variables mediate the relations between ethnic orientation and (indexical) linguistic variables in Nagy et al.’s study.

Although the focus of this paper has centred on quantitative indices of ethnic identity, I want to reiterate that these only provide a partial picture of the relation between ethnicity and language. As illustrated by several of the papers in the current issue, the rich depth and breadth of qualitative analyses are often (but not always) lacking in much social psychological research. [Fix’s \(2014\)](#) analysis of the linguistic and material style of white American women who have significant social ties with African Americans provides a good example of how a quantitative analysis complements a thoroughly detailed, in-depth analysis of the geographical, historical, socio-political and personal contexts in which the participants live. Similarly, the mix of quantitative macro-social and qualitative micro-social analyses of [Wong and Hall-Lew’s \(2014\)](#) work reinforces the point that identities are not discrete (as implied by most quantitative measures) but intersectional. The nuances of this point seem best articulated through their interpretative approach, and it is unlikely that quantitative approaches alone can adequately capture the fluid quality of identity negotiation within particular spatio-temporal contexts. With this in mind, even when using quantitative measures, researchers should assess and specify in their notes as much of the context as possible (e.g., locality, gender, generation, etc.), in order to examine potential interactions between these multiple contextual factors, ethnicity and language use in statistical models. Such analyses, along with detailed descriptions of the context within which the research is conducted, would provide some of the detail needed to understand the situated nature of the language–ethnicity link.

5. Whither ethnicity and language variation?

It is the conundrum of context that I believe sociolinguists and social psychologists must tackle in order to further understand the relation between language and ethnicity. The various papers in this volume underline that its complexities cannot be adequately captured by theorizing in which ethnicities and ethnolects are framed as fixed categories with rigid boundaries. Rather, as suggested by [Becker \(2014\)](#), they are better construed as repertoires that skilled individuals can use as resources to construct identities (see also [Gumperz, 1964](#); [Hymes, 1974](#); [Benor, 2010](#)). Such sociocultural capacities facilitate a speaker’s access to a host of potentially intersecting and multivalent subjectivities, as illustrated by the work of [Wagner and Wong and Hall-Lew \(2014\)](#). These observations resonate with other discussions of bilingualism that emphasize that identities are constructed interpersonally, that the relation between language and identity is often indeterminate, and that identity and language use are interwoven with power and positioning within real and/or imagined communities ([Block, 2007](#)).

This constructionist perspective highlights the limits of socio-structuralist theorizing that tends to represent the macro- and micro-context as a social reality external to, and perceived by, the individual. Although this point is well taken, this critique implies a counter-position in which context is constituted by and internalized within the person or between specific interlocutors. Context is construed as a subjective or intersubjective creation that is constantly changing within and across

social interactions, subject to the vagaries of personal whims and interpretations. Although I would agree there is some veracity to this position, this portrayal of context seems to belie the phenomenological experience that context is extra-individual and more stable than this characterization suggests.

I hold the position that there is a need for analysis at a level in which context is not construed as an “objective” reality (indexed perhaps by demographic variables) that is perceived more or less accurately by individuals, but rather as shared understandings of what are typical and/or appropriate social representations and conduct regarding ethnicity and language. One aspect of this analysis would involve studying the manner by which common ground (i.e., consensual, normative understanding) is co-constructed and referenced by interlocutors through dialogue, as is the focus of much ethnographic and conversation/discourse analytic work already conducted by many sociolinguists. However, given that the social context exists at a level that is more general than an analysis of any individual’s representation or dyadic interaction could likely capture (although the latter might be a debatable assumption), an analysis of the social context must also construe norms (including linguistic and ethnicity norms) as a common belief system that is more or less distributed among a network of people. Such an analysis would entail greater integration of social network analysis into examinations of language, ethnicity and social interaction (cf., [Crossley, 2010](#) for a parallel argument), including analysis of how and why some beliefs become more widely dispersed and shared than others (cf., [Kashima, 2008](#)). One possible approach, recently forwarded by social psychologists of culture, situates the analysis not at the subjective level of personal beliefs, but at the level of average perceived consensus in a given community ([Chiu et al., 2010](#)). But even with such a construal of the social context, researchers must further examine the conditions under which these norms are more or less internalized and consistent with personal values (whether expressed as identities, attitudes, or other representations). In such an analysis we might see that the social context (e.g., normative consensus about whether and how a linguistic variable indexes a social variable) is differentially linked to language choices, but this relation is mediated by identification with that community.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to provide a social psychological perspective on the papers in this special issue on ethnicity and language, in the interest of promoting dialogue between sociolinguists and social psychologists on the topic of language and ethnicity. To this end, I described diverse psychological approaches to ethnic identity, and suggested that these different perspectives might suggest different kinds of relations between identity and language variation. I also pointed out some methodological limitations to self-report measures, particularly those involving quantitative responses to closed-ended questions, and stressed the importance of using mixed methods. Finally, I suggested some directions for future research that might be worthy of interdisciplinary collaboration, including the articulation of the “social context” as a normative “reality” comprised of consensus regarding appropriate language use and identities that is distributed within the social network of a language community. Ultimately, it seems to me that greater communication between the two disciplines holds considerable potential for developing our shared understanding of the link between language and ethnicity.

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