19. Language and Identity

ANDRÉE TABOURET–KELLER

To Identify: Transitive vs Intransitive

The language spoken by somebody and his or her identity as a speaker of this language are inseparable: This is surely a piece of knowledge as old as human speech itself. Language acts are acts of identity (Le Page and Tabouret–Keller, 1985).

The Greeks identified as non–Greek those whose speech sounded to them like barbarbar and called them barbarians; in 1978, in a field interview in Belize, an independent state since 1976 after a long period under British rule as British Honduras, the following dialogue took place:

DR (the schoolboy interviewed): “Well, I would say I’m a Belizean, too. Co … Because erm, born in Belize, you know, I got to know about Belize a bit in history. An’originally, everybody called themselves Belizean, so I call myself a Belizean.”

LeP (the interviewer): “How do you recognize another Belizean?”

DR: “Well, usually in Belize you find the language, the main language you know is this slang that I tell you about, the Creole. And you’d recognize them by that, you know. They usually have this, you know, very few of them speak the English or some of them usually speak Spanish.”

(Le Page and Tabouret–Keller, 1985: 216)

The two semantic fields of the verb identify are illustrated: In the first case, language is taken as an external behavior allowing the identification of a speaker as a member of some group, as in the case of non–Greeks identified by Greeks as foreigners by their way of speech. In the second case, language is taken as the means of identifying oneself, as when the Belizean schoolboy identified himself as Belizean, which meant for him, first, to be born in Belize, and, second but indirectly and certainly with some ambivalent feelings, to belong to a group also identified by its language, “this slang,” “the Creole.” Identifying the others as the barbarians is much more than nicknaming or naming them. It sets a frame within which the relationship will start and often develop. For it implies both that they are different from us and that we are different from them, and also, even if not explicitly, that they too are supposed to apply the same logic vis-à-vis ourselves. The Latin alter (or, at a later time, alter alter) expresses this complex process in a very condensed and apt way, stressing its mirror quality. Identifying us as Creole implies that at least some others exist who have a different identity.
Identifying others or oneself is a means of differentiation and of opposition.

**The Dynamics of Identities**

An analogy may be of some help. The dynamics of ever-changing language in ever-changing human polylogues takes place in a non-homogeneous, unlimited ocean containing mainlands, isles, and islets of relatively permanent usages based on a given linguistic stock, also only relatively permanent; these language pockets are located within larger sociolinguistic streamlets and streams. Personal identities, although not parallel nor complementary to these variations, nevertheless show a similar kind of dynamic (Tabouret-Keller, 1989). At any given time a person's identity is a heterogeneous set made up of all the names or identities, given to and taken up by her. But in a lifelong process, identity is endlessly created anew, according to very various social constraints (historical, institutional, economic, etc.), social interactions, encounters, and wishes that may happen to be very subjective and unique.

We call identification processes those psychological processes by which identities are established. Although we are primarily concerned with language-embedded identities that rest on strictly symbolic means, such as family names, for example, we must not forget that identities may also exploit scopic materials, sensory elements among which visual features seem to occupy a pre-eminent place. The global term *nonverbal*, commonly used to deal with them, calls for caution, because it suggests that these features are extralinguistic, which is not quite the same thing, as will become apparent further on. Every person exploits different layers of identities, forming more or less intricate and encased networks, some parts of which are loose and prone to frequent change and replacement, others being more or less permanent throughout the life span and across social and cultural space. We are identified, and identify ourselves, within the large space of the society of our time, within the different groups – institutional, professional, friends, etc. – we belong to, within the surroundings of our home, our office, our car, our out-of-door outfits, our in-door outfits, etc. A good deal of our overt and covert identities blend symbolic and nonverbal means, certain identifications seem to isolate scopic behavioral elements as if in a postural imitation. The problem of the possible independence in man of certain scopic or nonverbal behavioral elements from inclusion into language-steered symbolic systems remains open. It is central in cognitive theories and answers to it are still tentative, as in a postural imitation. In sociolinguistics we prefer to relate and include what may initially appear as purely nonverbal behavior in cultural constraints or trends that are never independent from symbolic mediation.

We must also stress that, as an oral behavior, language itself necessarily includes corporeal elements resulting from the physiological channels that our voice has to pass through and that give it its phonetic qualities, that is, the upper ends of the digestive and respiratory tracts. No wonder speech and language are so easily confused with life itself: Many organic associations are constantly at work between speech and breathing or eating.

**Language and Identity: Complex Links**

The link between language and identity is often so strong that a single feature of language use suffices to identify someone's membership in a given group. On the battle-field after their victory over the people of Ephraïm, the Gileads applied a language-identity test to sort out friend and foe: All of the soldiers were asked to pronounce the word *shibboleth*; those who pronounced the first consonant as [∫] were friends, those who pronounced it [s] were enemies and therefore killed at once (Judges: XII. 6). Hence a single phonemic feature may be sufficient to include or exclude somebody from any social group. But any other more complex symbolic language item, for example, a given name, may fulfill the same function. In the nineties, during a discussion in French about identity with other French-speaking adolescents of her age, a schoolgirl said: “It's my first name that spoils everything. Nobody pays attention, and as soon as the teacher calls my name at the beginning of the year, Bang! those who don't know me say, ‘what name is this?’And I have to say my mother is German.” This girl's first name was a Germanic name (Varro, 1995).

**Language and Identity: Complex Binds**
These examples show how individual identity and social identity are mediated by language: Language features are the link which binds individual and social identities together. Language offers both the means of creating this link and that of expressing it. Such features imply the whole range of language use, from phonetic features to lexical units, syntactic structures, and personal names.

Two main reasons can be used to explain the close link of language and identity. The first belongs to human psychology: Identification processes range all the way from the confluent identification of mother and new-born child by feeding at the breast or, more generally, nursing, to mere imitation of another, and to identification proper where someone adopts, consciously or unconsciously, a feature or a set of features of another's behavior. Language use offers the largest range of features and the most easily adoptable ones for identification, whatever such identification processes and the complementary identities may mean to their bearer and to those who observe them. The complexity of such behavior is best illustrated by the attempt to please someone by adopting, through identification, behavioral features of another person who one knows is appreciated by that person. Such an attempt may include, for example, such things as a kind of coughing to punctuate sentences as a style of expression. This would be an objective feature of conduct, but identification also involves all sorts of construed representations, such as types and stereotypes (Giles and Powesland, 1975; Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985: chapter 6; Tabouret-Keller, 1991).

The second reason for the close identification of language and identity lies in their linkage by constitution and by law, as illustrated by the example of the Oath of Strasbourg. On February 14 in the year 842, Lewis the German and Charles the Bald, two grandsons of Charlemagne, took an oath of alliance against their older brother, who opposed the legitimate partition of their grandfather's kingdom (Balibar, 1993: 26). First each read the text of the oath in his own language. Then they switched languages: By speaking the Romance language to read out the text of the oath, the heir of Eastern France established it as the language for Western France. The heir of Western France did the same for the Germanic language for Eastern France by using it to read out the text of the oath. Each of the two languages was given legitimacy, but only as far as the dignity of the other was respected. All this took place under the authority of Latin, the language in which the history of the Oath of Strasbourg is recorded. Third, the spokesmen of the two princes swore fidelity to the alliance in their own languages, according to a text which was translated verbatim (eadem verba) from Latin into Germanic and Romance. This innovation came from the masters of grammar and literature who prompted the princes word for word. Not only did they not speak Romance, but it was important that the spoken text did not deviate from the written one, which was considered to be the authentic version.

Imposing on a language the dimensions of an institution, of legitimacy linked to power over a territory and over other institutions, especially law, has several consequences. The name of the language, corresponding to some kind of standardized form – in the case of the Strasbourg Oath, the two forms created by the grammarian advisors of the two kings, Germanic and Romance – achieves some degree of autonomy in people's thinking. According to Le Page (1980), naming a language makes it ready for reification and totemization, that is, it can be made into an object and given iconic status. Reification usually involves some body of doctrine (grammars, lexicon, a literature), totemization the adoption of a language as one of the defining social properties of a group. Members of a group who feel their cultural and political identity threatened are likely to make particularly assertive claims about the social importance of maintaining or resurrecting their language (as, for example, in Wales, Quebec, Belgium, immigrant groups all over Europe, and numerous other communities throughout the world). We see here that identification is served by the name of a language that fulfills the symbolic function of representation, at both the social and individual levels, where it represents not only affiliation with a community or group, but all kinds of allegiance: to a religion, a political leader, an ideology. Fishman's chapter (20) in this book provides many examples of the expression of such collective identification processes.

Identification by a single feature of language use, as in the shibboleth example, or by a complex of features, as in the case of the so-called Creole, is only one side of the language binding function. The other is that a language's name serves as a label covering any kind of intuitive knowledge of what the "object" that it refers to may be – common use, a common standard, an idealized form of the language, etc. As such the name of a language serves as the basis of identification by means of a
shared element. In such cases, identification with a partner is mediated, first of all, by the common label and, secondarily, but not necessarily, by direct behavioral identification with other participants in the same community, social group, faith, belief, ideology, etc. Other behavioral features may support the identification, for instance, dress, a flag (or any other symbol), shared by people one has never met before and will never meet afterwards. Language itself can function as such a symbol for which some are ready to die or kill.

**Boundaries, but with Gaps**

Languages and the identities they carry with them generally imply a boundary marking function: The same identity prevails where and as long as the same language is spoken. Has this ever been true? It certainly is no longer true today, but it is true that the longer a territorial identity is perceived as embedded in the use of an idiom – more often than not, subsumed under a unique term that might designate the territory, the people, and their language – the stronger the representation of a highly focused unit of internal coherence. The strength of such a representation does not depend on permanent variation and change in language use: On the contrary, it helps to overlook these in favor of a unique identity supported by this unique term. This representation is even more focused when language as a named object – as an identification label, not as a linguistic behavioral feature – becomes by law the expression of power at the same time that it also becomes the main instrument by which this power is expressed and executed (Weinreich, 1968: 648). Modern nation-states, which today occupy almost all the world’s territory, intervene in the idealized union of language and identity. They have many means of forcing a language upon their citizens, be it by the constitutional definition of a national, official, or state language, or by one of many other ways like control over the language(s) allowed for school education, for law and justice, etc. French is not only the name of a territory, of the people who live there, of the language that is supposed to be spoken by them, it is also by constitution the language of the citizen of the State of France, including overseas territories such as Martinique and Guadeloupe. As a matter of inherent paradox, though not openly expressed, the formation of states rests on discourse (and ultimately on law) justified by mother–tongue ideology, and calls on the territorial identity of a population at the same time that these states, in setting their frontiers, ignored the language people use and their identity (Tabouret-Keller and Le Page, 1986: 252). As a result, frontiers between states do not usually coincide with dialectal areas and thus most European states, if not all of them, include territories where languages other than the official ones are in use. In such cases, all sorts of distributions between citizenship identity, national identity, and language use identity, are found: Spanish by citizenship, Catalan by family origin, residence, and political choice, Catalan but also Spanish speaker. In a survey of language use in secondary schools in Alsace, in 1980, pupils between 12 and 14 were asked if they thought it possible to be Alsatian without being able to speak the Alsatian dialect; more than 50 percent answered yes (Ladin, 1982: 185).

Multilingual situations illustrate the two aspects of identification by language. A bilingual speaker may be identified by linguistic features deriving from language contact. In certain situations, this gives rise to feelings of inferiority, discrimination, or exclusion from the dominant group, or conversely, feelings of familiarity, recognition, complicity among those who share the language and/or the contact situation. The creativity of bilinguals, especially in oral language not controlled by the normative power of writing, will suffer repression through the totemization of the dominant language. Mastery of the latter is regarded as testimony to allegiance to the state that imposes it, and integration into a community mistakenly based on a single linguistic identity. Such sociolinguistic constraints point toward the subjective difficulties which often arise in contact situations.

**Group Affiliation as a Matter of Relative Choice**

Boundary functions of language imply the possibility for individuals to be both in their own group and out of the others’groups. Such affiliations are of relative value, according to the strength of the identification with language, both as being used and being an identification label, or as only one of these functions. In a survey by Dabène in Grenoble among adolescents whose parents were immigrants from North Africa, one of them declared: “Arabic is my language, but I don’t speak it” (Dabène and Billiez, 1987: 76). As well as language, groups themselves, via their leaders, their members, a common faith and holy oral or written bodies, their press and other media, may reify and
totemize their existence with a name identical to that of what they consider to be their proper language. Membership in a group must satisfy some kind of need in its members, but groups are nothing without their members and it must be stressed that group leaders usually have an advantage in fostering and sustaining the group. One of the easiest means for this is to include the group's name and its attribute in discourse, to stress group affiliation by differentiating from others who don't possess the same advantages, who are easily recognized, by language use among other things.

Groups, whether formal or informal, are aware of and cannot ignore the boundary-marking function of language, if only by the name of the group. Names function in a double capacity of naming an organization and some kind of affiliation, as in Cosa Nostra, for example. Group affiliation is hardly something anyone can dispense with, but some groups one is part of willy-nilly, e.g., gender or age groups; some are imposed upon one, e.g., by social categorization; some one may choose whether or not to join, in which case one has more liberty to adhere to the constraints the affiliation implies.

The image of language, absorbed by the infant with its mother's milk, is one of the roots of the mother-tongue metaphor, the strength of which is due in part to the fact that the new-born child cannot escape dependence on adult's care for his survival (Tabouret-Keller and Le Page, 1986). In any case, the family group is certainly one one has to deal with, even by leaving it. Later on many want to join other groups by accommodating to their behavior, or by adopting what is perceived as their characteristic features, among which language behavior is often, although not always, the most overt. However, it is not necessarily the most important feature; virtually any product of the imagination can be employed for purposes of identification.

Joining a group is in itself a very complex process involving factors linked with the subjects' most subjective and intimate history, their situation and status in society, etc. Hence identity is rather a network of identities, reflecting the many commitments, allegiances, loyalties, passions, and hatreds everyone tries to handle in ever-varying compromise strategies. These imply language use to mark group affiliation, to reveal permitted or forbidden boundaries, to exclude or include, etc.

Theories about the Linguistic Aspects of Identity

To deal with language and identity, we must rely only on language itself. There are hence two possible avenues of approach: technical terms, as in linguistics, and metaphorical terms, as in all other disciplines, and in everyday language. This can be illustrated by every chapter of this book. Technical terms need to be defined and strictly contextualized; metaphors appeal to imagination, which is not only a great asset in identification processes but also in scientific research.

Both Giles and Le Page have developed theories addressing two questions that arise here: To what extent is group identity a matter of choice, and what are the conditions for admission to a linguistically defined group? What of people's feelings, motives, or loyalties?

Giles's accommodation theory is concerned with interactive behavioral events and rests on a definition of an ethnic group as "those individuals who perceive themselves to belong to the same ethnic category" (Giles, 1979: 253). In 1982, Giles gave the following definitions of his theory:

A basic postulate of accommodation theory is that people are motivated to adjust their speech style, or accommodate, as means of expressing values, attitudes and intentions towards others. It is proposed that the extent to which individuals shift their speech styles toward or away from the speech styles of their interlocutors is a mechanism by which social approval or disapproval is communicated. A shift in speech style toward that of another is termed convergence and is considered often a reflection of social integration, whereas a shift away from the other's style of speech represents divergence and is considered often a tactic of social dissociation.

(1982: 105)

An illustrative example of his theory is given by Giles, with Byrne (1982), in the case of two close but linguistically distinguished communities. According to this theory, the more chances of acquiring a
quasi-native competence in the language of a group rise for an individual member of the other ethnic group when:

(a) his identification with his proper group is weak or the language of this group is not of central value to him;

(b) he is not inclined to believe that the intergroup relationship can develop in his group's favor;

(c) he perceives his own group as having a weak ethnolinguistic vitality;

(d) his perception of his own group is vague;

(e) he identifies with his community less in ethnic terms than in terms of membership in other groups, such as a profession.

In order to account for a series of complex behavioral data, Giles introduces an additional concept into accommodation theory, the concept of complementarity. Convergence and divergence may simultaneously operate on different linguistic dimensions. For example: "simultaneous shifts away from and towards the other in a dyad can occur in a way that can be regarded as totally integrative for both participants" (Giles, 1982: 122).

A good many theories applying to bilingual situations bear similarities to Giles's, for example, those of Wallace E. Lambert (1974, 1977), J. Cummins (1979), and J. Hamers and M. Blanc (1982). These are all based on the a priori existence of social, ethnic, regional, national, and professional groups, etc. More generally, language contact situations are good cases to study language and identity fusion or disjunction. Some of them are dealt with in other parts of this book (see especially the chapters by Clyne (18) and Nelde (17)).

Although Giles regards Le Page's work on language behavior in multilingual communities as an important forerunner of accommodation theory (Giles, 1982: 105) the latter's theory differs fundamentally from Giles's by postulating that the speaker creates his linguistic system and speech acts as acts of projection (Le Page, 1968, 1978). Hence social groups need not be defined beforehand; it is the existence of the individual that is the basic postulate. For Le Page it is essential to stress that the individual creates for himself the patterns of his linguistic behaviour so as to resemble those of the group or groups with which from time to time he wishes to be identified, or so as to be unlike those from whom he wishes to be distinguished" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985: 181). Groups or communities and the linguistic attributes of such groups have no existential locus other than in the minds of individuals, and such groups or communities inhere only in the way individuals behave towards each other.

Speech acts are seen as acts of projection: "The speaker is projecting his inner universe, implicitly with the invitation to others to share it, at least insofar as they recognise his language as an accurate symbolisation of the world, and to share his attitudes towards it" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985: 181).

There is no system for the speaker to internalise other than that which he has himself created, which is already internal, and is already the idiosyncratic expression of this search for identity and role. To the extent that he is reinforced, his behaviour in a particular context may become more regular, more focused; to the extent that he modifies his behaviour to accommodate to others it may for a time become more variable, more diffuse, but in time the behaviour of the group – that is he and those with whom he is trying to identify – will become more focused. Thus linguistic systems, both in individuals and in groups, may be considered as focused or diffuse.

(Le Page et al., 1974: 14)

An individual's ability to get into focus with those with whom he wishes to identify, however, is constrained. One can only behave according to the behavioral patterns of groups one finds it
desirable to identify with to the extent that:

(a) one can identify the groups;
(b) one has both adequate access to the groups and ability to analyze their behavioral patterns;
(c) the motivation for joining the group is sufficiently powerful, and is either reinforced or lessened by feedback from the group;
(d) we have the ability to modify our behavior.

My own theory rests on the postulate that language, however defined, precedes any of us at birth, that the existential locus of Homo sapiens, be it individuals or groups, is in language itself. This postulate was developed in seminar work in 1987–8 (Tabouret-Keller, 1989: 15–17). Identification processes are not envisioned in the frame of a dual relationship between A and B, as if A identifies B, or A identifies with B. Rather, they take place in a three-part relationship: Identification between A and B is possible only insofar as these two have access to and are part of C.

A, B, and C are terms of different qualities. The former two represent individuals or groups, whereas C represents language in its symbolic function as the foundation of the human condition. According to this hypothesis, a three-part relationship is fundamental to human existence, while a dual relationship may suffice for all other living species. Except in the case of a strictly scopic identification, human beings are bound to language. We often adopt features of the manners and ways of behavior of others without being aware of, or having any explicit knowledge about, the process by which this happens. Yet such identifications make sense at some level of consciousness, and would still make sense were they to correspond to unconscious representations. Making sense means to depend on words.

Our various examples show two ways of how language creates people’s identities. On one hand, the language someone speaks functions as a behavioral attribute by any of its elements; on the other hand, language supplies the terms by which identities are expressed. Both ways are subsumed under C. In the present two states deriving from the former Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, language politicians emphasize differences between the two varieties of the formerly common language spoken in the formerly united country. They hope this will enable the identification of anyone, by a sole behavioral speech feature, as citizens of one of the two countries. The armed commando that, on December 24, seized the French Airbus at Algiers airport, intending to blow it up, called itself El-Mouakikoune Bi Eddima “those who sign with blood.” This is alas no exception. E. J. Hobsbawm’s latest book on the history of the present century provides many examples of this kind, from almost every country in the world.

We have to explain why people want to be identifiable by their language and ways of speech, and why they want to keep a name which reminds them of an allegiance that commands them to kill. A corollary of my thesis leads us to define identification as a process on which rests the operation of bringing together identities as social constructs and identities as subjective constructs. The distinctions we have introduced up to now were between the individual as a social unit and the person recognized in an institutionalized frame. We need here a third term to specify individuals as unique in that they alone have lived their own life, can speak their own words, and ultimately, must die their own death. The first two entities, individual and person, can be characterized by a series of objectifiable features, as studied and described in sociology, anthropology, and law, whereas the third, subject, can be characterized by the singular quality of mental processes, whatever this notion may refer to, from the Freudian concept of the three-layered mind to the sophisticated models of contemporary cognitive science. We claim that these elements which create a nexus between social objective and individual subjective modalities of identities are themselves identity terms. In that event, the same term functions on the social level, where it operates, for example, as an element of social integration, and on the individual level, where it serves, for example, as a catalyst of associative processes. The ways in which an identity term is invested in various social domains of discourse does not necessarily coincide with the subjective values associated with it. However, not every identity term has a subjective function, and not every subjectively invested identity is echoed in social dimensions and discourse.
Directions for Future Research

All research on language and identity starts from the assumption that identities make sense, that they are meaningful. Although some answers have been given in terms of symbolic functions of language and identities as language-embedded elements, the question remains open – for psychology more than for sociolinguistics – how exactly these symbolic functions operate. As yet, we do not know enough about the ways in which identities themselves mediate between the various symbolic resources of different groups and also how, under certain conditions, they function as a means of power in normative social systems.

Hobsbawm (1994: 3) discusses the fact that the historical memory of the beginning of World War I is no longer alive, and that “the destruction of the social mechanisms that link one’s contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century.” To governments and especially all Foreign Ministries, he recommends a seminar on peace settlements. It is obvious from what he says about the peace settlements in 1918 and 1945, and from what we read in the press about attempts at bringing to an end the conflict in former Yugoslavia, that questions of identity are by and large ignored. It is true that war and peace involve more than lost and passionately desired identities, although these may suffice to justify an individual’s or a group’s actions. But war and peace cannot be understood if the powerful role of identities is ignored. Identities have a part to play in the continuation of war or peace, for example, when the identity as enemy is attributed to an entire population, as in the case of the Tutsi and Hutu in present-day Rwanda.

Finally, we do not know much about the ways in which identities function as cognitive means or modes of categorization (differentiation, unification, classification). As a cognitive means, identities serve to cope with social plurality. Further, they can soften, if not resolve subjective contradictions. We know almost nothing of the ways in which identities underlie exaltation or sublimation, but we suspect that they provide just a very fragile and uncertain bridge between a person and her society, for example, when it comes to dealing with serious social problems such as unemployment. How can people manage to share the ideals of discourse celebrating employment, work, and affluence when such ideals are out of reach for millions of people? The link between language and identity appears as one of the strongest social links, but also as one of the weakest, especially when the social future is as uncertain as it is at the end of the twentieth century.

1 According to a widely accepted idea deriving from the work of Bakhtin, all speech, even inner speech, is dialogal. Speech includes the other, if not necessarily another partner. I suggest that the use of language, being fundamentally social, is polylogal rather than merely dialogal.

2 Scopic, although specific to vision, is used as a cover term for all identification processes resting on sensory data: visual, acoustic, tactile, gustatory.

3 A mathematical model for such an in and out running can be seen in the Möbius strip.

Cite this article
