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**Module: SOCIOLINGUISTICS**

**Course Number: 08**

**Course Title:** **LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY**

If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart. (Nelson Mandela)

**Functions of Language**

Language is a way of communicating thoughts and feelings. Language can unite people, as it can divide them. It can also constitute a means of asserting one’s identity or one’s distinctiveness from others. A common language may be the ideal vehicle to express the unique character of a social group.

**Identity**

According to Thornborrow (2004): “Identity, whether on an individual, social, or institutional level, is something that we are constantly building and negotiating throughout our lives through our interaction with others.”

Trask (2007) states: “Identity in relation to linguistics concerns the role of language inproviding a speaker with individuality and group membership. Everytime you open your mouth, you give other people important cluesabout what sort of person you are: where you come from, what socialclass you belong to, even your sex and age (for example, on thetelephone). This information says something both about your individualityand about the social, national and ethnic groups to whichyou consider yourself to belong. For several decades now, sociolinguistshave realized that providing each speaker with an individualand group identity is one of the most important functions oflanguage.”

**Approaches to Language and Identity**

Throughout human history, language and identity havebeen closely linked. Political boundaries have beendrawn along linguistic lines, establishing nationality aswell as ethnic division. Often, a single feature of pronunciationcan provide a convenient means of identification.Pronunciation, grammatical and lexical markers,naming, and discourses may all be used to establishidentity. The linguistic approach that is most centrallyconcerned with the interrelationship between identityand language is sociolinguistics. Sociolinguisticapproaches to identity and language have changed over

time. At least three different strands of inquiry intoidentity and language can be identified: variationist, interactional, and social constructionist[[1]](#footnote-1) approaches.

Variationist sociolinguistics[[2]](#footnote-2), which is strongly associated with the pioneering work of William Labov, is based on the premise that language reflects identity. Assuming that a person’s speech reflects characteristics of that person, aspects of social identity—such as social class, sex, ethnicity, nationality, or age—were traced through forms of language. The bulk of variationist work on identity and language concerned pronunciation. Typically, certain pronunciation variableswere linked to aspects of social identity. However, in recent years, work in variationist sociolinguistics has been challenged on the grounds that social identity cannotprovide an explanation for language use because itis a concept that is itself in need of explanation. Critics of variationist sociolinguistics argue that instead ofasking, ‘How do women and men speak differently?’ or‘How do Black and White Americans speak differently?’it would be more important to find out how people become gendered or racialized beings in the first place.

Interactional sociolinguistic approaches[[3]](#footnote-3) to identityand language, as pioneered by John Gumperz and usedby Deborah Tannen, draw largely on social psychology[[4]](#footnote-4).In this approach, identity is based on group membership,where the negotiation of identity in interaction isof central concern. Instead of focusing on pronunciation,interactional sociolinguists study discourse, writtenor spoken communication, preferring qualitative

methods over quantitative in data collection and analysis.Interactional sociolinguistics assumes that identityas group-membership is negotiated, challenged, orupheld in conversation. When people come togetherfrom different backgrounds,misunderstandings arelikely to occur, as they do not share the same conventionsfor signaling identity and role relationships.Consequently, most of the work in this tradition has been concerned with cross-cultural communication.‘Cross-cultural’ has been rather loosely defined andincludes interactions between people from differentnational backgrounds (e.g. American–Japanese business communication), between migrants and natives(e.g. South-East Asians in British job interviews),between people from different ethnic backgrounds (e.g.Black and White Americans), or between women andmen. This social psychological conception of identity,however, has come under attack for at least two differentreasons. In this approach, identity as group membership is seen as essentializing, meaning identity is regarded as internal and immutable. Further, this viewof identity relies on the idea of a homogeneous groupwhile, in fact, people are members of many differentgroups simultaneously (e.g. American, Hispanic, professor,female, heterosexual). The latter objection, thatsocial identity is hybrid and heterogeneous, is raised bylinguists who work in bi- and multilingualism studies.The language use of bilinguals clearly exemplifies thatspeakers do not only have one single identity but rathera repertoire of identities.

Contemporary approaches to language and identitymost often build on the framework of social constructionism.Identity is now seen as relational, cultural, andcontingent. It is relational because it is located in connectionsmade between people rather than in the mindsof individuals. Identity is cultural because it is based onshared understandings, and it is contingent because it isa strategic performance that may fail or misfire.Speakers are seen as strategically deploying their linguisticrepertoires in order to project chosen identities.However, their acts of identity are not exclusively intheir own hands as they depend (a) on the repertoires attheir disposal and (b) on the ways in which their speechpartners choose to view them. Identities are constructedor co-constructed depending on the power relationshipthat pertains between the interactants. In manysocieties, categories such as caste, gender, or race areimposed and coerced, leaving little or no room for individualsto perform or explore alternative identities thatmight deviate from prevailing ideologies. Aspectsof social identity that have played a central role inrecent linguistic work are: gender, nationality, ethnicity, and bilingualism.

**Nationality and Identity**

Nationality has been seen as intricatelylinked to language for centuries. To the present

day, many nations, particularly in Europe and NorthAmerica, subscribe to a ‘one nation, one language’ideology. Many states have used the reification of astandard language and the common identity that supposedlygoes with a shared language as a means to naturalizepolitical borders. In an intricate genre analysis, Wodak et al. (1999) describe how ‘the same’ nationalidentity (Austrian) is performed in significantly differentways and with significantly different meanings inpublic and private speech (e.g. newspaper articles vs.one-to-one interviews).

**Ethnicity and Identity**

Social status, gender, age, ethnicity and the kinds of social networks that people belong to turn out to be important dimensions of identity in many communities. On Martha’s Vineyard, those who had lived on the island for generations, and especiallythose men who fi shed for their livelihood, resented the fact that the island has been invadedby more recent immigrants, and especially by summer tourists. A 1960s linguistic survey by Labov suggested that these attitudes were indicated by the way locals pronounced the (ay)and (aw) sounds in words like *light* and *house.* Their pronunciation of the vowels in thesewords had gradually become more and more centralised. (The position of the tongue at thestart of the vowel had moved towards the centre of the mouth.) So *light* was pronounced [lait](it sounds a bit like *layeet*) and *house* was pronounced [haus] (a bit like *heyoose*). This soundchange, which seemed to be unconscious, was a change to a more conservative pronunciationwhich used to be associated with the area in the past. It had been dying out, but it was revitalised to express solidarity between those who identified with the island and felt loyaltyto its rural values and peaceful lifestyle. The centralisation of the vowel in *light* was particularly significant for signaling ***Islander identity***.

**References**

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1. It is common place in the humanities and the social sciences to claim that certain human features, such as someone’s gender, race, or sexual orientation, are socially constructed. This view about the nature of these human categories (known as Social Constructionism) is supposed to be in contrast with two rival views, namely, Biological Realism (that is, the view that a certain category is a biologically real kind), and Anti-Realism (that is, the view that a certain category is empty: nothing belongs to it, the corresponding expression does not refer to anything). Social constructionism is taken to be a realist account of the nature of a certain category: it is claimed that the category is a real feature of human beings, but it is determined by social, rather than natural or biological properties. (Diaz-Leon : 2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Variationist sociolinguistics is most aptly described as the branch of linguistics which studies the foremost characteristics of language in balance with each other – linguistic structure and social structure; grammatical meaning and social meaning – thoseproperties of language which requirereference toboth external (social) and internal (systemic) factors in their explanation. (Tagliamonte 2006:4) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Interactional sociolinguistics is a qualitative, interpretative approach to theanalysis of social interaction that developed at the intersection of linguistics,anthropology and sociology. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. the study of the manner in which the personality, attitudes, motivations, and behaviour of the individual influence and are influenced by social groups.From Merriam-Webster dictionary. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)