

Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts

Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge, Eds. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. 2003.
Pp. x + 349.

Post-modern, post-structural, and post-colonial thought have brought to the fore new and productive metaphors for understanding social life, challenging normative ideologies that restrict the deployment of certain personal identities. By surfacing implicit power relations traditionally accepted as common sense (Bourdieu, Foucault), locating fissures and intertextualities within discourses previously considered stable and coherent (Bakhtin, Derrida), and elucidating *third spaces* between dichotomous identity labels (Butler, Bhabha), critical thinkers in this vein have undermined the notion of an essentially stable self and encouraged exploration of social identity as a complex and shifting phenomenon. These commitments in turn offer profound critiques of socio-political structures in the name of liberating oppressed – or *dispreferred* – selves. However, with their inherently political stance and disregard for strict empirical inquiry, these discourses have simultaneously generated their own counter-productive biases and naiveties.

Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge's (2003) edited volume *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*, situated firmly within a post-structural framework, brings to the field of sociolinguistics the same mix of tantalizing corrective and naïve bias. In their introduction, the editors argue that identity is a dialogic phenomenon, constantly open to construction and re-evaluation within and through communicative interaction. Rather than seeking fixed identities underlying discourse strategies, they call for the examination of identity as a narrative emerging through language – or, more specifically, as a “fragmented, decentered, and shifting” narrative (p.18), resulting from the complexities of multilingual contexts.

The editors thus reframe the sociolinguistic project to explore the negotiation of identity as it plays out in language choices. In doing so, they critique essentialist prejudices in certain sociolinguistic models (i.e., one-to-one correspondences between language use and social factors such as age, gender, and ethnic background) along with the failure of previous models to acknowledge shifting variations in identity valuations over time (i.e., the way historical moment affects the perception and deployability of certain identity choices). For example, Pavlenko's article (chapter 1) contrasts the permissible identities for immigrants to the United States in the early 20th and late 20th century by exploring literary/autobiographical narratives of immigration in relation to reception of those texts by native readers. She finds that the notion of the immigrant success story – for both immigrants and natives – has changed greatly over the course of the century, suggesting that the category *immigrant* loses its moorings as an essential identity definition.

In the same critically expansive vein, the editors question the range of linguistic maneuvers currently considered examples of identity negotiation. To the discourse-level choices of code-switching and code-mixing, they provocatively add further options, including the use of new linguistic varieties, the deployment of new rhetorical strategies (arguably a form of code-mixing), the learning of a second language, and the creation of identity narratives (i.e., stories one tells about oneself). The latter two maneuvers may seem somewhat meta-linguistic, yet they prove fruitful concepts in an article studying a working class American woman's choice to study French as a means of attaining the social capital, and social freedom, typically unavailable to someone from a lower class background (Celeste Kinginger's chapter 7). The collision of this choice with her background problematizes her acquisition of the language, in part due to the perceptions native speakers bring to their dialogue with her but also due to her own difficulties accommodating to the new identity story she seeks to tell about herself.

Throughout the volume, similar interplays of language, narrative, and power imperfectly structure the deployment and viability of the different identities subjects would assume. The 11

articles in the book are drawn from an impressive array of social contexts, spanning five continents and including some rarely explored sociolects – Verlan in suburban Paris (Meredith Doran’s chapter 3) and Black British Sign Language (Melissa James & Bencie Woll’s chapter 4) – and areas of inquiry – literacy in Nigeria (Benedicta Egbo’s chapter 8) and Japanese as a Second Language among Japan’s South-East Asian immigrant communities (Kanuko Yanno’s chapter 11). Each piece explores social interactions in settings fraught with political complexities, where participants cannot rely on a single inter-personal identification, but must instead navigate among various identity options, all of which come loaded with social expectations and biases. Rather than language serving as a neat bridge from internal identity to external representation, language choices become implicated in the work of negotiating one’s identity within a network of options and constraints.

The British mothers of Pakistani origin in Jean Mills’ article (the exceptional chapter 5) juggle the use of Urdu, Arabic, and English in the home to attend to the multiform pressures of their social networks: in-laws in Karachi who want to talk to their grand-children, husbands who leave the work of language training to their wives, the Muslim faith which calls them to prepare their children to read the Koran in the original Arabic, and the homogenizing monolingual education system which devalues their first language but which also serve as the locus of success or failure for themselves and their children. Language policy in the home thus seems a no-win situation for these women, as they continually foreground and downplay certain aspects of their identities in the light of these conflicting forces. Like the Deaf Black informants of James and Woll’s study in chapter 4, they often feel uncomfortable simply being one or the other: they must calibrate their identities according to the social constraints most salient on any occasion.

More happily, the suburban North African-French teenagers in Meredith Doran’s piece (chapter 3) appear to revel in the identity options afforded by the local sociolect, Verlan, which offers them a parallel social space for exploring their *in-between* identities (as nonnative-looking natives) alongside their interactions with their monolingual compatriots in standard French and their families in their home languages. At the same time, these youths walk a tight balance in using a variant most commonly associated with criminals and thugs: they report the need to modulate their use of Verlan based on their recognition of its relative safety around different speakers and listeners.

Doran’s piece, along with most of the others in the volume, relies extensively on personal interviews with research participants, and herein lies a significant problem of the work as a whole. On one hand, this technique allows the researcher access to emic levels of explanation normally untapped in sociolinguistic analysis concerned with power and identity. On the other, it generates a certain Heisenbergian quality to the work: how much are the informants’ identity narratives affected by the interviewer’s questions and presence? The writers categorically ignore this issue, in most cases failing even to include the interview questions which elicited the reported responses. This absence is particularly glaring in Doran’s study, in which teenagers speak in surprisingly sophisticated language about their identities. Certainly, multicultural youths may have a complicated understanding of their lives, but the reader is left in doubt as to how the researcher’s presence colored their responses, or to how much identity-work they are performing in the interviews. A truly rigorous post-structuralist approach should at least acknowledge the ways that the researcher’s power position and the potential for intertextual bricolage of his/her discourse would color a respondent’s presentation. Ironically, the writers acknowledge the practice of identity negotiation without exploring how it occurs in front of them.

Read against Pavlenko’s chapter on immigration narratives, though, this problem suggests that many of the identities which emerge in the interviews are success stories of a sort – not tales of how the participants actually behave, but how they ideally perceive themselves as behaving. Certainly, the philosophical underpinnings of the volume would support that

reframing, with its commitment to identity narrative as the object of analysis rather than identity itself. Yet, the editors promise greater critical engagement in their introduction:

While participant perspectives are privileged in the volume...the contributors take a critical stance with regard to all texts and appeal to critical ethnography, which allows them to triangulate the data, and to critical discourse analysis, which enables them to uncover hidden ideological meanings. (pp. 25-26)

One of the few examples of the latter sort of criticism is applied not to any participant's narrative, but in a scathing discourse analysis of a British MP's speech in Parliament in the wake of the "ethnic rioting" in Northern England during the summer of 2001 (Adrian Blackledge's chapter 2). Blackledge skewers the MP for the "illiberal" ideology (p. 86) undergirding her call for a more rigorous national language policy, but he fails to acknowledge the generic, social, and political constraints framing this speech, thereby denying this speaker the same sympathy afforded to other informants in the volume. This decision could fairly be understood as an editorial policy of "not tolerating the intolerant" – a liberal commitment expressed openly throughout the volume – but the same critical ear might well be turned on the participant's stories as well as on the researcher's methods. How might the researchers' "unfailing interest in social justice" (p. 4) – a concept barely unpacked in the volume – also affect their analysis of the texts they survey?

Nel Noddings, the former chair of the Philosophy of Education department at Teachers College, used to begin her lectures on post-modernism with her own evaluation of that branch of thought: "a mix of the wonderful and the kooky." Critical theory does provide a bold critique of current models in linguistics, or in any field, but until it addresses its biases and lack of rigor, research in this vein will not be taken seriously outside of the circles of the already-converted. *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts* offers a strong and diverse collection of studies for researchers in the areas of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, and it effectively introduces emerging models in the field. Just be sure to keep a critical eye on the critical theorists.

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