

## 2.4 Discourse and identity

A person may have a number of *identities*, each of which is more important at different points in time. They may have an identity as a woman, an identity as a mother, an identity as someone's partner and an identity as an office worker, for example. The ways in which people display their identities includes the way they use language and the way they interact with people. Identities are not natural, however. They are constructed, in large part, through the use of discourse. Identity, further, is not something that is fixed and remains the same throughout a person's life. It is something that is constantly constructed and re-constructed as people interact with each other. Part of having a certain identity is that it is recognized by other people. Identity, thus, is a two-way construction.

The earliest studies into the relationship between language and identity were based on a variationist perspective; that is, they looked at the relationship between social variables such as social class in terms of variation in the use of linguistic variables such as certain features of pronunciation, or the use of non-standard grammar. More recent work, however, has taken a *poststructural* perspective on language and identity, seeing identity 'as something that is in constant process' (Swann et al. 2004: 140–1) arguing that it is through language, or rather through discourse, that identity is principally forged.

The information a person 'gives off' about themselves, and in turn, their identity, depends very much on the context, occasion and purpose of the discourse. It also depends on the 'space' and 'place' of the interaction (Blommaert 2005). Cameron (1999) gives an example of this in her discussion of how a group of male US college students construct heterosexual masculinity through the talk that they engage in while watching TV in their college dorm. Richardson (2000) shows something similar in her analysis of the language male cricket club members use to talk about women in the cricket club newsletter they contribute to. In both these studies the men involved perform and enact particular gendered (and sexual) identities which for that moment in time are, for them, socially salient.

It is not just through the performance of identities that they are created, however. It is also by the fact that they are recognized by other participants in the interactions. In Blommaert's (2005: 205) words, 'a lot of what happens in the field of identity is done by others, not by oneself'. In some cases this identity may only be temporary. Equally '[n]ot every identity will have the same range or scope' (211) nor be the same across time and physical space. As Blommaert says, people speak both in and from a place. Place, he argues, 'defines people, both in their eyes and in the eyes of others' (223) as well as attributes certain values to their interactions. People can (and do) he argues, shift places 'frequently and delicately, and each time, in very minimal ways, express different identities' (224). No single aspect of identity (such as gender, race and ethnicity), further, is independent of other aspects of identity (such as social class, occupation and sexuality). Identity, rather, is a social accomplishment that

'operates as a repertoire of styles, or ways of doing things that are associated with culturally recognized social types' (Bucholtz 2010: 2).

Thomas (2007) has explored the issues of language and identity in online chat environments, a very particular place and space. With a focus on adolescent 'cybergirls', she examines how girls use words and images to establish online identities which reflect both their fantasies and their desires in this particular setting. She does an analysis of both the words and the images that they use to create their identities. In their online environment, the cybergirls interacted with words, symbols for words, as well as various other symbols such as emoticons and 'avatars' (visual characters which express a certain identity) in order to establish their online identities. One of her participants, Violetta, talked about how she wrote online to convey a particular persona:

Violetta: i'd have whole typing styles for people. like, if i were trying to trick someone i knew into thinking i was someone else, i'd type a lot differently than i do normally. a person's typing style can give them away like their voice does. (114)

Thomas found that 'the girls who gain and exercise power in their online worlds are those who know how to use and manipulate words, images and technology' (Thomas 2004: 359). She found that some of what they did online reflected the kind of 'learned social accomplishments' that researchers in the area of language and gender have referred to. Some of what they did, however, reflected fantasies they had about themselves and their desired personae, the online medium giving them a safe and private place to establish these fantasized-about identities.

The identities that people establish online, then, provide an interesting example of how people create identities through their use of language (and other visual devices) that may, in some cases, be separate and distinct from their offline identity. Each of these identities is part of the ongoing process of establishing who we are, and who we want (at least at certain times) to be. It is for this reason that authors such as Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004) prefer to talk about *identity online* rather than *online identity*. Some people communicating online may, indeed, change essential characteristics about themselves (such as their age, ethnicity, race or physical appearance) in order to present an identity online that will be more appealing to the audience they are wanting to communicate with. A Taiwanese user of online chat rooms in Tsang's (2000) study, for example, found he had more success in getting people to chat with him if he said he was Caucasian, rather than Chinese (see Liu 2010a, 2010b; Varis, Wang and Du 2011 for a discussion of online identities in China).

### Identity and casual conversation

Many of the interactions in the show *Sex and the City* are examples of the use of discourse to create, express and establish social (and other) identities. A common way in which the

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characters in the show do this is through their use of the genre casual conversation. As Eiggins and Slade (1997: 6) argue:

Despite its sometimes aimless appearance and apparently trivial content, casual conversation is, in fact, a highly structured, functionally motivated, semantic activity. Motivated by interpersonal needs continually to establish who we are, how we relate to others, and what we think of how the world is, casual conversation is a critical linguistic site for the negotiation of such important dimensions of our social identity as gender, generational location, sexuality, social class membership, ethnicity, and subcultural and group affiliations.

Eiggins and Slade argue that people do not engage in casual conversations just to 'kill time', but rather to negotiate social identities as well as to negotiate, clarify and extend interpersonal relations. As they put it:

The apparent triviality of casual conversation disguises the significant interpersonal work it achieves as interactants enact and confirm social identities and relations. (16)

They describe this as the central paradox of casual conversation. As they argue, casual conversation is the type of talk in which people feel most relaxed, most spontaneous and most themselves, 'yet casual conversation is a critical site for the social construction of reality'. Casual conversations do a number of things which are crucial to discussions of language and identity. They establish solidarity 'through the confirmation of similarities', and they assert autonomy 'through the exploration of differences' (ibid.).

The way in which language is used in casual conversations, like all spoken interactions, is influenced by the relationship between the people speaking, the frequency with which they come into contact with each other, the degree of involvement they have with each other and their sense of affiliation for each other. In the case of *Sex and the City*, each of the four female characters knows each other extremely well. Although they are the best of friends, they are each quite different and from quite diverse backgrounds. As they meet together, they share their experiences and negotiate their understandings of (among other things) life, love, men and sex. As Carrie and her friends talk, they construct themselves in a way which signifies (their view of) desirable Western women of a certain social class in a certain physical and social setting through their use of the genre of casual conversation.

Understanding the social and cultural context of the *Sex and the City* conversations is critical to understanding the identities that are being expressed and negotiated in many of the conversations. What to some people may seem natural in their interactions is a result of Butler's (2004) 'sets of repeated acts' and 'repeated stylisations of the body'; that is, the acts that they repeatedly perform which reaffirm and publicly display their views of themselves, and in turn their social identities as, among other things, independent successful professional New York City women of a certain age and certain social class (see Paltridge, Thomas and Liu 2011 for further discussion of this; also Richardson 2010, Piazza, Rossi and Bednarek 2011 for further discussion of television dramatic dialogue).

When we speak (or write), then, we are telling other people ‘something about ourselves’ (Cameron 2001: 170) and relating to people in particular ways. Identity, thus, is a joint, two-way production. Identity, further, is not just a matter of using language in a way that reflects a particular identity. It is rather a socially constructed self that people continually co-construct and reconstruct in their interactions with each other. This leads to different ways of doing identity with different people in different situations. A person’s identity then:

is not something fixed, stable and unitary that they acquire early in life and possess forever afterwards. Rather identity is shifting and multiple, something people are continually constructing and reconstructing in their encounters with each other in the world. (ibid.)

Identity is a ‘negotiated experience’ in which we ‘define who we are by the way we experience our selves . . . as well as by the ways we and others reify our selves’ (Wenger 1998: 149). Identities are not fixed, but constantly being reconstructed and negotiated through the ways we do things and ways of belonging (or not) to a group (Casanave 2002). Our identities are further developed as we increase our participation in particular communities of practice. These identities, further, are based on shared sets of values, agreed-upon cultural understandings and the ideologies which underlie our use of spoken and written discourse.

These communities of practice, further, may be imagined (Anderson 1991) or they may be virtual (Meadows and Waugh 2010). Pavlenko and Norton (2007) discuss the notion of *imagined communities* in relation to English language learners arguing that learners’ desired memberships of imagined communities influence their motivation for learning and the investment they make in their learning. Meadows (2009) uses the notion of *imagined national communities of practice* in his discussion of the ways in which students may invest in this notion as a way of maintaining their position, and privilege, in their more local (and actual) community. Thomas’ (2007) *Youth Online* provides many examples of how people in online worlds create and establish identities that may be quite different, at times, from their offline ‘actual’ identities.

## Identity and written academic discourse

Identity is as much an issue in written discourse as it is in spoken discourse. This is particularly the case in student academic writing. Hyland (2002c) discusses the view that is often presented to students that academic writing is faceless, impersonal discourse. Students are told, he says, ‘to leave their personalities at the door’ when they write and not use personal pronouns such as ‘I’ which show what is being said is the student’s view or place in things. As Hyland (2002c: 352) argues, ‘almost everything we write says something about us and the sort of relationship that we want to set up with our readers’. Indeed, one of the ways that expert academic writers do this, in some academic disciplines at least, is through the use of the pronoun ‘I’.

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Establishing writer identity is, however, something that is often difficult for second language writers. This is often complicated by students bringing a different writer 'voice' from their first language setting to the second language writing situation (Fox 1994). Students may come from backgrounds where they have considerable standing in their field of study and find it difficult to be told they need to take on the voice of a novice academic writer, and hide their point of view, as they write in their second language. Hirvela and Belcher (2001) argue that teachers need to know more about the ways students present themselves in their first language writing and about their first language and culture identities so they can help students deal with the issue of identity in their second language writing.

As Casanave (2002: 23) argues in her book *Writing Games*, learning to belong to a community of practice can take time and a great deal of effort. It can be filled with tensions and conflict. As she points out:

Newcomers inevitably feel the foreignness of unfamiliar practices, the unwieldiness of new forms and tools of communication, and relationships with more experienced practitioners that are not necessarily harmonious.

Work in the area of *academic literacies* (Lea and Street 2006, Lillis and Scott 2007, Blommaert, Street and Turner 2008, Street 2010, Wingate and Tribble 2011) provides a way of thinking about some of these issues. An academic literacies perspective on academic writing sees learning to write in academic settings as learning to acquire a repertoire of linguistic practices which are based on complex sets of discourses, identities and values. Here, students learn to switch practices between one setting and another, learning to understand, as they go, why they are doing this, and what each position implies. This means understanding what is required of writers at a particular level of study in terms of attitudes to knowledge and how this is revealed through language. This also involves how a writer, at the particular level, shows their command of their subject matter and their ability to critically reflect on it. That is, students need to show both their authorial identity and authority through the text they are writing in such a way that their reader will recognize and respond to this (see Paltridge and Starfield 2007, Paltridge et al. 2009 where this is discussed further).

Ivanic (1998) discusses the notion of self-representation in academic writing and, in particular, the concept of the *discoursal self*. As she points out, there are always a range of alternatives writers can choose from in order to represent themselves in a text, their relationship with their readers, and their relationship to the knowledge they are discussing. This can be through the use of *stance* features such as *self mentions* (*I, we, my*), *hedges* (*might, perhaps*), *boosters* (*definitely, in fact*) and *attitude markers* such as *unfortunately* and *surprisingly*, which express their attitude towards a proposition (Hyland 2005b). Writers also draw on *engagement* strategies such as *reader pronouns*, *personal asides*, *appeals to shared knowledge*, *directives* and *questions*. Examples of each of these strategies are shown in Table 2.1. Through the use of these strategies, writers both acknowledge and recognize the presence

**Table 2.1** Examples of stance and engagement strategies in academic writing (based on Hyland 2005c)

Strategy	Examples
<b>Stance</b>	
Hedges	<i>Our results suggest</i> that rapid freeze and thaw rates during artificial experiments in the laboratory <i>may</i> cause artificial formation of embolism.
Boosters	With a few interesting exceptions, we <i>obviously</i> do not see a static image as moving. This seems <i>highly</i> dubious.
Attitude markers	The first clue of this emerged when we noticed a <i>quite extraordinary</i> result.
Self-mentions	This experience contains ideas derived from reading <i>I</i> have done.
<b>Engagement</b>	
Reader pronouns	Although <i>we</i> lack knowledge about a definitive biological function for . . .
Personal asides	And – <i>as I believe many TESOL professional will readily acknowledge</i> – critical thinking has now begun to make its mark.
Appeals to shared knowledge	Of course, <i>we know</i> that the indigenous communities of today have been reorganized by the catholic church . . .
Directives	<i>It is important to note</i> that these results do indeed warrant the view that . . .
Questions	<i>Is it, in fact, necessary to choose between nature and nurture?</i>

of their readers at the same time as they position themselves in relation to the outcomes of their research (Hyland 1998a, 1998b, 2002a, 2005c, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011).

As Hyland (2009a, 2012) points out, in order to be successful students need to represent themselves in a way that is valued by their discipline as well as adopt the values, beliefs and identity of a successful academic writer in their area of study. It involves ‘negotiating a self which is coherent and meaningful to both the individual and the group’ (Hyland 2011a: 11). This identity, further, is only successful by the extent to which it is recognized by the discipline and the group (Hyland 2010). Students, thus, need to choose ways of expressing themselves that will resonate with members of the group so that their claims to be one of them will be seen to be credible and valid (Hyland 2011a). This kind of writing, thus, is highly situated (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic 2000) and requires an in-depth understating of the values and ideologies of the discipline in which the student is working, the subject of the next section of this chapter (see Hyland 2012 for further discussion of identity and academic writing).

## 2.5 Discourse and ideology

The values and ideologies which underlie texts tend to be ‘hidden’ rather than overtly stated. As Threadgold (1989) observes, texts are never ideology-free nor are they objective. Nor can they be separated from the social realities and processes they contribute to maintaining. For Threadgold, spoken and written genres are not just linguistic categories but ‘among the very processes by which dominant ideologies are reproduced, transmitted and potentially changed’ (107). In her view, a spoken or written genre is never just the reformulation of a linguistic model, but always the performance of a politically and historically significant process.