

# Literature Review on Language and Identity Construction

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Identity has been widely examined in various subjects, like psychology and sociolinguistics. However, there is a lack of a systemic review concerning this field. Thus, this paper aims to discuss the presented literature regarding language and identity construction, more specifically in the fields of impoliteness and politic study. The review will be carried out through the following several aspects: firstly, the basic definition of identity in different sectors; secondly, the interplay between impolite study and identity construction; and thirdly, the interplay between identity construction and language within political discourses and last part about overall comments and further suggestions. It is hoped that this short literature review provides some guidance for the scholars who are aiming to do study about identity construction.

*Keywords:* identity, impoliteness, political discourse

## Definitions of Identity

Our capacity for self-reflection and self-awareness is among the most remarkable characteristics that set humans apart from other species. This kind of self-oriented act is normally manifested through the use and uptake of verbal and non-verbal factors, in a broad sense, the interplay between language use and language comprehension. The questions like “Who am I?”, “Who are you?”, and “Who are we?” are thus framed in academic study for identifying the construction process and differences between “self” and “others”. It is reasonable to say that language is one channel through which social beings express, communicate and, ultimately, negotiate their identities (Locher, 2011). This process is what we termed the process of identity construction.

As Wodak (2012) has noted to examine the definition of “oneself” and “others” “always implies inclusionary and exclusionary processes” (p. 216) regarding identity construction. He also contends that identity is always recreated or produced in interactional settings and everyone can have several identities which are typically fragmented, dynamic, and changeable. From this note, it is obvious that he holds that an individual’s identities are social in nature since identity is manifested through the meaning expressed or the use of language. In turn, an individual’s identity may determine his or her use of language in a specific context. Consequently, a dialectic relationship between language and identity is formed (Wodak, 2012).

From the sociocultural linguistic perspective, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) also proposed that identity is “the social positioning of self and other” (p. 586). For the positioning of “self”, Brewer and Gardner (1996, p. 84) argued that self-representation can be distinguished from three levels, respectively the “personal self” from the individual level, the “relational self” from the interpersonal level, and the “collective self” from the group level. From their arguments, on the one hand, identity can be cognitively presented, viewing identity from an essentialist

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view as a deterministic trait of an individual, which is unalterable, static, and authentic (Tenenbaum & Davidman, 2007). On the other hand, identity is always constructed and negotiated in the interaction, regarding it as a dynamic concept (De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

Nevertheless, drawing a distinction between different identities is a complex process (Fairclough, 2003, p. 160). With different research approaches, studies on identity abound and the definitions of identity vary because of different research angles. This short review will focus on the constructivist approach to identity issues and the next several paragraphs will review the issues of identity construction in the field of impoliteness study and political study. Examining the two domains is necessary because of the dynamic changes in their interactions, which can thus present a constructivist nature of identity.

### **Interplay Between Language and Identity in Impolite Study**

In the field of impoliteness study, studies nowadays have noted the situated nature of identity and impoliteness with emphasis on their construction process.

Based on a corpus of 160 interactional sequences extracted from both the US and the UK versions of the talent show *Idol* spanning from 2002 to 2009, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Bou-Franch, and Lorenzo-Dus (2013) have examined one music expert, Simon Cowell's expert identity construction process regarding negative comments (in the authors' words, negative comments refer to the impolite utterances). The music expert as an authoritative, cruel but honest judge and a witty executioner is respectively discussed in the transcribed material through a genre-based and socio-constructivist approach. The findings indicate that impoliteness and identity are found intimately connected, which is also highlighted in Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2009). This is intriguing to a certain extent for connecting identity and impoliteness in this specific genre with its very prominent turn-taking system among the interactants. It is also a hint for researchers that on discussing impolite issues, the identity issue should not be neglected since the impolite utterances reflect one's power in this process thus possible for constructing various identities.

From the viewpoint of relational work in interaction, more precisely Goffman's (1967) notion of "face", Locher (2011) has elaborated on the relationship between identity construction and impoliteness with meta-comments between advice-seekers and advice-givers on an internet forum. It can be seen from the research that on discussing issues regarding impoliteness and identity, the two concepts, face and identity, are normally intertwined, possibly because "there is no face-less communication" (R. Scollon & S. B. K. Scollon, 2001, p. 48). However, identifying relations with online comments is a tough task since it may involve social factors like power distance and cultural differences. Moreover, Locher herself has also admitted that paralinguistic features related to the comments should be examined as well so to provide a more accurate analysis.

Ladegaard (2012) has examined gender, power, and identity position through jocular insults and verbal abuses through the on-the-spot observation in a Hong Kong workplace. The referred constructed identity in this paper shows that identity and power are closely related, and impolite speech acts can facilitate identity construction. Therefore, the impoliteness is viewed as a strategy for identity construction, which is also examined in Chen and Ran (2013). Another innovative point of this study is that the speakers' tone of voice has been taken into consideration. This is a feature that can only be noticed in real conversations but not the transcribed scripts. Thus, in future analysis, the study concerning identity construction would be more convincing if authentic real-life material is employed.

Different from the on-the-spot observation examined in Ladegaard (2012), another perspective approaching the study of impoliteness and identity is through computer-mediated communication, for example in Upadhyay (2010) and Han (2021). This kind of discourse is strikingly different from face-to-face interaction, which is subject to “the rule of self-respect and the rule of considerateness” (Goffman, 1967, p. 11). In this way, the netizens’ identity can be constructed regardless of power distance and cultural differences. Their studies also reflect that identity could be created and co-constructed interactionally.

From the literature reviewed above, it is suggested that firstly, recent works within the field of impoliteness study have focused on the situatedness nature of identity and notions like power, face, image, and impoliteness are all interconnected which need further study for a detailed analysis. Secondly, methodologically speaking, since both identity and impoliteness relate to construction aspects and social factors, the interactional approach based on socio constructionism is favored by scholars.

### **Interplay Between Language and Identity in Political Discourses**

To distinguish political discourse analysis from political research, the review part will mainly pay attention to the narrow sense of political discourse, which is related to political settings, like news reports, presidential debates, and campaign speeches. Thus, more focus will be put on linguistic analysis rather than political analysis and it must be made clear that it is hard to strike a balance between these two kinds of analysis.

National identity is the most studied area in identity research in political discourses. De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) have illustrated the Austrian national identity construction from a discourse-historical approach to analyze discourses concerning political speeches, newspapers, interviews, etc. This proposed approach has been widely used later in various studies (Carvalho, 2005). The finding is illuminating that national identity is not a social reality but a socially constructed product. Meanwhile, it inspires the scholars that the ordinary people’s understandings of a nation are of importance to the discursive construction of national identity.

Liu (2020) has investigated three different groups’ opinions regarding a crisis that happened in Beijing, Daxing District, respectively from the perspective of a Chinese national news agency, foreign media coverage, and social media in China. Based on identity theory, she has clarified that the meaning of “Renmin”, which is viewed as a political concept (Wu, 2009), has been interpreted differently via different platforms. The results manifest that in the process of the Chinese rejuvenation, “Renmin has been encoded with different social functions in different periods” (Liu, 2020, p. 348) and thus it bears Chinese characteristics. Though more towards a political analysis, this paper does remind the scholars in the field of language and national identity research that concepts carrying specific political meaning or Chinese characteristics worth a further study. Moreover, it would be intriguing to compare the shaping of national identity through comparing various platforms, especially, Western and Eastern media.

With the transcribed data from the official video recordings of political interviews after the British parliamentary elections in 1997, Lauerbach (2006) has investigated the politicians’ identity construction process through interviewers’ voicing and ventriloquizing techniques. Representing the discourse of others is viewed as voicing. This is a common device for the speaker to distance himself or herself from what is being expressed especially in political settings. On the other hand, what is enlightening is that she has mentioned the role of verbal mimicry played in the identity construction process. However, Lauerbach did not take a further look at the exact prosodic variation of the mimicry and a detailed analysis of that would be much more meaningful. As a marker

of identity, it is argued that the prosodic factors cannot be neglected for that they cannot only contribute to language structure but also meaning (Gibbon, 2021). Moreover, as mentioned in Tracy and Robles (2013), “identity-work more generally, is accomplished through vocal cues” (p. 108). However, prosody has failed to attract most scholars’ attention to a large extent in the field of the interplay between language and identity study. Thus, discourse analysis from a prosodic view is still a novel approach to examining identity issues.

Gleibs, Hendricks, and Kurz (2018) have examined the American leadership’s identity construction issues through the analysis of their spouses’ campaign speeches by adopting a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. It seems that few studies have paid attention to presidents’ identity construction process through the political influence of their spouses or more precisely through examining their spouses’ related speeches (Watson, 2003). The inspiring part is that the study did not focus on the “dyadic” process between leaders and followers but paid special attention to the role of the third party, in the author’s words “identity mediator”. This means the leaders’ identity can be mediated through a third party, which provides a new perspective for the research on identity construction issues. It is not uncommon to find that in our daily life there are many instances of constructing a person’s identity through “identity mediators”, especially in the case of mediating conflicts. Therefore, it is reasonable to study the identity construction process from the standpoint of the third party.

### Overall Comments

It is witnessed that a large and growing body of literature has investigated the interplay between language and identity and the field has presented “a daunting variety and dissimilarity of theoretical and methodological orientations” (De Fina, 2019) because of its cross-disciplinary status. Methodologically speaking, most studies regarding identity issues are of a qualitative nature. In this regard, approaches like discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and critical discourse analysis are often employed in the relevant research. However, is it possible to incorporate quantitative and qualitative analysis while approaching this issue? Theoretically speaking, studies concerning identity issues nowadays have transcended the essentialist view and oriented towards social interaction (see De Fina et al., 2006). From this perspective, whenever there is an interaction, there emerges an identity issue. It is then possible to explore the interactants’ identity construction process concerning various interactional types.

Identity construction is truly a broad topic that can be narrowed down into smaller areas like analysis of intercultural identity, identity in the second language discourse, identity construction on virtual platforms, and multilingualism and identity. Apart from the mentioned studies, because of the interdisciplinary nature of identity study, there are still areas waiting to be explored, like the research on the identity construction process from the perspective of a multimodal approach, prosodic analysis, and third party viewpoint.

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