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Introduction

Identity construction in complex discourse contexts

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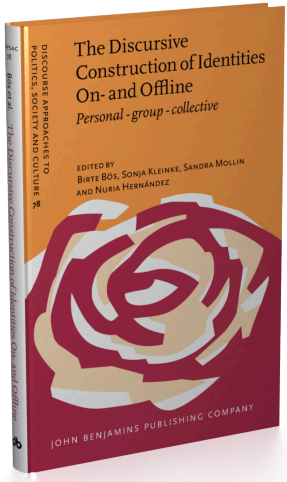

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Introduction

Identity construction in complex discourse contexts

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1. Introduction

Despite its firm position on the social sciences agenda for some 60 years now, research on identity has taken many different, often opposing paths and directions (Wetherell, 2010, p. 3). Authors from different disciplines still treat identity as a "slippery", "blurred", "confusing", and even "illusive" concept, which, according to Wetherell, is best defined "as an open problematic – a site gathering together a wide range of concerns, tropes, curiosities, patterns of thoughts, debates around certain binaries and particular kinds of conversations" (2010, p. 3).

This volume approaches identities "as highly negotiable in interaction, emergent and largely co-constructed" (De Fina, 2010, p. 206). It thus follows the turn from essentialist notions of identity to a social constructivist paradigm,[1] which has triggered exponential growth in identity research in the past 20 years (ibid., pp. 205–206). The contributions at hand view identity construction as inseparably and dynamically linked to language and other semiotic systems (see e.g. Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 1982, pp. 7–8; Joseph, 2004, pp. 12–14; Joseph, 2010, p. 9; Llamas & Watt, 2010, p. 2 and Whetherell, 2010, p. 14). As a common denominator, the contributions of this volume conceptualise identity in the broadest sense as "the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586).

Adopting a wide range of theoretical and methodological approaches, the studies offer a multifaceted operationalisation of the linguistic processes of identity construction, in which Bucholtz and Hall's framework (Kirner-Ludwig, Salonen,

1. For a detailed discussion of the three major methodological approaches in the social constructivist paradigm (the *talk-in-interaction, autobiographical* and *sociolinguistically oriented approaches* highlighting, e.g., indexicality and social practice as central domains of identity research) see De Fina, 2010, pp. 206–217).

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Enzweiler, Eller, Mollin), especially indexicality (Wentker, Tanskanen, Kleinke & Bös, Fetzer) and the concept of 'face' (Eller, Mollin, Musolff) play a central role. Whereas some of them analyse identity construction in terms of its dynamic aspects of interactional negotiation and social practices (e.g. Kirner-Ludwig, Enzweiler, Wentker, Tanskanen, Fetzer, Musolff), others take a resultative perspective and focus on the linguistic indexes of identity produced by the interlocutors in specific instances of discourse (Salonen, Kleinke & Bös, Eller, Mollin).

2. Recasting sites of identity construction in the digital age

By considering both offline and online contexts, this volume pays tribute to the dramatic changes in technologies of communication which speech communities have experienced since the 1990s. The increasing mediatisation of our daily interactions has challenged long established communicative practices at a global level (Fraas, Meier, & Pentzold, 2012), leading to a loss of "stability and certainty as to who we can be and what we can do and say" (Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008, p. 1), metaphorically described as "liquid modernity" or the "foamy present" (Bauman, 2000 and Sloterdijk, 2004, both discussed in Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008, p. 1).

With the development of social media in an increasingly globalised world, these technological changes have reached a new quality: New patterns of participation have created new and more varied sites of online and offline identity construction, often with blurred boundaries. Online participation in social network sites has become a natural practice (Yus, 2011, p. 113) and is closely intertwined with offline social bonding – not just for a new generation of digital natives. Official public discourse has been increasingly opened up to different forms of participation from below, e.g. normal citizens feeding into the news stream on various channels (Johansson, Kleinke & Lethi, 2017). Furthermore, private aspects flow into the construction of leadership identities in mainstream media (on- and offline) and politicians as well as average members of the public swap between on- and offline, public and private (Bös & Kleinke, 2017), thus foregrounding different aspects of their identities.

Yet, the traditional top-down processes of constructing and positioning collective and group identities are, obviously, also still at work. As elaborated in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the institutional political discourse of mainstream media (be it offline or online) still gives political elites the prerogative of interpretation, and the power to shape common beliefs (van Dijk, 2008, pp. 89–91), which are central to the construction of collective and group identities. Also, cultural artefacts still have the potential to construct, perpetuate and distribute role models for identity construction. Interestingly, individuals, groups and collectives handle such

increasingly complex and diverse processes and sites of identity construction with ease, shifting between various facets as foci in their identity construction.

3. The lens of clusivity

Among the multiple facets of identity construction, *(in-/ex-)clusivity*, i.e. who, precisely, is included/excluded in an instance of identity construction, is a central human experience (Joseph, 2004, p. 3) and thus vital for both language users and researchers, including the contributors of this volume. Discussing the essential role of the *us-them* distinction from an evolutionary perspective, Hart argues that in order to survive, "humans have evolved cognitive capacities to (i) categorise coalitional groups in terms of an in-group/out-group dichotomy and (ii) construct associations between out-group members and negative or threat-connoting cues" (2010, p. 55; cf. also Dessalles, 2009). Thus, as speakers, we constantly align with some, and in doing so we detach from others; yet, we may affiliate ourselves with different groups and change our alignments.

The complex and multi-layered processes of identity construction have featured prominently in both CDA-related work and studies taking a broader range of perspectives (e.g. Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Duszak, 2002; Fetzer, 2014; Hart, 2010, 2011; Iedema & Caldas-Coulthard, 2008; Pavlidou, 2014a; Reisigl, 2007; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 2008). One aim of this volume is to scrutinise these complexities through the lens of clusivity and hereby exemplify and discuss the linguistic mechanisms of their negotiation in different online and offline discourse contexts in a dynamic discourse landscape.

4. Three strands of identity

The papers at hand address three major strands of human identity, each of which can be thought of as an aggregative abstraction with its own complexities: *personal identity*, *group identity* and *collective identity*. The contributions pay special attention to the interplay between the public vs. private dimensions of the interactions and possible audiences, as well as the potential impact of social and sociotechnical affordances of different communicative settings and different modes of identity construction online and offline. The three ontologically intertwined yet analytically separable strands of human identity motivate the three-part structure of the volume and will be examined against the backdrop of more general principles of discursive identity construction (e.g. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 2010).

While the separation of these strands, or any facets of identity, is necessarily artificial, since they represent linked processes that cannot technically be isolated in real social life, it serves as an analytical tool to carve out facets of clusivity which interlocutors make salient in ongoing discourse. Against the backdrop of a *self* vs. *other* juxtaposition, the relatively well-established dynamic and discursive concept of *personal identity* includes the other as a relational counterpart of the self, creating "self-designations and self-attributions brought into play or asserted during the course of interaction" (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1347). In a nutshell, "personal identity is the bundle of traits that we believe make us [and others – eds.] unique" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 298).

The concept of *group identity* pursued in this volume acknowledges the highly dynamic and negotiable character of group membership, which, just like personal identities, can no longer be adequately described in terms of discrete, independent macro-social variables such as gender, class, race or ethnicity. The contributions assembled here link two different aspects of group construction: firstly, they focus on processes of generating intersecting, hybrid and multiple group memberships, "which are not necessarily otherwise namable [sic] or pre-defined, but rather get constructed or delineated in discourse itself" (Pavlidou, 2014b, p. 5; cf. also Dori-Hacohen, 2014) – see, e.g. the contributions by Wentker, Tanskanen, Kleinke and Bös, and Eller. Secondly, they consider group construction as affected by (but not identical to) macro-categories, such as political affiliation, class or gender, which are made salient by the participants in an interactional context (for example, in 'gendering' or 'ethnicising' discourse, Litosseliti, 2006; Whetherell, 2010). These highly dynamic processes result in multiple varied, discursively emerging and shifting "constellations of identity categories" in the sense of complex (group) identity slots, i.e. complex ranges of "limits and possibilities made available by identity constellations" (Reay, 2010, pp. 279–280, here for educational contexts). These slots allow for (non-)alignment and (non-)allegiance, highlighting group membership constructed in the interactional moment and, in the spirit of Bucholtz and Hall's (2005, 2010) *positionality principle*, intersecting with (other) macro-categories in complex ways (see e.g. Tanskanen, this volume).

The third strand, *collective identity*, has not been as clearly delineated as *personal* and *group identity* in linguistic research, and further work is needed to assess the *how* and *why* of its construction (Desai, 2010; Wetherell, 2010). In contrast to *personal identity*, which we described above as "the bundle of traits that we believe make us unique", both *group identity* and *collective identity* capture "what makes people occupying a category similar" (Polletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 298) and both may be affected by (demographic) macro-categories such as political/regional affiliation, gender or ethnicity. However, in addition, the notion of *collective identity* as used in this volume is rooted in the study of social movements (e.g. Cerulo, 1997;

Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Melucci, 1989) and is closely related to long-established concepts in sociology and social psychology, such as Durkheim's *conscience collective* (Durkheim, 1893) and Weber's *Gemeinschaftsglaube* (Weber, [1921] 1972, II, Chapter IV, § 2).

Collective identity can, for example, be observed in political discourse, not only at a professional, parliamentary level, but also among lay people discussing political issues in public Internet fora (cf. e.g. Tenenboim & Cohen, 2013). In order to account for such different discourse domains, this volume views *collective identity* from a top-down as well as a bottom-up perspective: On the one hand, *collective identity* is related to long-term, latent processes of identity construction by self-identifying communities (Schlesinger, 1993). It implies the construction of boundaries at an intersubjective level based on (latent) symbolic (civic) codes in the sense of 'socio-cognitive representations' which include "beliefs/knowledge, values, norms, goals and emotions" and related "attitudes and expectations" (Koller, 2014, p. 151). These can be instantiated by recurrent local social (including discursive) practices, and may embrace "assumptions about the origins of a social group, its evolution through time and space, and its arrival at its present destination" (Schlesinger, 1993, p. 7). *Collective identity* has a historical and spatial dimension and is frequently exploited in top-down official, institutional political discourse. Thus, in contrast to *group identity* as described above, which is highly dynamic and negotiable, often delineated and constructed merely in the interactional moment, the third strand, *collective identity*, relates to the discursive construction of rather stable, long-term affiliations and has a strong ideological component.

In order to account for collective identity construction from below, this volume adds the perspective of the *individual* to the intersubjective level of *collective identity* by including "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection to a larger community (real or imagined), category, practice, or institution" (Desai, 2010, p. 421),[2] which occasionally may complement top-down *collective identity* construction by politicians (cf. Fetzer's contribution, this volume).

By combining different elaboration sites of the *self–other dimension*, this volume aims to sharpen our awareness of the oscillation and correlation of the three different types of identity outlined above, scrutinising more or less stable patterns of its construction as well as 'moments of identification' that emerge in ongoing discourse (cf. Wetherell & Mohanty, 2010, p. 16).

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2. See also Koller's (2014, p. 151) "individual/collective identity" which accounts for an individual's processes of self-identification, without, however, distinguishing *collective* from *group identies* on ideological grounds and in a historical dimension.

5. The contributions

Part I of the volume elaborates on the dimensions of 'self and other', 'private and public' from the perspective of individual identities. While Monika Kirner-Ludwig and Elise Salonen study identity construction in virtual blog formats, Claudia Enzweiler discusses the construction of the individual identity of a female protagonist in a comic book.

Monika Kirner-Ludwig's contribution "Great pretenders: The phenomenon of impersonating (pseudo-)historical personae in medieval blogs, or: blogging for someone else's fame?" explores the practice of intentional impersonation of a non-self by analysing how individual bloggers construct overtly fictional identities as if they were their own. Her study of the medieval weblog http://houseoffame.blogspot.com/ scrutinises the interface of constructed *personal private identities* and *personal identities from the public realm at the pretend-level*. It shows how the boundaries between the historicity of the Middle English author Chaucer and the perceived contemporaneity of the blogger are blurred by the blogger's use of the technical affordances of the blog context and the decision to speak from a pseudo-Chaucer's *I*-perspective.

Elise Salonen's paper "Constructing personal identities online: Self-disclosure in popular blogs" tackles the private–public dimension from a different perspective. In her study of altogether 150 journal blog postings from ten different personal blogs, she spotlights verbal techniques of self-disclosure (i.e. the revelation of personal information). Unlike previous work based on interviews that reveal the bloggers' *perception of* their own self-disclosure, Salonen retrieves and analyses *I*-statements from the blogs themselves to determine what kind of publicly displayed personal identity is being constructed at a propositional level. Kirner-Ludwig's and Salonen's papers explore the ways in which bloggers and co-bloggers create and sustain identities – real or pretend – and employ a common language code to establish and maintain the fiction of the blog, and both address the question of how much the bloggers' selves shine through their personae.

Claudia Enzweiler's paper "The development of identity in *Batman* comics" on the long-term construction of Batgirl Stephanie Brown also delves into verbal techniques of personal identity construction, extending the perspectives taken by Salonen and Kirner-Ludwig on two dimensions. Firstly, her paper focuses on an individual fictional character from a comic book, locating her study, as it were, at one end of the 'personal individual' to 'public individual' identities scale, going one step further than Kirner-Ludwig's paper in this respect. Secondly, Enzweiler's study explicitly includes the relational dimension of verbal identity construction (cf. Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, 2010) by looking at both speech *produced by* a fictional character as well as speech *directed at* her by other protagonists. In her thorough

analysis of the verbal interaction between the various protagonists, Enzweiler shows that, in addition to the verbal techniques of identity construction produced by the main heroine, it is the verbal recognition by other protagonists that grants Stephanie Brown true Batgirl-status.

Part II comprises papers dealing with the dynamic construction of group identities in various digital discourse modes, from the essentially private context of a WhatsApp group chat, which users can only join by invitation, to the public format of online discussion fora.

Michael Wentker's paper "Code-switching and identity construction in WhatsApp: Evidence from a (digital) community of practice" shows how the use of WhatsApp fosters group construction and identity and thus helps to build social meaning that transcends on- and offline contexts. By combining corpus-linguistic and ethnographic methods, Wentker provides insights into a close-knit community of practice (CofP) of six German university students. The corpus data, consisting of 682 WhatsApp messages, coupled with a participant survey show how code-switching between English and German proves a powerful resource of group identity construction. Comparable to Kirner-Ludwig's (pseudo-)historical blogger (cf. Part I), the WhatsApp CofP members draw on verbal strategies and linguistic structures anchored in a playful 'pretend context'. Yet, in contrast to the other contributions in this volume, the identity construction processes evidenced here are not witnessed and fuelled by out-group audiences, but are essentially self-sustaining.

In her paper "Identity and metapragmatic acts in a student forum discussion thread", **Sanna-Kaisa Tanskanen** focuses on the role of indexicality and relationality in the construction of personal and group identity positions in interaction, linking macro-level demographic categories with emerging temporary, interactionally specific roles. The paper studies interactions in Britain's largest online student forum *The Student Room*, concentrating on instances in which the participants themselves explicitly talk about their own and others' national identities at the interface of *group* and *collective identity*. The indexical construction of identity is thus approached through the lens of metapragmatic acts and how they are used in the joint negotiation of the national identity of individual users.

Sonja Kleinke and **Birte Bös**'s paper "Indeterminate *us* and *them* – The complexities of referentiality, identity and group construction in a public online discussion" reinvestigates the polarising effects of indeterminate first- and third-person plural pronouns and determiners (i.e. the *we*-set and the *they*-set) from a digital discourse perspective, combining cognitive and CDA perspectives. The authors tackle the double-indexical nature of the use of the indeterminate *we*- and *they*-sets by, firstly, showing how posters construct and negotiate potential in- and out-group referents, and, secondly, examining the predicate expressions linked to both sets as inferential cues to the propositional characterisation of in- and out-group identities collectively

constructed in the thread. Thus, their contribution exemplifies the dynamics of cognitive conceptualisation processes and provides insights into the construction of cultural models. Particularly in the use of indeterminate *we*, traces of 'collective identity' emerge which are discussed in more detail in the contributions in Part III.

By highlighting the multifarious nature of identity construction, **Monika Eller**'s contribution "The interplay between criticism and identity management in the comments sections on newspaper websites" effectively bridges Parts I, II and III of this volume. Her paper offers a fine-grained analysis of the discursive construction of personal and in- vs. out-group identities, as well as spontaneously emerging traces of bottom-up collective identities in critical comments posted on the websites of *The Guardian* and *The Times*. In addition to the propositional level of identity construction discussed in Kleinke and Bös, Eller also includes an interpersonal perspective by tackling the intricate interplay among the discourse moves of disagreement, criticism and identity construction. The paper focuses on the type of target (individual/group/collective) on which the criticism is based, the way disagreement/criticism is expressed, the foregrounding and correlation of macro- and micro-identity categories of the author and the target, and linguistic techniques to express alignment or non-allegiance.

Part III of the volume moves on to the construction and role of 'latent', quasi-institutional long-term collective identities that are well established in the cultural knowledge of a speech community and can be easily accessed by the public when aligning with in-groups and constructing respective in- and out-groups. The three papers in this part focus on top-down professional political discourse offline, designed for a complex audience. They highlight a different dimension of the private–public interface and different functions of including the 'private' than the ones dealt with in Parts I and II.

Sandra Mollin's paper "The use of face-threatening acts in the construction of in- and out-group identities in British parliamentary debates" links up with Eller's study (Part II) in focusing on the role of face-threatening acts (FTAs) in the construction and reinforcement of identities. Mollin focuses on parliamentary discourse as an institutionalised arguing game of 'us' versus 'them' between political parties (cf. also Kleinke & Bös). Her study uncovers the ways in which FTAs are used to construct collective identities in the British House of Commons in more content-oriented and less routinely impolite debates in the field of health policy. Political discourse always addresses the invisible audience, the electorate, at the same time as the direct addressee (the political opponent). In addition, FTAs can be directed against individuals' and groups' faces. They not only aim to strengthen the in-group identification of voters who see themselves as affiliated with the party of their choice, but also to convince undecided voters that they really do belong to this group as well.

In the second contribution in this section, "Collective identities and the private-public interface in political discourse", **Anita Fetzer** argues for collective identities as the default in political discourse. The focus of her analysis lies on those contexts in which political agents depart from the default by entextualising particular discursive identities, e.g. that of the private-domain-anchored family person, thereby assigning them local relevance. The doing and undoing of discursive identities is reflected in the strategic indexical use of deictic devices, as well as in the importation of private-domain-anchored communicative styles and genres, such as colloquial expressions and small stories, contributing to the hybridity of the discourse domain and the identities constructed therein.

The final contribution of the volume, **Andreas Musolff**'s paper "Nations as persons: Collective identities in conflict", analyses collective identity building in the Middle East conflict, with special regard to the NATION AS PERSON metaphor instrumental in the conceptualisation of political entities as (pseudo-)personal identities. Based on a corpus of ten speeches delivered by the Israeli and Palestinian political leaders Netanyahu and Abbas to the UN General Assembly, the paper illustrates how this metaphor fundamentally informs the pragmatic stance of the speakers as 'embodiments' of their nations' collective identities vis-à-vis other nations. The study is enriched by press material reacting to the speeches in terms of the folk-psychological notion of (social) face-loss or face-saving, which combines metaphoric and metonymic construals of the nation as a 'Self' in social interaction. As all the other papers in this volume, Musolff's contribution takes a relational perspective on identity construction, extending the range of indexical means of identity construction to include conceptual metaphor.

Taken as a whole, this volume offers a multifaceted conceptualisation of the role that linguistic choices play in the discursive construction and meta-discursive negotiation – i.e. the genuinely relational construction – of identity across a wide range of communicative situations. All of the papers presented here make reference to the dynamics and the social, interpersonal and political functions of identity construction against the background of changing patterns of 'ratified participation'. Thereby, they adhere to both bottom-up as well as top-down processes of identity construction – both in institutional public discourse as well as lay discourse.

What makes this volume unique is its complex approach to identities on- and offline. It addresses the links between the progressing mediatisation of our daily interactions and new forms of online and offline identity construction whose boundaries are increasingly blurred. The contributions explore the complexities and challenges of identity construction which members of a speech community face across a range of contexts, focussing on 'clusivity' as an overarching aspect of multiple interactional contexts.

Tackling the linguistic challenges posed by this complexity, the multi-level micro-analyses of identity construction at the personal, group and collective levels cover a broad range of discourse domains, accounting for both the productive and receptive ends of such processes. They shed light on social media applications such as blogging, WhatsApp and forum discussions, which are open to lay-participation, as well as top-down political discourse and cultural artefacts, in which 'normal' members of a speech community tend to be at the receiving end, primarily granting or ratifying discursively constructed identities.

The limits of a volume such as the present one are obvious. With its necessarily limited selection of interactional contexts, it can merely provide a rough sketch of potential sites of identity construction on- and offline. Thus, further research should expand the range of discourse domains discussed in Sections I–III as well as the scope of empirical studies within each of the discourse domains. Also, the relation of the propositional and interpersonal aspects of identity construction and the role of 'face' in these processes could be scrutinized more systematically for a broader range of discourse domains.

The ever-growing impact of ever-changing social media applications requires us to continually re-address questions regarding their impact on and interplay with identity construction processes in other, traditional off-line modes, such as face-to-face interaction, telephone conversations, lecturing, political speeches, etc. And finally, in an increasingly multicultural world, further insights could also be gained by studying processes of personal, group and collective identity construction cross-culturally, including a more comprehensive analysis of the different facets of clusivity, e.g. in the discursive construction of macro-level identities such as gender, professional, ethnic or national identities.

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