Poststructuralist Theory of Identity: Its Framework and Implications for Language Learning

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Introduction

　　Norton argues, "SLA [S̲econd L̲anguage A̲cquisition] theorists have struggled to conceptualize the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they have not developed a comprehensive theory of identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context" (Norton, 2000, p. 4). Research in the field of SLA, up to this point, has predominantly been focused on the cognitive aspects of second language acquisition and has overlooked the "subjectivity" (I use the term "subjectivity" to refer to people's sense of identity) of these learners. As a result, processes involved in learning language, at many times, have been conceptualized purely as a mental phenomenon at an individual level. However, these days, more and more researchers such as Ortega (2009), Norton (2000, 2010), Maynard-Warwick (2007), Talmy (2008), and Canagaraja (2007) have started to focus on the link between language and identity: how do learners' success (or lack thereof) in second language acquisition and sense of identity in relation to their world and language affect each other?

　　The goal of this paper is to clarify two things: 1) what identity is and how it is constructed and 2) how one's sense of identity affects L2 (2̲nd L̲anguage) acquisition. To that aim, I first give an overview of the current poststructuralist theory of language and identity, and second, I proceed to integrate the concepts of the first section into the scope of language learning.

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Poststructuralist Identity Theory

What is identity?

In order to talk about identity in any meaningful way, I'd like to first define the term "identity". For this purpose I'd like to adopt Kanno's definition of identity: "I use the term identity to refer to our sense of who we are and our relationship to the world. Many aspects of our 'selves' contribute to our understanding of who we are: race, gender, class, occupation, sexual orientation, age, among others". (Kanno, 2003, p.3) As we see here, identity is one's own sense of his or her position in the world, which means that it is ultimately subjective; nonetheless, it also depends on one's relationship to the world around him/her. Furthermore, there are many aspects that make up our identities; therefore, such things as being an American or being a man are just aspects of one's identity.

To illustrate, I as a bilingual, have many personal experiences that reflect the complexity of the matter: I have had many encounters with people who have said to me, "you Americans are⋯" or "you Japanese are⋯" in reaction to something that I may have said or done (or in many cases, things that I may have not said or done). It is true that I am half American by blood and speak English, and it is also true that I am half Japanese by blood and speak Japanese; however, when I am labeled as "American" or as "Japanese", I do not feel they are accurate, all-encompassing descriptions of my identity. I do not think of myself as "an American", "a Japanese", nor the sum of the two. The fact of the matter is, "identity" becomes a complex, multidimensional concept for not only bilingual/bicultural individuals, but for any individual, and it is a misconception to assume that they can be labeled based on just one perspective.

Traditional Western view of identity vs. Poststructuralist view of identity

Norton describes the differences between the traditional Western view and the poststructuralist view of identity as follows: "While humanist [Western] conceptions of the individual – and many definitions of the individual in SLA research – presuppose that every person has an essential, unique, fixed and coherent core (introvert/extrovert; motivated/ unmotivated), post-structuralism depicts the individual – the subject – as diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space" (Norton, 2000, p.125). To clarify, the traditional Western view sees every individual as having a single fixed identity, whereas the poststructuralist view sees identity as a non-unitary trait that changes over time.

This seemingly chaotic perception of the poststructuralist view of identity can be better

understood in context. Here is a crude example of such context: An individual who is introverted and lacks energy can, within a short period of time, become an energetic, extroverted individual through physical exercise. If one were to ask this individual about what has happened, s/he may dismiss his old image as "that me is gone". Although, for the purpose of clarification, I have given an overtly simplistic example of what the poststructuralists see as identity, we see later on that the matter becomes more subtle and complex. However, the core idea here is that identity mustn't be viewed as an inherent property of an individual, but as a state in flux.

Identity as a site of struggle / Identity as socially constructed and socially constrained

One of the key concepts for Norton, when speaking about the nature of identity, is that it is "a site of struggle". She explains, "The concept of identity as a site of struggle is a logical extension of the position that identity is multiple and contradictory. If identity were unitary, fixed and immutable, it could not be subject to change over time and space, nor subject to contestation" (Norton, 2000, p. 127). What exactly does she mean by "a site of struggle"? There is a certain image of one's self that one would like to portray to the people s/he is interacting with, but when the other people within a given interaction have his/her own notions of self that they also want to portray, struggle and negotiation may overtake.

For example, a man with an exceptionally high IQ may be content with being called "the smartest person in class" all his life, until one day in college, he meets another woman whose IQ is even higher than his. His identity as being "the smartest person in class" may be in jeopardy now. Struggle and negotiation take place within interaction to settle the matter. As a result, there may be numerous outcomes: A) He reigns victorious and retains his title. B) His title is taken away by the woman, and as a result, he needs to come up with a backup identity that he can realistically pull off. C) The two decide to work it out by attempting to position themselves as "the smart couple" (although they may not be romantically involved). D) Nobody wants to be around them because of the disharmony they cause; consequently, they may both be viewed in a much more negative light than before. The man's sense of identity is not solely within his hands. In most cases, he can only hold onto his sense of identity as "the smartest person in class" insofar as he receives recognition as such by others. There are a number of interpersonal/social factors that affect the outcome of his sense of identity.

Social positioning

What we see above in the hypothetical example is a case of social positioning. "Wortham

defines social positioning as 'an event of identification, in which a recognizable category of identity gets explicitly or implicitly applied to an individual'" (Wortham, 2004 as sited in Menard-Warwick, 2007, p.268). In Wortham's view, all social interactions from birth to death are events of identification. This means that there is a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation that is going on within all interactions, which is a characteristic of identity that many scholars such as Ortega (2009), Norton (2000, 2010), Maynard-Warwick (2007), and Kanno (2000) maintain.

Maynard-Warwick's study (2007), which employed Critical Discourse Analysis as the method for analyzing cases of social positioning that took place within a classroom setting (an ESL (English as a Second Language) program in California with a high Latina population), reveals an excellent example of how social positioning could take place. In this study, there were two examples of social positioning taking place within the classroom: The case of Fabiana and the case of Camila.

In the case of Fabiana and her class, the instructor, Karrie, assigns students to put a check next to the skills that they possess off of a list as a means of conducting a speaking exercise. Assuming that these Latina students have little job experience, the checklist only consists of stereotypical feminine skills such as cooking, cleaning the house and cutting hair. However, Fabiana has prior experience of buying and selling pharmaceuticals, which is a skill that is not included in the list. When the time comes for Fabriana to talk about her skills, she tries to position herself as a 'businesswoman', but due to her lack of linguistic competence, she cannot establish her identity as such. Instead, Karrie proceeds to correct her grammar and reassigns the role of 'learner' to Fabiana while simultaneously reestablishing herself as the 'teacher'.

The other student, Camila, is the most advanced student in her class. In a group exercise that instructs the students to match pictures of occupations to statements that workers in that occupation might say, Camila insists on 'maid' being the match for the statement, "I'm so bored making the same thing everyday". (Karrie reveals that the intended answer for this statement was 'factory worker', but accepts 'maid' because they 'make beds'.) As a result, Emelio (one of the few males in the class), who has the correct answer, is attacked and humiliated by the whole female population of the class. It was a strategic move on Camila's part to ensure her position as the most competent learner in the class.

As the above examples illustrate, identity is a moment-to-moment construct. Furthermore, individuals are often forced to fight for it. With everyone having their own agendas, and often unwilling to compromise, the struggle becomes very real. The following section sheds more light on the issue through examining the relationship between power and identity.

Power and Identity

In order to grasp the conception of identity as being a site of struggle, we cannot leave the issue of power out of the equation. As was illustrated in the cases of Fabiana and Camila above, power became the deciding factor of their identities. When we examine the examples above, we understand exactly what we mean by the word power – in Fabiana's case, the teacher naturally has more power than the student in a classroom setting and Camila's case was a quintessential example of majority rules. Nonetheless, we must identify what we actually mean by the word power. Norton describes power as "the socially constructed relations among individuals, institutions and communities through which symbolic [e.g. language, education, and friendship] and material [e.g. capital goods, real estate, and money] resources in a society are produced, distributed and validated" (Norton, 2000, p. 7). Note that power is defined as "the socially constructed relations", which means that it is not something to be possessed and held onto. It is something that manifests itself in social interaction. To clarify this point, I will take a CEO of a company as an example. The CEO has the power to give orders to anyone he wants at his workplace, but at home, he may have to run errands for his wife. This means that power is established differently within different communities of practice. The general principle is that the individual/s with more power within a given situation get more say in the matter.

At this point, I'd like to summarize some of the key concepts that have been covered thus far. First of all, the traditional notion of identity as being a fixed, essential core of an individual has been replaced by the notion that identity is constantly being established and revised within interaction. Secondly, within interaction, identity can be explicitly or implicitly assigned to an individual by oneself, by others, or by both through social positioning. Lastly, power plays a crucial role in determining the outcome of a particular episode of social positioning. Now that I have briefly illustrated the issue of identity within its broad terms, I go on to show its relevance within the language-learning context.

L2 learner identity theory and models

The link between one's own sense of identity and language acquisition may not be obvious or intuitive at first glance; nonetheless, it can be a significant factor in shaping the learning experience of a L2 learner. The goal for this section of the paper is to link the ideas of identity as defined in the previous section to the framework of language learning and to explain how one's sense of identity can play a role in second language acquisition. For that purpose, I present three examples of Poststructuralist theories/models that aim to explain the socio-psychological factors that play a part in language learning and the behaviors of a

language learner.

Norton's model of second language identity theory

Within the research field of second language identity theory, the most influential theory of all is the one formulated by Norton (2000). There are two concepts within her theory that I'd like to discuss to show how the language learner is perceived through the poststructuralist view of identity. The first is the concept of investment. Norton claims, "If learners 'invest' in the target language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital" (Norton, 2010, p. 353). When one conceptualizes identity as being non-unitary, contradictory, and ever changing, there arises a notion of the aspired identity at particular points in time, which an individual strives to attain. An individual will 'invest' time and energy to attain that identity insofar as they feel that it is worthwhile at that particular point in time. For this reason, highly motivated students may be perceived as underachieving, unmotivated students if they don't have investment in the language practices carried out within a given classroom. In other words, the student may be highly motivated to improve on their language skills but the particular activities carried out in class may not be what they perceive to be worth their time or effort.

The second key element is L2 learners' affective and symbolic affiliations with various communities of practice. One point to note about this concept is that the communities of practice being referred to here may be real, immediate communities that a learner strives to be a part of, or imagined communities that the learner envisions to be a part of in the future. Under this view, we can come to understand that some learners may invest in learning English to be accepted into a community of foreigners while others may invest in being accepted in that very class that s/he is learning in. For this person, learning a foreign language with other L2 learners is a community in which s/he wants to be a part. It is an identity that this individual would like to have.

Both of the concepts listed above have impacts on the behavior of a language learner and on his/her rate and nature of language acquisition, which stem on his/her vision of what kind of identity s/he envisions to acquire/maintain.

Acculturation model

Schumann maintains, "Any learner can be placed on a continuum that ranges from social and psychological distance to social and psychological proximity with speakers of the TL [Target Language], and that the learner will acquire the second language only to the degree

that he acculturates" (Schumann, 1986, p. 379). The term acculturation, according to Schumann, refers to the action of socially and psychologically integrating into the target language group. In other words, the degree to which a learner assimilates with the target language group dictates the degree to which the learner successfully develops his/her linguistic proficiency. There are two types of variables that affect the degree and nature of acculturation – social variables and affective variables – as categorized by Schumann. Here, I'd like to briefly explain some of these variables to illustrate the complexity of acculturation in respect to second language acquisition.

According to Schumann, there are seven factors that influence the social variables of acculturation. These factors are listed below:

1. *Social dominance patterns*. The political, cultural, technical, or economic superiority or inferiority of a group in a contact situation. In general, the group that feels, or is positioned as, the "inferior group" will tend to acculturate to the dominant group.

2. *Integration strategies*.
   a. *Assimilation*. Total integration of life style and values to those of the target language group's. The language learner will try to adopt the culture of the other group at the expense of his/her own.
   b. *Preservation*. The opposite of assimilation: The language learner rejects the life-styles and values of the target language group and tries to preserve his/her own culture.
   c. *Adaptation*. Adopts the lifestyles and values of the target language group but reverts back to their own within intra-cultural communication.

3. *Enclosure*. The degree to which the two groups share the same churches, schools, clubs, recreational facilities, crafts, professions, and trades. The more the two groups share these social constructs, the easier acculturation is.

4. *Cohesiveness & size*. The more cohesive or large the language learner group is, the less likely that acculturation will occur.

5. *Congruence/similarity*. The more similarities that the two groups possess, the more likely that acculturation will occur.

6. *Attitude*. The attitude of each of the groups towards each other plays a crucial role in determining the degree to which acculturation occurs.

7. *Length of residence in the target language area*. The longer the intended stay, the more likely that acculturation occurs. Although, this factor is intended to describe immigrants in particular, I think that this will also apply to EFL situations if we

consider it as both short-term (i.e. length of lesson) and long-term (i.e. intended length of studying) involvement with the community of practice.

The factors mentioned above are what constitute the social variables that take part in determining the degree to which learners and groups of learners will acculturate with the target language community. Next, I will go over the affective variables that affect the degree to which learners acculturate.

Just as the social variables could be categorized into seven different factors, Schumann also maintains that affective variables can also be categorized into four factors. Let's take a look at them:

1. *Language shock.* The learner's self-esteem concerning the target language use. Adult learners are often times haunted by doubts that they are not speaking correctly or that they are not communicating what they are truly intending to communicate. Worries of these sorts hinder the rate of language acquisition.
2. *Cultural shock.* Disorientation resulting from encountering a new culture. This could result in a total rejection of the target language community.
3. *Motivation.* The learner's purpose for learning the target language. Integratively-oriented learners (learners whose motivation for learning the target language is to interact with people of the target language group) often are more successful than instrumentally-oriented learners (learners whose motivation for learning is to use the target language as a means of accomplishing a goal) because the former's motivation encompasses the desire to acculturate with the target language group.
4. *Ego-permeability.* In short, the flexibility of the learner's sense of who they are. The more permeable their egos are, the more likely that acculturation occurs.

We have just examined the social and affective variables of acculturation and saw that both are multi-dimensional. The importance of each factor may have different weights for different learners; thus, it seems unlikely that a simple equation can quantify the degree to which learners acculturate. Nonetheless, this taxonomy can raise our awareness of the factors that come into play when determining a learner's psychological involvement with the target language community.

Both Norton's model of second language acquisition theory and Schumann's acculturation model place emphasis on the volition of the language learner and how much he/she is willing to integrate him/herself into the community in which the target language is being learnt. In

general, the more one integrates oneself, the more successful language acquisition becomes.

In contrast, the next theory –namely, *speech accommodation theory*- focuses on the behavioral outcomes of language learning.

Speech accommodation theory

Coupland, Giles, & Henwood (1988) suggest that *speech accommodation theory* is a "social psychological model that explains and predicts interindividual sociolinguistic behaviors and their effects" (Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988, p.6). Although they may come in several different forms, the core factors of this theory are *convergence* and *divergence*: Coupland, Giles, & Henwood maintain that interpersonal behavior can be explained in terms of these and other *speech accommodation strategies*.

Whether they are conscious or unconscious, convergence and divergence occur all the time in interaction: for example, a mother speaks differently to her baby than how she would speak to her husband (convergence), or a teacher may speak differently from his/her students to establish her position as a teacher (divergence). Below is a list of the different types of speech accommodation strategies that occur in interaction according to Coupland, Giles, & Henwood:

1. *Speech convergence*. Individual's adaptation to the interlocutor's speech (i.e. choice of language, pronunciation, dialect etc.). Speech convergence is likely to happen when an individual aims to be accepted by the interlocutor.
2. *Speech divergence*. The accentuation of one's linguistic differences from the interlocutor (i.e. choice of language, pronunciation, dialect etc.). This is likely to happen when an individual aims to distance him/herself from the interlocutor.
3. *Speech maintenance*. Nonconvergence/nondivergence to interlocutor. This may have varying effects in different situations.
4. *Speech complementarity*. Accentuation of factors that are culturally perceived to be standard for a certain role (i.e. high pitch speech of Japanese women) within inter-role communication.

Speech accommodation theory, unlike the acculturation model, does not account for the psychological, subjective rationale for the actions that people take in interaction: however, it describes the types of phenomena that occur as a result of the various mental states that the learners possess at a given point in time regarding their sense of identity in relation to the interlocutor.

The three L2 learner identity theory/models that were outlined in this paper can all contribute in different ways in understanding the complexity of the relationship between language learning and the learner's sense of identity. Norton's model of second language identity theory places emphasis on the notion of *investment* and the learner's affiliation to given communities of practice. Schumann's acculturation model aims to illustrate the social and affective variables that constitute a learner's willingness/desire to acculturate to the target language group. Coupland, Giles, & Henwood's speech accommodation theory focuses on the behavioral variations that occur as a result of a learner's intents. In any case, identity is the key.

Conclusion and future research

The aim of this paper was to outline the theoretical framework for understanding and identifying what is actually meant by the word "identity", how it is constructed, and what role it has in second language acquisition. We have seen that identity is understood to be in constant flux and is constructed on "a site of struggle". Such notions as social positioning and power come into play at these sites. Furthermore, we have taken a brief look at models that illustrate the effect of one's sense of identity and the identities that they strive for in second language acquisition. In any case, the issue is never simple. The multiple layers that come into play make the overall picture that much more difficult to grasp; however, just as it is with understanding many complex notions, by breaking down big questions (i.e. what is identity) into its components, the picture becomes more manageable and comprehensible.

In the future, I intend to take the concepts outlined in this paper to apply them to understanding and analyzing specific case studies. I hope that this paper can help shed better light onto the relationship between a learner's sense of identity and the success (or the lack thereof) in acquiring a foreign language, and that language teachers can get a better grasp of how issues of identity can come into play when learning/teaching a foreign language.

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