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# A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology

Edited by Alessandro Duranti

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## CHAPTER

## 16 Language and Identity

*Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In many ways, the study of linguistic anthropology is the study of language and identity. The field’s concern with the linguistic production of culture entails a concern with the variety of culturally specific subject positions that speakers enact through language. Thus classic linguistic-anthropological studies of performance and ritual, of socialization and status, describe not merely kinds of speech but kinds of speakers, who produce and reproduce particular identities through their language use.<sup>1</sup> Although the field did not rely heavily on the term *identity* itself until relatively recently, the concept has now taken a central position in linguistic anthropology, serving less as the background for other kinds of investigation and more as a topic meriting study in its own right. This move is important because among the many symbolic resources available for the cultural production of identity, language is the most flexible and pervasive. The fact that so much scholarship on identity in socio-cultural anthropology draws on linguistic evidence – such as life stories, narratives, interviews, humor, oral traditions, literacy practices, and more recently media discourses – attests to the crucial if often unacknowledged role language plays in the formation of cultural subjectivities.

This chapter characterizes some of the most important recent developments in the new anthropological research tradition of language and identity. We begin by exploring two key concepts, sameness and difference, that offer complementary perspectives on identity. The first of these allows for individuals to imagine themselves as a group, while the second produces social distance between those who perceive themselves as unlike. Even together, however, these concepts are inadequate to capture the power relations in which identities are enmeshed. For sameness and difference are not objective states, but phenomenological processes that emerge from social interaction. We therefore turn to the ways in which similarities and differences become organized hierarchically in social contexts. We discuss this process in terms of *markedness*, an

originally linguistic concept that is now applied more generally to situations in which normative and non-normative categories are established.

With this background laid, we review the development of identity studies in linguistic anthropology and related fields, and the critiques that such studies have attracted. Anthropological research on identity has long been an overtly political undertaking, focusing on relations of power and subjectivity in local societies and in encounters between cultures, as well as in the ethnographic project itself. Yet precisely because of its political nature, some of this research has been vulnerable to charges of operating within overgeneralized notions of similarity and difference, often referred to as *essentialism*. Despite this criticism, however, the study of identity continues to be both viable and necessary. And because language is central to the production of identity, linguistic anthropology has a vital role to play in the development of new research frameworks.

Recent theoretical work in linguistic anthropology creates the conditions for achieving this goal by foregrounding the complex social and political meanings with which language becomes endowed in specific contexts. We focus in particular on four semiotic processes that are widely discussed in the literature: *practice*, *indexicality*, *ideology*, and *performance*. Although identity is not always explicitly at issue in such research, these semiotic processes provide a clear account of how social identities come to be created through language. Indeed, it is on the basis of this scholarship that we are able to propose a definition of identity that avoids essentialism while remaining politically productive. In the final section of the chapter, we build on this definition by offering a framework to explain how such processes are carried out – the social and political relations engendered through semiotic acts of identification. This model, which we term *tactics of intersubjectivity*, provides a more systematic and precise method for investigating how identity is constructed through a variety of symbolic resources, and especially language.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 IDENTITY: SAME DIFFERENCE?

The term *identity* literally refers to sameness. One might therefore expect that identity would be most salient when people are most similar. Yet this seemingly straightforward formulation is more complex in practice. It is not easy for an outside observer to determine when a group of people should be classified as “alike,” nor is it obvious on what grounds such a classification should be made, given the infinitude of ways in which individuals vary from one another. Hence, externally imposed identity categories generally have at least as much to do with the observer’s own identity position and power stakes as with any sort of objectively describable social reality. Such issues often come to the fore when linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists attempt to characterize the membership of a given speech community, for what counts as membership in linguistic terms may differ from equally relevant social, cultural, historical, and political criteria (see Silverstein 1996). This issue has been extensively debated with respect to African American Vernacular English. Some researchers (e.g., Labov 1973, 1980) have privileged linguistic criteria and advocated a restrictive definition of speech community membership as centrally associated with adolescent and pre-adolescent boys in urban street gangs. Other scholars instead take

a more anthropological perspective, emphasizing the importance of the perceptions and practices of the full range of speech community members (e.g., Jacobs-Huey 1997; Morgan 1994). While misrecognition of a community’s own norms is especially likely when a scholar is not a member of the group she or he studies, even “native” anthropologists may misinterpret what they see and hear. In the 1950s, Edward Dozier, an anthropologist of Santa Clara Tewa and French American parentage, argued that another Tewa group based in Arizona had partly acculturated to its Hopi neighbors, despite plentiful linguistic and cultural evidence of their separate identity (Kroskrity 2000a).

It is therefore crucial to attend closely to speakers’ own understandings of their identities, as revealed through the ethnographic analysis of their pragmatic and metapragmatic actions. When individuals decide to organize themselves into a group, they are driven not by some pre-existing and recognizable similarity but by agency and power. In a French-language high school in English-speaking Canada, for example, students whose linguistic, racial, and ethnic identities did not conform to the rigid categories available at the school formed a “multicultural” group that based its identity on ethnoracial diversity and a shared resistant youth style, hip-hop (Heller 1999a). Social grouping is a process not merely of discovering or acknowledging a similarity that precedes and establishes identity but, more fundamentally, of inventing similarity by downplaying difference.

Although identity work frequently involves obscuring differences among those with a common identity, it may also serve to manufacture or underscore differences between in-group members and those outside the group. The perception of shared identity often requires as its foil a sense of alterity, of an Other who can be positioned against those socially constituted as the same. Indeed, many studies of language and identity in linguistic anthropology report the most vigorous formation of socially significant identities in contexts of (perceived) heterogeneity rather than of (perceived) homogeneity. Ethnic identity, for example, generally emerges under conditions of contact, whether as a way of reifying distinctions between people who live in juxtaposition to one another (Barth 1986 [1972]; Urciuoli 1995) or as a way for cultural groups to remain apart, voluntarily or involuntarily, from the de-ethnicizing process of citizenship in the nation-state (Fishman 1999). The latter type of situation makes clear that homogeneity is itself a contested ideological achievement that seeks to erase crucial differences in identity. Moreover, the possibility that ethnic identities may be eliminated altogether under nationalism suggests that such identities do not coexist in the kind of multicultural harmony marketed in the mass media and promoted by liberal education, in which physical, cultural, and linguistic specificities become interchangeable and equivalent differences. In reality, in situations of cultural contact, equal status is won, if at all, through bitter struggle. This fact is illustrated by ongoing efforts around the world to gain some form of official state recognition for the languages of people who have experienced subordination and oppression under colonial rule, nationalism, and global capitalism (see e.g., Hornberger 1998; Paulston 1997).

Where difference is not deliberately eradicated, at least at the ideological level, the organization of difference into systematized structures – social categories – is the functional output of identity work. Such structures have been well documented in US high schools, where binary and oppositional local youth identities proliferate. Among

these oppositions are Jock versus Burnout, based on class (Eckert 2000); Norteña versus Sureña, based on national allegiance (Mendoza-Denton 1996); and nerdy versus cool, based on engagement in youth culture (Bucholtz 1999). Although these and other contrastive identities may seem to form pairs in which each element is equal, usually there are social inequities associated with such identity choices. In most cases difference implies hierarchy, and the group with the greater power establishes a vertical relation in terms beneficial to itself. Such ideological ranking enables the identities of the more powerful group to become less recognizable as identities; instead, this group constitutes itself as the norm from which all others diverge.

### 3 POWER AND MARKEDNESS

Within linguistics, this hierarchical structuring of difference has been termed *markedness*, a concept that has been borrowed and extended by a number of scholars of identity within the humanities and social sciences to describe the process whereby some social categories gain a special, default status that contrasts with the identities of other groups, which are usually highly recognizable. In many contexts in the United States, such unmarked categories may include whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, middle-class status, and Christianity, but in local settings other arrangements are also possible, and of course the particular categories that are unmarked vary across cultures, though not limitlessly. The unmarking of powerful identities is generally supported by a wide network of supralocal ideologies, but the process also crucially involves the local level, at which unmarked identities may be reproduced as well as challenged and reinscribed with identity markings. Marked identities are also ideologically associated with marked language: linguistic structures or practices that differ from the norm. In US culture, the politics of markedness plays out among Puerto Ricans in New York in their experiences of imposed racialization and ethnicization and in the stigmatization of their language varieties, both Spanish and English (Urciuoli 1996).

The power of unmarkedness is likewise evident in Zambia, in which the 73 languages spoken in the country are hierarchically organized: the seven dominant ethnic-group languages used in the media are positioned above the other languages, while English, the official state language, is the unmarked and most prestigious code (Spitulnik 1998). Thus despite a rhetoric of pluralistic equality, English's privileged status remains largely immune to challenge, unlike the seven ethnic-group languages. When one category is elevated as an unmarked norm, its power is more pervasive because it is masked. By being construed as both powerful and normative, its special status is naturalized and the effort required to achieve this status is rendered invisible – and, when associated with language, inaudible (cf. Bucholtz 2001; Trechter and Bucholtz 2001). This ideological process of *erasure* (Irvine and Gal 2000) complements and is supported by the erasure of social complexity in those languages and identities that remain marked and subordinate, like the scores of Zambian languages and ethnic groups that have no media outlet.

Because markedness implies hierarchy, differences between groups become socially evaluated as deviations from a norm and, indeed, as failures to measure up to an implied or explicit standard. Hence such differences are used as a justification for

social inequality. Those who transgress gender norms in their linguistic and other social practices are often targeted in this way, but members of racialized, ethnicized, or other groups who do not conform to the stereotypical behavior expected of them are also susceptible to accusations of inadequacy or inauthenticity. Until recently, researchers often shared with community members the perception that those who do not conform to ideological expectations are somehow socially deficient, and thus unconventional social actors were marginalized both within their own culture and in scholarly reports (see Hall 2003; Trechter 2003). The charge of deficiency, however, overlooks the important fact that speakers who resist, subvert, or otherwise challenge existing linguistic and social norms are vital to the theoretical understanding of identity as the outcome of agency, through which language users creatively respond to and interrogate social constraints they cannot disregard or dismantle (for a fuller discussion of agency, see Ahearn 2001; Duranti, this volume). To understand why earlier studies of identity tended to miss this fact, it is necessary to consider the development of identity as a scholarly and political concept.

### 4 IDENTITY AND ITS CRITICS IN LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

The trend to focus on identity in linguistic anthropology is in part a response to similar intellectual developments elsewhere in anthropology, as well as in the social sciences and humanities more widely. At the center of this scholarly endeavor are some dimensions of identity that are currently the most contested and politicized: race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality. Arising from struggles for equal rights for marked members of these categories, the study of identity has always been highly political.

Although the study of identity has been most closely associated with other fields, especially psychology and sociology, anthropologists have also found the concept to be a valuable tool for understanding local cultural workings of and responses to sexism, racism, (neo)colonialism, and other kinds of power relations. The study of identity has also led anthropology to greater reflexivity, as indicated both by scholars' fuller consciousness of their own positionality in the research process (Briggs 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986) and by the increased attention to the anthropology of late modern societies and the identities that emerge from them (Marcus 1999). Though its role in providing the impetus for this shift in the field is sometimes overlooked, feminist anthropology has been especially important in moving the discipline in these directions, given its central concerns with researcher subjectivity and in drawing connections between gender in Western and non-Western societies (Behar and Gordon 1995; Visweswaran 1994). In linguistic anthropology, studies of identity have addressed questions of contact, colonialism, and power between societies as well as political and social inequities within a given culture (see also Garrett, this volume; Philips, this volume); hence gender has been central here as well (e.g., Gal 1978; Keenan 1989 [1974]; Philips, Steele, and Tanz 1987). Critical anthropological work on race and ethnicity has been equally important in this regard (e.g., Bucholtz and Trechter 2001; Harrison 1988; Morgan, forthcoming; Twine and Warren 2000), and the study of sexuality in sociocultural and linguistic anthropology has also made significant contributions to the understanding of the identity of self and other (e.g., Herdt 1997; Kulick and Willson 1995; Livia and Hall 1997; Weston 1998).

But just as questions of identity have come into focus in linguistic anthropology, such research has experienced a backlash both within the field and in adjacent areas of research. The study of identity has been subject to critique on both theoretical and political grounds. Critics have charged researchers of identity with *essentialism*, a theoretical position that maintains that those who occupy an identity category (such as women, Asians, the working class) are both fundamentally similar to one another and fundamentally different from members of other groups. Essentialism takes as its starting point that these groupings are inevitable and natural, and that they are separated from one another by sharp boundaries. Although essentialism is often understood as biologically based, it may also be interpreted as a cultural phenomenon. Hence, some who reject the claim that African Americans, say, are biologically distinctive as a group (a claim that has been thoroughly discredited in anthropology; see Harrison 1995; Keita and Kittles 1997) may nonetheless argue that African American culture is relatively homogeneous and clearly different from other cultures, a position that was put forward in much of the early research (e.g., Kochman 1981; for a critique of this view, see Morgan 1994).

From this description, two things will be obvious to students of linguistic anthropology: first, until quite recently, essentialism served as the basis of anthropology as a discipline; and second, in most of its forms, cultural essentialism relies on language as a central component. The essentialist origins of anthropology may be found not only in the fruitless nineteenth-century quest to find biological correlates of race but also in the forging of a close ideological connection between language and identity, especially ethnic identity. The scholarly tradition of Romanticism, motivated by the emergence of nationalism, indelibly linked language to ethnicity in a quasi-biological fashion (see also Bauman and Briggs 2000). In this version of ethnicity, which endures both in academic and in popular discourse, identity is rooted not in genetics but in heritable cultural forms, especially language, which symbolize and, in more extreme essentialist modes, iconically embody an ethnic group's distinctive cultural identity. The Romantic understanding of language tied it to the spiritual essence of its speakers: hence languages, like the cultural identities that gave rise to them, were thought to be necessarily separate and non-overlapping.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, perceived or asserted cultural similarity produced an expectation of linguistic similarity (and vice versa). In the twentieth century, cultural essentialism was most evident in the study of ethnic minorities within the nation-state. In the US context, the primary focus of such work was the language and culture of African Americans; as noted above, the essentialism of much of this research was challenged by later scholars.

Even when ethnicity is not the focus of analysis, social identities have often been represented in scholarship as clearly delineated from one another, internally homogeneous, and linked to distinctive linguistic practices. In particular, this perspective dominated much early work on language and gender, which for many years viewed the categories of female and male as dichotomous and the corresponding linguistic practices of each gender as vastly different ("women's language" and "men's language"). While this approach was valuable for both intellectual and political reasons in calling attention to understudied linguistic and social phenomena, it overlooked the extent of intra-gender variation and inter-gender similarity in language use. This preoccupation with gender difference to the exclusion of other kinds of analyses has

been critiqued by language and gender scholars for some years (e.g., Bing and Bergvall 1996; Cameron 1996; Crawford 1995; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Gal 1991, 1995; Trechter 1999).

Ironically, the lure of essentialism is so attractive that even some of its most vehement opponents draw on it in their argumentation. As a case in point, in a series of publications, Kulick (1999, 2000, 2002, 2003) offers several versions of what is fundamentally the same critique: that the study of language and sexuality (a term which for him is often synonymous with *sexual identity*) is unproductive and must be replaced by the study of language and desire. He argues that research on language and sexuality, or what he calls "gay and lesbian language," relies on unwarranted essentialist assumptions. Despite his reduction of a broad field of study to a much narrower realm, Kulick's basic objection is well taken in so far as it calls into question any necessary link between gay or lesbian identity and unique language use. Indeed, in this regard his discussion echoes the extensive critique of the notions of "women's language" and "men's language" in language and gender studies. Yet at the same time, Kulick maintains that it is only from such an essentialist vantage point that identity can be studied. He asserts, for example, that "any discussion that wants to make claims about gay or lesbian language must [...] establish that those ways of using language are unique to gays and lesbians" (Kulick 2000: 259). This insistence on difference as the basis of identity is the very claim that language and gender scholars have been working against for several years. Since such a strong criterion can never be met, the conclusion to be drawn is that the study of language and sexuality, and by extension any study of language and identity, is illegitimate.<sup>2</sup> While Kulick is not advocating an essentialist approach to language and identity, he fails to understand that identity – including sexual identity – is constituted by much more than difference. As the wealth of research surveyed in this chapter indicates, the interconnections between language and identity are multiple, complex, and contextually specific (Hall 1995; Hall and O'Donovan 1996).

The answer to the problem of essentialism, then, is not to eliminate the study of identity. Without identity, we argue, there can be no anthropology, since cultural processes are intimately bound up with socially located cultural subjects. The solution is instead to develop better theoretical frameworks. While recognizing the difficulties with research that accepts the essentialist or binary models of identity that community members may eagerly offer up, we also want to emphasize that such research provides a starting point for understanding the ideological underpinnings of language, identity, and their interrelationship. Previous research often failed to distinguish between essentialism as a theoretical position and as an ethnographic fact. But to recognize that essentialism is frequently operative in the formation of social identities, as many researchers do, is not necessarily to embrace it as one's own theoretical stance. A great deal of work within linguistic anthropology addresses itself to essentialism as a one-to-one mapping between language and identity, whether to explore how this ideology works in a particular cultural context; to exploit it as part of an activist endeavor to protect communities in jeopardy; or to explode it by revealing the many other ways in which identity and language may intersect. Inevitably, linguistic anthropologists often find themselves drawing on more than one of these perspectives in their research. A non-essentialist approach to identity within linguistic anthropology

cannot dispense with the ideology of essentialism as long as it has salience in the lives of the speakers we study. Moreover, a researcher may deliberately engage in essentialist analysis for specific political or intellectual purposes, such as calling attention to identities that would otherwise be ignored; this "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1995; see also McElhinny 1996) purposefully oversimplifies complex situations in order to initiate a discussion that will later become more nuanced. While researchers will disagree as to when and whether such moves are appropriate, it is important not to essentialize essentialism itself: like all ideologies, it is situated and strategic (see also Herzfeld 1996; Jaffe 1999; Woolard 1998a).

One of the greatest weaknesses of previous research on identity, in fact, is the assumption that identities are attributes of individuals or groups rather than of situations. Correlational approaches to language and identity, such as those commonly taken in some areas of sociolinguistics, associate rates of use of particular linguistic forms with particular kinds of speakers. Although more recent approaches have complicated this simple picture (see Mendoza-Denton 2002), much work within variationist sociolinguistics assumes not only that language use is distinctive at some level but that such practices are reflective, not constitutive, of social identities. Correlational perspectives on language often emphasize the distinctiveness of group patterns at the expense of variation across individuals within the group, or even variation within a single individual. But identity inheres in actions, not in people. As the product of situated social action, identities may shift and recombine to meet new circumstances. This dynamic perspective contrasts with the traditional view of identities as unitary and enduring psychological states or social categories.

The extent to which identities are forged in action rather than fixed in categories is evident in studies of status. Although this term quite literally defines power as residing in unchanging ("static") roles that individuals inhabit across social contexts, anthropological research on the linguistic dimensions of status demonstrates that high-status identities are not entirely given in advance but are interactionally negotiated. One of the earliest studies to make this point is Irvine's (1989 [1974]) analysis of greetings among Wolof-speaking people in West Africa, who may artfully use greetings to impose higher status on addressees for social purposes such as eliciting the financial support that this status entails. Similarly, Duranti (1992) demonstrates that Samoan respect vocabulary does not always map neatly onto pre-existing social categories that merit respect, namely, titled persons such as chiefs. Instead, respectful words are used to create contextually relevant status relations depending on the needs of the interactional moment. Referents of high status may be assigned ordinary lexical items, while non-titled individuals may be referred to respectfully, in order to position the speaker, the addressee, and/or the reference in temporarily salient statuses for strategic purposes such as flattery.

Recent attention in linguistic anthropology to language as social semiotic action also provides an approach to identity that does not fall into the trap of essentialism. The deterministic outlook on identity is here replaced with a more agentic perspective. Because in this body of scholarship identity is better understood as an outcome of language use rather than as an analytic prime, traditional identity categories do not drive the analysis and are often invoked obliquely, if at all. The semiotics of language concerns not identity as a set of fixed categories but identification as an ongoing social and political process.

## 5 SEMIOTIC PROCESSES OF IDENTIFICATION

Given its focus on the social and cultural, linguistic anthropology considers identity a quintessentially social phenomenon. This view contrasts with Freudian-influenced psychological perspectives, which understand selfhood as a pre-cultural object that resides in the individual mind and develops within the (psycho)social drama of the family, the broad outlines of which are thought to be similar across cultures. Such psychoanalytic approaches are often overly deterministic and overly universalizing, and at best account for only a narrow set of the identities that emerge even in a single cultural context. Yet psychology is also cultural, as Sapir (1949, 1994) long ago recognized, and recent efforts in linguistic anthropology to consider individual subjectivity and social agency in the linguistic construction of selfhood (e.g., Ochs and Capps 1996; Wortham 2001) are an important counterbalance to previous studies of social identity as largely monolithic, such as the early sociolinguistic work on race and gender.

Semiotics, or the study of systems of meaning, offers a valuable perspective from which to view identity. Semiotics investigates the association created between social or natural objects and the meanings they bear. While language is often taken as the prototypical semiotic system, it is more complex than many other systems because it has social meaning as well as referential meaning. It is precisely this duality of language – its ability to convey meaning at two levels, one semantic or referential and one pragmatic or contextual – that makes it such a rich resource for semiotic production within human societies. To take a simple example, at the referential level the contemporary slang word *props* means (refers to) respect, but at the broader sociocultural level it means (is associated with) hiphop culture, and hence a speaker who uses the word may indirectly invoke this identity. Such semiotic associations are created in a number of ways. We consider four interrelated and overlapping processes whose study has been especially fruitful for the anthropological understanding of language and identity: practice, indexicality, ideology, and performance.

### 5.1 Practice

*Practice* is habitual social activity, the series of actions that make up our daily lives. The notion of practice (or praxis) emerges from Marxism, and while this influence is apparent in the frequent use of the concept to understand the political economy of everyday life, the term now has a wider range of use. For linguistic anthropologists, one of the most important practice theorists is Bourdieu, not only because he considers language a practice rather than merely an abstract system of rules, as many theoretical linguists maintain, but also because he recognizes that linguistic practice is not distinct from other forms of everyday social activity (Bourdieu 1977b). Thus through sheer repetition language, along with other social practices, shapes the social actor's way of being in the world, what Bourdieu calls *habitus*. However, the specific practices in which one engages, and which in turn constitute the habitus, are not the same for everyone: gender, social class, age, and many other dimensions of life experience are culturally reified as the basis for the inculcation of differentiated

practice, and these are associated with differential values as "symbolic capital" – that is, as resources that may be drawn upon to build social and economic success.

Here we see the beginnings of identity forming through the sedimentation of habitual action. But although Bourdieu (1977a [1972]) argues that practice, including linguistic practice, is more often rooted in embodied repetition than in deliberate action, this does not preclude the possibility that it may be the outcome of social agency. Speakers may elect to engage in certain activities or to affiliate with social groupings in which particular practices are expected, or "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Thus while the process of socialization into our first community of practice is particularly significant for the acquisition of both communicative and other cultural competence, such socialization is not a one-time event but a phenomenon that happens throughout our lives (Ochs and Schieffelin 1995; Kulick and Schieffelin, this volume).

The relevance of this framework for sociolinguistic research on identity has been most fully explored by feminist scholars, who note its potential to examine speaker agency within social constraints (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; McElhinny 1998). Eckert (1989) argues that because of gender subordination, women in many cultures are not permitted to strive for real-world accomplishments to the same extent as men; they therefore must rely more heavily on symbolic resources, such as language, appearance, and personality, to display themselves as acceptable cultural members. It is for this reason, Eckert suggests, that many studies of variationist sociolinguistics find that women's speech more closely approximates the standard or prestigious form of a language. But speakers are not entirely locked into particular subject positions based on gender or other dimensions of social inequality; as social actors move between different communities of practice in their daily lives different dimensions of identity come to the fore, including identities based on activities rather than categories (Goodwin 1990). Moreover, the fact that a suburban American high-school girl, for example, can become a popular Jock or a rebellious Burnout through her habitual choice of everything from blue jeans to vowels means that practices can converge not just around macrolevel social categories but around local identities based on style, or distinctive practice (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995).

## 5.2 Indexicality

Practice, as repetition, is instrumental to a second semiotic process associated with identity: indexicality. *Indexicality* is the semiotic operation of juxtaposition, whereby one entity or event points to another. The basic insight, first developed by semiotician Charles Peirce, is that some signs, which he called indices, function via repeated and non-accidental cooccurrence: smoke is an index of fire, clouds of rain. This process of extracting meaning from juxtaposed events or entities has been generalized for the analysis of the social and ideological realm by Michael Silverstein (e.g., 1985).

The fullest treatment of indexicality in relation to identity is Elinor Ochs's (1992) exposition of the linguistic indexing of gender. Ochs notes that linguistic structures become associated with social categories not directly but indirectly, through a chain of semiotic associations. An example of this phenomenon is the process by which

certain sentence-final particles in Japanese have come to be thought of by Japanese speakers as "women's language." Some particles, Ochs observes, are used to mitigate the force of an utterance; this linguistic form is therefore directly associated not with an identity category but with a stance, an orientation to the ongoing interaction. However, because the speakers who tend to take up this "deferential" stance are usually female, the same linguistic form has become indirectly associated with women, and this connection is now so widely recognized that the intermediate step from stance to identity has become obscured. The direct indexical relationship is still readily recoverable in actual linguistic practice, since speakers of Japanese and other languages said to have "gender-exclusive" forms can in fact draw on the linguistic elements associated with the other gender to index particular interactional stances (Trechter 1999). Thus so-called women's language is often used by men in order to convey a general interactional stance that has no necessary association with femininity.

This ambiguity between direct and indirect indexicality is an important source for establishing and justifying power inequities between groups. Hill (1995) argues that Anglo-Americans who do not speak Spanish may use "mock Spanish" forms like *No problema* (cf. Spanish *No problema*) in their speech to directly index a jocular stance, but because it is ungrammatical the same form may indirectly index an identity that covertly defines itself over and against Spanish speakers (on this point, see further below). In both of these examples, the accretion of social meanings through repeated occurrence, together with the denotational meaning of these linguistic forms, results in the formation of social stereotypes based on language: the demure middle-class Japanese woman, the laid-back Mexican. Such stereotypes are not neutral but highly politicized. Attention to the semiotic processes through which language enters into power relations has become one of the most productive areas of research in linguistic anthropology via the study of language ideologies (Kroskrity, this volume). This issue is also closely tied to identity, for beliefs about language are also often beliefs about speakers.

## 5.3 Ideology

Sociolinguistic research has long used concepts such as stereotypes or attitudes to characterize sociocultural beliefs about languages and their speakers. Yet these notions emphasize individual psychology at the expense of the sociocultural level at which belief systems contribute to the structuring logics of power. The issue of power as a social phenomenon is central in the concept of ideology, which has become the preferred term of art for linguistic anthropologists concerned with how language accrues sociopolitical meaning (e.g., Blommaert 1999; Kroskrity 2000b; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998).

Like *practice*, the term *ideology* originates in Marxist thought, but it too has undergone extensive revision in the hands of later scholars. The conventional understanding of ideology as a process of mystification that distorts subjects' perception of political-economic realities has been replaced in most linguistic-anthropological research by a more nuanced view in which ideology organizes and enables all cultural beliefs and practices as well as the power relations that result from these.



The concept of ideology in linguistic anthropology has been given further analytic force by Irvine and Gal (2000), who have developed a highly influential model for how language ideologies become instantiated. As we noted briefly above, one of the processes they document is *erasure*, or the elimination of details that are inconsistent with a given ideological position. Another process is *iconization*, a concept that expands Peirce's notion of the iconic sign into the ideological domain, much as Silverstein and Ochs did for the index. Irvine and Gal characterize the semiotic process of iconization as the ideological representation of a given linguistic feature or variety as formally congruent with the group with which it is associated. Thus iconization is also a process of *essentialization* (see also Kuipers 1998): the creation of a naturalized link between the linguistic and the social that comes to be viewed as even more inevitable than the associations generated through indexicality. Irvine (2001a), for example, details the ways in which European linguists' classification of African languages in the nineteenth century relied on assumptions about the correspondence of linguistic gender (i.e., a system of noun classification) and cultural practices, gender relations, and family structure. Because linguistic gender was believed to be "lacking" in African languages, African social gender was thought to be equally defective. In this way, European languages, which tend to have gender-based noun classification, could be elevated above "inadequate" African languages, and accordingly, European cultures could be considered superior to African cultures. Such reasoning was used to represent colonialism as not simply justifiable but even necessary and beneficent. Irvine and Gal note that such oppositions can be replicated at various levels of social structure, a phenomenon they term *fractal recursivity*, and hence can produce multiple identity positions at once: the asserted superiority of Europeans over Africans could be played out at the level of languages, nations, communities, and individuals. In principle, then, there is no end to the differentiation of identity.

Iconization and indexicality are converse processes of identity formation: indexicality produces ideology through practice, while iconization represents practice through ideology. In the first instance, ideologies of culturally intelligible identities emerge from social actors' habitual practice; in the second instance, actual practice may be far removed from the imagined practices that ideology constructs on the basis of perceived and literalized metaphorical resemblance between language and social organization. In both situations, however, ideology remains in the shadows. In fact, these processes cannot operate successfully if their ideological foundation is exposed. By contrast, the final semiotic process of identification that we consider here, performance, often calls attention to ideology and thus renders it hypervisible.

#### 5.4 Performance

Whereas practice is habitual and oftentimes less than fully intentional, *performance* is highly deliberate and self-aware social display. In everyday speech, as in much linguistic anthropology, the type of display that *performance* refers to involves an aesthetic component that is available for evaluation by an audience (Bauman 1977). In this sense, performances are marked speech events that are more or less sharply differentiated from more mundane interaction.

But as linguistic anthropologists have long recognized, performance occurs not only on stages and under spotlights but in frequent and fleeting interactional moments throughout daily life (e.g., Bauman 1986; Hymes 1975). This broader notion of performance is also compatible with the concept of the performative in the philosophy of language, which has gone on to a long and influential afterlife in gender theory. According to Austin (1962), performative verbs effect change in the world through language under appropriate social conditions, such as the jury statement "We find the defendant not guilty." This concept was introduced to gender theory as *performativity* through the work of Butler (1990), who observed that gender is accomplished in much the same way as a performative speech act: through its very invocation under felicitous conditions. Performance, then, does not merely refer to the social world but actually brings it into being, although performances may be evaluated as more or less felicitous, more or less successful. The production of gender – or any identity – thus depends crucially on ideology to render that identity recognizable and legitimate. And although Butler maintains that most gender performances are not intentional acts but reiterations of hegemonic practices, she also acknowledges that an element of deliberate action is potentially present in those performances that challenge or subvert dominant ideologies, an insight that brings her notion of gender performance closer to the usual linguistic-anthropological meaning of the term, in which agency and individual action are often central.

Performance in both senses often involves *stylization*, the highlighting and exaggeration of ideological associations. An illustration of both aspects of performance is found in Barrett's (1999) research on African American drag queen performers in a Texas gay bar. Although they dress and talk like wealthy European women in their stage performances, these men wish to be neither female nor white. Instead, their stylized use of features of "women's language" (Lakoff 1975), African American Vernacular English, and gay double-entendres, like their elegant yet flamboyant clothing, is meant to question ideologies of sexuality, race, and class by ironically underscoring them through an exaggerated performance of (white, middle-class, heterosexual, female) gender that clashes with simultaneous performances of blackness and gayness. Such performances are highly political in that they demand recognition of identities – poor, gay, black – that are marginalized in hegemonic culture. Performance is therefore a way of bringing identities to the fore, often in subversive or resistant ways (e.g., Bauman and Briggs 1990; Pagliai and Farr 2000).

#### 5.5 Identity and culture

As the foregoing discussion indicates, practice, performance, indexicality, and ideology do not operate separately in the creation of identity. Ideology is the level at which practice enters the field of representation. Indexicality mediates between ideology and practice, producing the former through the latter. Performance is the highlighting of ideology through the foregrounding of practice. Yet it is also important to keep these processes conceptually distinct. What we find repeatedly in studies of language and identity is a clear difference between cultural ideologies and social practices: cultural beliefs about how people of various social backgrounds should, must, or do speak and act (generated through indexicality) are generally reductive and inflexible,

while the actual linguistic and social practices in which people engage in specific social contexts (including the display of practice in performance) are highly complex and strategic.<sup>4</sup> Ethnographers have often relied too heavily on cultural ideologies, mistaking them for accurate descriptions of cultural practice. Such errors are easy to make given that ideologies about practice usually bear some relation to practice, however distorted, and that practice often reproduces ideological expectations.

The semiotic processes detailed above reveal the extent to which identity is not simply the source of culture but the outcome of culture: in other words, it is a cultural effect. And language, as a fundamental resource for cultural production, is hence also a fundamental resource for identity production. This assertion challenges the common understanding of language as a mirror reflecting one's culture and identity. The following working definition of identity captures these key insights:

*identity*: an outcome of cultural semiotics that is accomplished through the production of contextually relevant sociopolitical relations of similarity and difference, authenticity and inauthenticity, and legitimacy and illegitimacy

The remainder of the chapter explains each element of this definition and offers illustrations of how linguistic anthropology has examined the various dimensions of identity as a social, cultural, and political construct.

## 6 TACTICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

While the various semiotic actions described above are all undertaken for the sake of identity, they do not always perform the same sort of identity work. As an explanation for social action, then, identity is not an analytical primitive. Just as important as understanding *how* identities are formed is understanding *why* they are formed, the purpose for which particular semiotic processes are put to use. Yet there has been very little theorization of the various purposes for which such identity work is accomplished. Some of this work has been done within sociolinguistics and related fields, where several different but overlapping models of identity have been developed: accommodation theory within social psychology (Giles and Smith 1979); audience and referee design within sociolinguistic studies of mass media (Bell 1984, 1992); and acts of identity within creole studies (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). However, these models do not completely address the issues of culture, power, and agency that are crucial to much of contemporary linguistic anthropology.

Recognizing this gap, we have developed a framework for describing the social relations established through semiotic processes.<sup>5</sup> We call these often overlooked and underdiscussed components of identity *tactics of intersubjectivity*. Tactics of intersubjectivity are the relations that are created through identity work. We have chosen the term *tactics*, following Certeau (1984 [1974]), to invoke the local, situated, and often improvised quality of the everyday practices through which individuals, though restricted in their freedom to act by externally imposed constraints, accomplish their social goals. Our second term, *intersubjectivity*, is meant to highlight the place of agency and interactional negotiation in the formation of identity. As with *tactics*, however, we wish to emphasize the limits that are placed on social agency, a

ension that is captured in the polysemy of *subject* as both the agent and the patient of social action.

We propose three different pairs of tactics, which we term *adequation* and *distinction*, *authentication* and *denaturalization*, and *authorization* and *illegitimation*. Each of these tactics foregrounds a different use to which identity may be put: the establishment of relations of similarity and difference, of genuineness and artifice, and of legitimacy and disempowerment *vis-à-vis* some reference group or individual. They thus pertain to three different but interrelated concepts central to identity: markedness, essentialism, and institutional power. These relations may operate singly or in tandem within particular semiotic processes. Moreover, given the frequent ambiguity and indeterminacy of interaction, the same linguistic act may be understood by speaker, hearer, or other participants as motivated by different tactics, and the tactical outcome may be negotiated by all those involved rather than established in advance.

The framework we sketch here is not intended as an exhaustive model of identity but as a way to examine the relational dimension of identity categories, practices, and ideologies. These relations may be enacted via any aspect of identity, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, or status, and they may be forged through any of the semiotic processes described above. Tactics of intersubjectivity therefore do not replace these other perspectives, but rather provide a more complete picture of how and why identity is created through language and other semiotic systems.

### 6.1 Adequation and Distinction

We focus in most detail on the first pair of tactics, adequation and distinction, because processes of similarity and difference have been the most thoroughly examined aspects of identity formation. The first of these, *adequation*, involves the pursuit of socially recognized sameness. In this relation, potentially salient differences are set aside in favor of perceived or asserted similarities that are taken to be more situationally relevant. The term *adequation* denotes both equation and adequacy; the relation thus establishes sufficient sameness between individuals or groups. The relation of adequation suggests that likeness, which as discussed above is often taken to be the basis of identity, is not an objective and permanent state but a motivated social achievement that may have temporary or long-term effects. For instance, adequation may be a means of preserving community identity in the face of dramatic cultural change. Thus as the indigenous Mexicano language is supplanted by Spanish in the Malinche region of Mexico, many people maintain the community standing of younger non-speakers of Mexicano by invoking a "rhetoric of continuity" in which language differences are subsumed under the discourse of kinship (Hill and Hill 1986: 418). Adequation also allows Mexicano speakers of both languages to locate themselves simultaneously within two different identity frames, by syncretically combining elements of each language into a single sociolinguistic system (cf. Woolard 1998b, this volume).

Adequation is often the basis of political organization and alliance. It may involve coalition-building across lines of difference, or it may collapse these boundaries altogether for the sake of a politically motivated strategic essentialism. This situation

is seen in a radio panel discussion that aired in response to the Los Angeles uprisings following the trial of the police officers who beat black motorist Rodney King. In the interaction, several panelists, though of different professional backgrounds, genders, and experiences, united around what was constructed as a shared and, under the circumstances, highly salient, African American identity (Bucholtz 1996); this temporary unity was conditioned by political events and should be taken as an indication not that the panelists are committed to essentialism but rather that a common identity is a social achievement rather than a social artifact.

It is important to recognize that the assertion of similarity through adequation does not necessarily involve solidarity. In Guatemala markets, Mayan vendors may meet their non-Mayan customers' insulting comments with equally insulting responses; in this situation Mayan women's use of the tactic of adequation to insist on social equality challenges longstanding power asymmetries in Guatemalan society (French 2000). Thus adequation may be a process of contested equalization rather than a consensual process of equation.

Like similarity, difference does not exist as a social reality prior to its deployment for social ends. The second tactic, *distinction*, is the mechanism whereby salient difference is produced. Distinction is therefore the converse of adequation, in that in this relation difference is underscored rather than erased. And like adequation, distinction involves partiality or sufficient difference. Our terminology echoes that of Bourdieu (1984), whose analysis of how class distinction is reproduced through the cultivation of taste demonstrates that social differences are made, not found. Distinction is one of the sociopolitical relations most fully explored in linguistic anthropology, particularly in studies that address hierarchy and stratification (e.g., Keating 1998; Duranti 1994). Irvine (2001b) has also described how linguistic and other semiotic resources may cluster together to form styles, or distinctive sets of cultural practices.

While distinction may be a strategy of domination, as in the case of the non-Mayan market customers just discussed, it is also a tactic of those with little access to hegemonic power. We have already pointed out that differentiation of identity is a way of resisting the relentless march of the assimilating forces of modernity and the nation-state. Hence speakers of minority or unofficial languages often elaborate linguistic differences between their own language and the language of the state. This tactic is well developed on Corsica, where Corsican identity is closely linked to language and an ideology of linguistic essentialism positions Corsican as naturally oppositional to the state language, French. Although in practice Corsican and French are often mixed, powerful ideologies, promoted in Corsican discourses and enforced in Corsican institutions, maintain the structural integrity of the language as an autonomous code (Jaffe 1999).

As both these examples indicate, distinction most often operates in a binary fashion, establishing a dichotomy between social identities constructed as oppositional or contrastive. It thus has a tendency to reduce complex social variability to a single dimension: us versus them. But distinction may also allow groups to create an alternative to either pole of a dichotomous social relation. Radical Basque youth in free radio broadcasts use creative linguistic practices to align themselves against both the political oppressiveness of Castilian Spanish and the rigid hierarchies and accommodationism of other forms of Basque nationalism (Urta 2001). Yet while such identities are complex and non-dichotomous, they are usually realized through a

binary logic. Dominican American teenagers, for example, occupy a subject position outside of the regulative structures of race, ethnicity, and language in force in much of the United States, since they are Spanish speakers who are phenotypically black (Bailey 2000). Such speakers negotiate their identities with their peers by using language to variously play off dichotomies of race (non-white versus white), language (Spanish-speaking versus English-speaking), and immigrant generation (English-dominant second generation versus Spanish-dominant first generation). Distinction, then, may erase other axes of difference or it may produce differentiation along multiple axes simultaneously.

## 6.2 Authentication and denaturalization

*Authentication* and *denaturalization*, the second pair of tactics, respectively concern the construction of a credible or genuine identity and the production of an identity that is literally incredible or non-genuine. We have chosen the term *authentication* in deliberate contrast with *authenticity*, another term that circulates widely in scholarly discourses of identity and its critique. Where authenticity has been tied to essentialism through the notion that some identities are more "real" than others, authentication highlights the agentic processes whereby claims to realness are asserted. Such claims often surface in nationalist movements, where a shared language becomes a powerful force in the formation and articulation of an imagined national unity (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). Here the process of authentication often involves the rewriting of linguistic and cultural history. In the standardization of a national language, for instance, a single language variety, and the people who speak it, are frequently repositioned as more central, fundamental, or "authentic" to the historical workings of the nation-state. The nationalistic rhetoric deployed in Muslim and Hindu political movements since the late eighteenth century in north India is a case in point (King 1994). While Hindu nationalists have adopted a *śuddh* or "pure" Sanskritic Hindi in the constitution of a historically situated Hindu identity, Muslim nationalists have embraced a variety of Urdu that draws more exclusively from Perso-Arabic sources. The linguistic correlate has been an ever-increasing divergence between Hindi on the one hand and Urdu on the other, with non-comprehensibility sometimes existing between radical versions of each. The authentication of identity in nationalistic movements like these tends to personify the language as much as it imagines a people, leading to situations like that in southern India where nationalist rhetoric is responsible for the transformation of the Tamil language into goddess, mother, and maiden (Ramaswamy 1998). Through this ideological reconstitution, Tamil speakers are accordingly authenticated as a people whose search for political and social empowerment is motivated by devotion, love, and purity.

In the above cases, language contributes to nationalist identity formation by providing a sense of cohesion and unity for its speakers. Once the identity of a language and its speakers becomes authenticated through nationalistic rhetoric, the language variety itself comes to index particular ways of being in and belonging to the nation-state. Everyday conversation then becomes the vehicle for authentication practices, as speakers are able to index various ethnic and nationalist stances through language choice. Research on bilingualism in multilingual nation-states, such as

Errington's (1998) study of bilingual Javanese and Indonesian speakers in Central Java, illustrates how speakers convey ethnic, nationalist, and political alliances through everyday codeswitching practices. But authentication can be achieved through stylistic choice as well, as when female participants on a feminist separatist Internet discussion list collaboratively construct a "female culture" through the required use of textual features stereotypically associated with women's communication (Hall 1996). The fact that many male-to-female transsexuals in the United States appropriate the stereotypical features of what Lakoff identified as "women's language" (see Bucholtz and Hall 1995) suggests that authentication necessarily works through singular and essentialist readings of particular identities and their language practices. The term *authentication*, then, as we use it in this model, refers to how speakers activate these essentialist readings in the articulation of identity.

Much less frequently discussed, but no less frequent in occurrence, is the process whereby identities come to be severed from or separated from claims to "realness," a process we term *denaturalization* because it often tends to highlight the artificiality and non-essentialism of identity. Again, research on gender offers a powerful example. By contrast with much of the research on transsexuals, who are often argued to use language and other social practices to authenticate a gender identity that does not conform to the one biologically assigned to them, the black drag queens studied by Barrett (1999) discussed above regularly disrupt their performance of white femaleness in order to question the naturalness of categories of race and gender. Performance is an especially rich site for the study of the tactic of denaturalization, but such de-essentializing moves are also found in everyday life, as when the Dominican American teenagers that Bailey (2000) studied playfully challenge their schoolmates' essentialist assumptions about the relationship between race, language, and immigrant generation. Thus denaturalization frequently operates to destabilize the essentialist claims enacted by authentication.

### 6.3 Authorization and illegitimation

The final pair of tactics are *authorization* and *illegitimation*, which involve the attempt to legitimate an identity through an institutional or other authority, or conversely the effort to withhold or withdraw such structural power. Authorization may involve invoking language in ways recognized by the state. Thus highly multilingual Australian Aborigines, for whom language is not strongly associated with identity, nonetheless have sought to use linguistic evidence of "community" in legal struggles over land rights (Haviland 1996). The most discussed forms of authorization in linguistic anthropology, however, are those associated with linguistic standardization. The authorization of a single, often highly artificial, form of language as the standard may be central to the imposition of a homogeneous national identity in which modern elites and speakers who once held traditional authority have very different roles (Errington 1998; Kuipers 1998). Yet the imagined identities thought to emerge from nationalist discourse are far from uncontested (Gal 2001; Silverstein 2000). An authoritative identity may also be constructed through the strategic use of linguistic markers of expertise, such as formal language and specialized jargon. In this way, in a much-publicized US court case in 1991, William Kennedy

Smith, a physician accused of rape, was able to position himself on the witness stand as simultaneously a medical expert and an (innocent) criminal defendant in order to respond persuasively to the accusation against him (Matoesian 1999).

But while authorization may depend on using language sanctioned by a hegemonic authority, legitimation is not always limited to those who control the most prestigious or powerful linguistic variety. In Senegal, the valorization of French is diminishing, despite its status as the official language of the state, and a hybrid form of Wolof is taking its place in practice if not in official ideology. This form of Wolof indexes an urban, sophisticated identity and is used in government, the informal economic sector, the media, and advertising; such uses may be understood to confer an "alternative legitimacy" on speakers of this variety (Swigart 2000: 91). Despite hegemonic structures, then, authorization is also a local practice that can contest as well as confirm dominant forms of power.

Similarly, illegitimation, or the process of removing or denying power, may operate either to support or to undermine hegemonic authority. In so far as every establishment of a standard or official language strips authority from those languages or varieties classified as non-standard or non-official, such language planning is an act of illegitimation as well as authorization, as shown by many researchers (e.g., Dorian 1989; Milroy 2000). On the other hand, illegitimation may also serve as a form of resistance to the state or another dominant authority. For example, a transnational language ideology that emphasizes the economic benefits of German allows German Hungarians to discount the local and national authority of the Hungarian language (Gal 1993). Thus, as also demonstrated by studies on the institutionalization of French in Canada (Heller 1999b) and of German dialect in Switzerland (Watts 1999), illegitimation may in turn result in a new set of authorizing practices.

## 7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have argued for the necessity of continued research on identity in linguistic anthropology. Despite a long history of scholarship that relies implicitly on identity to understand the relationship between language and culture, the field has only recently begun to address the topic overtly. The efflorescence of identity research in other fields, which informs and inspires recent work on language and identity, is an important resource for linguistic anthropologists; however, critiques of identity in our own discipline and others require that the analytic value of identity be made clear and that identity as a concept be more fully theorized.

The tactics of intersubjectivity that we propose here are meant to illuminate the motivations for identity work, in the same way that research on the semiotic processes of practice, indexicality, ideology, and performance helps to account for the mechanisms whereby identities are produced. Together, these two kinds of phenomena move us closer to a full picture of identity as the sociopolitical distillation of cultural processes. A working model of identity must accommodate such issues as markedness, essentialism, and institutional power as central components of identity. Such a model also addresses the critiques of language and identity research as well as the objections leveled against identity more generally by recognizing that sameness and

difference, the raw material of identity, do not exist apart from the ideologies and practices through which they are constructed.

## NOTES

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- 1 For convenience, this chapter, following longstanding custom in linguistic anthropology and linguistics generally, refers primarily to speech and speakers, but these terms should also be understood to include other kinds of linguistic systems such as sign languages and writing, which are equally available for the construction of identity (Baquedano-López, this volume; LeMaster and Monaghan, this volume).
- 2 Although in this chapter we focus on the linguistic production of identity, the processes we describe are not restricted to language and may be carried out through other semiotic means as well. Indeed, even linguistic identity projects are often supported by non-linguistic identity work, as many of our illustrative examples show.
- 3 In fact, it is not clear if Kulick intends this conclusion to be drawn, given his own work on Brazilian transgendered prostitutes, which makes precisely such a link between social practices – including language – and identity (Kulick 1998). We discuss this and other problems with Kulick's critique of identity research at greater length elsewhere (Bucholtz and Hall 2004).
- 4 Here and elsewhere we use the collocation *ideologies and practices* as a shorthand for the complex set of semiotic processes described above.
- 5 Our framework owes a great deal to the work of Judith Irvine and Susan Gal, whose model of ideological processes inspires our own formulation of semiotics and social relations of identity.

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## CHAPTER 17 Misunderstanding

*Benjamin Bailey*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

A degree of intersubjective understanding is the foundation of social life. It represents a link between conscious minds in distinct bodies, and it is implicit in the achievement of coordinated social action and the constitution of larger social structures and institutions. Language, our primary symbolic medium, is intertwined with the achievement of understanding, and language-in-use is itself an exemplar of coordinated social action.

The fact that we regularly coordinate social action in our daily lives can make understanding seem transparent and a natural condition. It is when we *mis*understand each other – when we encounter “problems” in interaction or undesirable consequences of interactions – that we examine the process of understanding. Examining *mis*understanding can thus help to illuminate processes of understanding by rescuing them from an underanalyzed naturalness.

As a marked form – the negation of the affirmative “understanding” – *mis*understanding points to an implicit ideology of communication: that to “understand” is normal, and to “misunderstand” represents a breakdown or failure of something that is natural. The positive value assigned to understanding veils the conflict, ambiguity, and uncertainty that are part-and-parcel of social and communicative worlds. This ideology backgrounds the material and political conflicts that are inherent in a socially and economically stratified world, serving the interests of those who would portray the status quo as equitable and harmonious.

While folk notions of communication and understanding center on referential, or propositional, meanings, misunderstandings at this level are relatively easily recognized as such and are commonly repaired by interlocutors. In the following segment, for example, interlocutors quickly attend to a problematic reference to A’s employer, and clarify it:

(1) (adapted from Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977: 368):

A: Well I’m working through the Amfat Corporation.