Discourse and Identity
A. de Fina, D. Schiffrin and M. Bamberg (Eds.)
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Discourse and Identity, a volume edited by Anna de Fina, Deborah Schiffrin, and Michael Bamberg with contributors from around the world, presents a myriad of ways in which what people say and how they say it simultaneously expresses and constitutes who they are. As the editors state in their thorough introduction, the contributions to the volume highlight post-positivist notions of identity as contextually contingent. In other words, the “I” is not the stable, essential being of the positivistic tradition, but rather the acting self who navigates amongst historical, social, and linguistic planes and varies according to context. While this non-essentialist subject is common amongst the fifteen chapters of the volume, researchers display the spectrum of approaches available to those interested in the interstices of discourse and identity, including conversation analysis, discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and document review. Likewise, there is a wide diversity in research participants, ranging from Brazilian middle-school students (Moita-Lopes, Chapter 11), African-American fathers (Wortham & Gadsden, Chapter 12), and Holocaust survivors (Schiff & Noy, Chapter 15) among others. The editors note the originality of including distinct theoretical orientations, methods, and participants, as the aim of the volume is ultimately to “offer analyses and reflections that can be taken as a basis for discussion by scholars who endorse different perspectives” (p. 6).
While each chapter points towards identity as socially constructed and contingent, each of the four sections in the book focuses on a particular angle of identity formation. A brief synopsis of each section follows, and chapters that may hold direct interest for the readership of this journal have been selected for elaboration. Part I, “Overview: Theory, Method, and Analysis,” lacks as clear a unifying feature as later sections, but contains two provocative chapters that dispel the chronological notion of time in identity formation. Elliot Mishler’s chapter (Chapter 1), “Narrative and Identity: The Double Arrow of Time,” elaborates a concept notably defined in his book (Mishler, 1999) as “the trope of the double arrow of time where the present (and future) anticipations shape the past as well as the reverse” (p. 2). Mishler asserts in Discourse and Identity that “the past is not set in stone” (p. 36) and is habitually restoried by the present and the potential future. In his analyses of narratives by craftartists and survivors of sexual abuse, Mishler notes certain past events were not only selected but also shaded anew to contribute to the endpoint of the narrative, generally how the person came to be who s/he is today. In “Small and Large Identities in Narrative (Inter)-Action,” Alexandra Georgakopolou (Chapter 3) states that a group of young Greek women told “tales of tomorrow,” that is, invented stories based on hypothetical situations that could realistically come to pass based on past individual and group experiences (p. 92). Mishler’s and Georgakopolou’s discussions of their participants’ narrativizing of their lives demonstrates that the simultaneity of past, present, and future not only revitalizes how one might think of time, but more importantly how identities are altered and become multiple through time. While the authors worked with participants in their native languages, one might question how their alternative chronology might further the study of the identity construction of second or foreign language learners. For example, do learners’ L2 identities begin in the initial stages of language study or only later when more complex grammatical structures, including past and future tenses, have been mastered?

Time is an implicit factor in many of the chapters in the book, but the explicit focus in Part II, “Private and Public Identities: Constructing Who We Are,” is on how social forces come to bear on people’s identities. Greer C. Johnson, in her chapter “The Discursive Construction of Teacher Identities in a Research Interview” (Chapter 8), is interested in the co-construction of identity. Using ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, the author studies how the interviewee (the teacher) and the interviewer (herself as the researcher) position themselves and each other through verbal
interaction. The interviewer initially positions the teacher as a “competent critical reflective practitioner” (p. 217) because the teacher has critiqued her practice previous to the interview, which sets her apart from other research participants. As the interview progresses, however, the teacher becomes more agentive and claims this category as her own. The teacher thus positions herself as a reflective practitioner, which seems to affirmatively answer Johnson’s overarching research question, “Can a poststructural approach to critical reflection encourage teachers to become more critical?” (p. 215). While the reader may wonder what the specifics of Johnson’s “poststructural approach” are, as the term “poststructural” is not defined nor paradigmatic authority established, this chapter ultimately reminds the reader that identity work is indeed collaborative. As such, language professionals must consider the ethics involved in investigative and pedagogical interactions. Language learners are taught not only linguistic and cultural content but, like the teacher in Johnson’s study, also who to be in dialogue with another.

Part III, “The Gendered Self: Becoming and Being a Man,” is innovative in that it not only addresses the construction of maleness, a topic often ignored in gender studies, but also whiteness and heterosexuality. Specifically, the three chapters in this section illustrate the aspiration to or rejection of the privilege of this categorical triumvirate. In “Hegemonic Identity-Making in Narrative,” Scott Kiesling (Chapter 10) conducts ethnographic interviews with fraternity members at a university located in the United States and reports how the young men’s narratives are both identity performances and support for the renewal of hegemonic discourses. Of particular interest is Kiesling’s discussion of the men’s use of “bitch boy,” a term used to describe the relationship between two men where one is subservient to the other. Kiesling notes that when one of the white men used the term, his voiced deepened and his pronunciation more closely resembled African-American Vernacular English (p. 283). This use of non-dominant linguistic features by hegemonic speakers is intelligible only when interlocutors are familiar with the discourses and identities referenced, in this case the African-American male as “sexualized physical power” (p. 283). This linguistic appropriation reifies existing stereotypes against the Other and bolsters the hegemonic identity of the speaker, even if he is unaware of such a move. This specific example demonstrates that phonological imitation is not neutral, particularly when the hegemonic speaker appropriates linguistic patterns in order to temporarily access and assume other identities. Within the context of foreign language learning in particular, one might ask how...
stereotypical uses of the target language in the hegemonic culture affect learners’ production of the language, as well as how language learners could be made aware that phonological production indicates identity, be it one’s own or another.

Part IV, “The In-between Self: Negotiating Person and Place,” may be of most interest to readers of this journal since its three chapters focus on participants who have been geographically, culturally, and/or linguistically displaced. Anna de Fina studies the ethnic identity of Mexican undocumented workers in her chapter “Group Identity, Narrative and Self-Representations” (Chapter 13). In interviews with the researcher, two young Mexican men recounted personal stories of how being “Hispanic” (the term they used instead of Mexican) is associated with “color” which in turn leads to discrimination from whites and blacks in the United States. de Fina notes the two young men, though sharing similar stories, differ widely in their reactions to their rejection, one man laughing off the white flight his presence caused, and the other wounded yet steadfast in not moving his seat on a city bus. While de Fina’s work focuses on how local narratives shape and are shaped by group identities, Mike Baynham (Chapter 14) concentrates on mimicry as a performance feature that highlights the speaker’s position. Specifically, in “Performing Self, Family, and Community in Moroccan Narratives of Migration and Settlement,” Baynham relates participant narratives regarding their movement between Morocco and London in the 1960s and 70s. Language plays a key role in the ability of the Moroccan migrants to adapt to their new surroundings, though it is not English that first provides entrée but ironically Spanish, the colonial language of Morocco at the time and a sort of lingua franca in the service industry (p. 390). Spanish, then, is not a source of oppression but becomes “my language” (p. 390) for one participant, an act of mimicry that out of present necessity rewrites past linguistic and cultural identities. de Fina’s and Baynham’s research illustrates how other identities (i.e., Hispanic over the more specific Mexican, speaker of Spanish in addition to Arabic) are fostered upon entry into new environs. While the utility of these new identities stand in stark contrast, the chapters in this section remind the reader that language is a significant, though not exclusive, part of the identity upheaval that accompanies a change in place.

The chapters in Part IV may be most directly relevant to those interested in second or foreign language studies. Nonetheless, Discourse and Identity as a whole is a valuable resource to such individuals, for it elaborates how
language expresses and constitutes who we are, how identities are contingent, multiple, and as fluid as time, and how researchers and educators in language-related fields may approach identity and discourse within their own contexts. Unlike other volumes on identity, *Discourse and Identity* provides a platform on which various theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and participants meet at the interstices of language and context to see what is possible.

**References**