Identity, agency, and second language acquisition*

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(2012)

Introduction

The processes of learning an additional language and the experiences and backgrounds of language learners have been conceptualized in various ways since the field of second language acquisition (SLA) was established. Each descriptor related to language learners has foregrounded certain aspects of their lives, their abilities, their identities and aspirations, and has also reflected certain theoretical assumptions about SLA historically. In SLA theory and practice in recent decades, for example, language learners have been described using the following terms: interlanguage speakers, fossilized second language (L2) users, immigrants, limited (English) proficient speakers, refugees, non-native speakers, heritage-language learners, Generation 1.5 learners. These terms and many others like them, typically chosen by researchers or institutions rather than by learners (research participants) themselves, often convey incomplete processes and outcomes of learning and acculturation. In contrast, the terms bilinguals, multilinguals, advanced L2 users (not “learners”), multicompetent speakers, or lingua franca speakers/users, to provide just a few alternatives, depict the same individuals, the larger social groups they belong to, and their dispositions and accomplishments—such as their attained L2 or L3 proficiency—quite differently.

How one is defined or described by oneself or by others, whether in research contexts or in life more generally, will of course always be partial, subjective, and situation-dependent. People invariably have a variety of social roles, identities, and characteristics, not all of which may be relevant or salient at the moment of description or easily captured in just one or two words. Whatever labels are used to describe language learners, these naming practices position people and their abilities and aspirations in particular ways, which itself has become a topic of critical reflection and theorizing in applied linguistics (e.g., Block, 2007a, 2007b; Leung et al., 1997; Norton, 1997a, 1997b, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Thesen, 1997).

In what follows, I first present a brief review of identity and agency as described and operationalized traditionally in SLA and sociolinguistics and then proceed to current perspectives. Next I describe research methods and theoretical approaches associated with studies of identity in SLA and finally suggest future directions for work in this area.
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Historical discussion

Sociological and social-psychological approaches

In early sociological research, aspects of identity such as gender, first language (L1), and ethnicity tended to be treated as straightforward, easily categorized, relatively homogeneous, and static group variables—an assumption critiqued a generation later. A student or speaker belonged to one social (e.g., ethnolinguistic) group or another, and the relationships (correlations, causal relations) between that group and certain traits (e.g., L2 proficiency), behaviors (L2 use), attitudes, or motivations were investigated. Much of the first generation of research in this area took place in Canada, an officially bilingual country with national multicultural policies designed to help minorities retain aspects of their ethnic group identity (e.g., language, culture, traditions; see Edwards, 1985), which in turn led to educational possibilities for majority language (Anglophone) students to study French and Francophone minority students to study English. A great deal of social-psychological research on the attitudes, dispositions, and learning of French by Anglophone Canadians or of English by Francophones ensued. Identity was operationalized as the degree or strength of ethnic or linguistic identification with one’s own (L1) group in relation to other groups.

Categories such as ethnicity, L1, or gender served as independent variables in studies investigating how women’s speech differs from men’s, how working-class people (i.e., those with lower socio-economic status, SES) use language in comparison with people of higher classes or SES, and how identification with one’s ethnolinguistic group or the vitality of one’s group influenced one’s attitudes and behaviors, either fostering or hindering language learning or particular linguistic practices (e.g., Giles and St. Clair, 1979, and issues of the International Journal of the Sociology of Language during those same years).

Language use (e.g., code choice, register, genre, accent) itself conveys social information such as group identity: geographical region, language variety, and thus, in some contexts, socio-economic status, or educational background. Linguistic variants therefore mark “insider” (in-group) or “outsider” (out-group) status relative to one’s interlocutors or audience. Clear evidence of the relationships between ways of speaking and (ascribed) social identity emerged in experimental studies in Montreal, and later elsewhere, in which bilinguals or multiple-dialect speakers were asked to read a text in different languages or varieties (e.g., Genesee and Holobow, 1989; Lambert et al., 1960). Listeners would react to the different types of language as though they were produced by different people and make judgments about them; for example, the English speaker was judged more “reliable,” the French speaker more “intelligent” or “attractive,” and thus inferences were drawn about not just the speakers but the sociolinguistic groups the speakers ostensibly belonged to. This matched guise technique indirectly revealed attitudes and biases toward particular linguistic identities, varieties, and social groups, including toward one’s own group.

Recent research in social psychology with respect to motivation and SLA describes aspects of language identity in terms of the “self”: e.g., the “ought-to self” (see Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009). Researchers now attempt to view motivation in a somewhat more dynamic, emergent, and socially constructed vein than in earlier accounts, explaining that motivation needed to be “radically reconceptualized and re theorized in the context of contemporary notions of self and identity” and needed to incorporate issues of hybridity in relation to Global English, especially (Ushioda and Dörnyei, 2009, p. 1). The authors also capture notions of future possibilities and imagined identities in chapters on “possible selves” — and not just one’s current self—following Norton (2000, and elsewhere).
Sociolinguistic approaches to identity and agency

Sociolinguistics, according to Edwards (1985), “is essentially about identity, its formation, presentation and maintenance” (p. 3, emphasis in original). The first generation of sociolinguists commonly used social categories related to identity, such as age, gender, race, nationality/ethnicity, L1 background, or class (SES). In Language and Social Identity, Gumperz (1982) and his colleagues took a more contextualized and interactional perspective on communication examining actual discourse as it unfolds instead of using questionnaire-based surveys of attitudes and practices related to language and social identity. Their qualitative discourse analytic approaches allowed them to study how identity manifests itself in everyday speech events such as job interviews and also how interlocutors—and especially minority group members, such as recent immigrants—may be socially and discursively positioned in various ways, sometimes to their disadvantage (e.g., as reticent, hostile, unforthcoming, evasive, or overly direct), on the basis of their group membership. The researchers’ goal was to assist minority-group members, often L2 learners of English, to gain better access to employment and other opportunities in “modern industrial society.” As Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) explained, “to understand issues of identity and how they affect and are affected by social, political, and ethnic divisions we need to gain insights into the communicative processes by which they arise” (p. 1).

Early studies of identity and agency in SLA

In early SLA interlanguage analysis studies, some applied linguists made connections among sociolinguistics, identity, and SLA, such as the variety of language a learner chooses (high prestige, low prestige) as his or her target L2 model. They also highlighted learners’ agency in SLA. Zuengler (1989), for example, argued that learners exert their agency or choice in selecting a target variety to learn, such as a high-status standard variety or a non-standard variety representing solidarity with a peer group, and that it is not simply a result of exposure: “it could be described as a decision as to who the learner wants to identify with” (p. 82). Beebe’s (1980) early work on style-shifting in SLA, furthermore, showed how learners’ identification with a prestige variety or marker in their L1 (Thai) influenced their L2 production. That work was not about identity per se but captured how social identification and status markers indirectly influenced SLA by subtly affecting learners’ choice of phonological variants, such choices being an aspect of agency.

Other research suggested that L2 learners might deliberately not accommodate to certain target L2 features, revealing aspects of their identities and agency. Women in Siegal’s (1994) study of Westerners learning Japanese in Japan typically resists very honorific, deferential, and feminine Japanese speech patterns because such forms or registers were incompatible with their identities as assertive Western women.

SLA diary studies since the late 1970s (e.g., Bailey, 1983; Kramsch, 2009; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000; Schumann, 1997) have analyzed aspects of language learners’ identities and self-image based on their status as foreign language learners and teachers, expatriate L2 learners (and, simultaneously, English language educators), or as highly competitive students seeking recognition and distinction in required L2 courses. However, much of the early research saw the issues encountered by learners (anxiety, competitiveness) as internal and psychological more so than fundamentally social or sociological.

Recent studies of identity, agency, and SLA

Recent scholarship in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and cultural psychology has contributed a great deal to how identity in L2 learning is viewed and how L2 learners are
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represented in and through their interactions with others, particularly as a result of the development of sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000; Wenger, 1998). Insights from various other theoretical and methodological approaches, such as poststructuralism, critical theory, feminist theory, narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (which represent different ways of understanding and interpreting human behavior and experience) have all influenced SLA and have addressed issues of identity and agency (e.g., Block, 2003, 2007; Duff, 2002; Kramsch, 2002, 2009; Morgan, 2007; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2002, 2008). Norton (1997a, 1997b, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995) was particularly influential in her arguments for the centrality of identity and agency in SLA, informed by critical theory, sociology, feminist theory, and poststructuralism. The publication of many book-length language learning memoirs written by non-linguists also addressed issues of identity and agency directly (e.g., Hoffman, 1989; Kaplan, 1993; Lvovich, 1997; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000). These memoirs often featured highly literate immigrant women reflecting on their complex experiences and their very mixed feelings and ambivalence about themselves as a consequence of their L2 learning, and loss of aspects of their L1 and former identities (e.g., Norton, 2000; Pavlenko and Norton, 2007). In general, this work examines identity in terms of a learner's unique past, present, and future experiences, desires, trajectories, and opportunities. This body of work, unlike more traditional SLA, has paid relatively little attention to an analysis of what learners are actually observed to do with and in their L2 or other languages and literacies in their repertoire. The research tends to examine the individual in relation to the social world and affective dimensions of identity. And rather than seek coherent, consistent, and generalizable results, the research considers some of the contradictions conveyed—or performed—by L2 language learners and users about their experiences and the sometimes hybrid notions of identity that result (Kramsch, 2009). In *Selbes in Two Languages*, for instance, Koven (2007) pluralizes the language learner self (selves). There has consequently been considerable attention paid to individuals' lives as new immigrants learning an additional language and seeking integration into educational, occupational, and other social spaces in their new society yet experiencing various kinds of internal, interpersonal, and societal struggles and indeterminate trajectories or outcomes in the process. Deterministic accounts of biological or social aspects of identity in SLA have been critiqued in favor of continually *negotiated* identities and the "nonunitary subject" (Norton, 2000, p. 125).

*Agency*, referred to earlier in relation to Zuengler's (1989) and Siegal's (1994) studies, has become an important theoretical construct in SLA as well, often in combination with *identity*, reflecting the view that learners are not simply passive or complicit participants in language learning and use, but can also make informed choices, exert influence, resist (e.g., remain silent, quit courses), or comply, although their social circumstances may constrain their choices. Such actions or displays of agency, which might be as simple as insisting on speaking one language (one's L2) versus another (others' L2) in a conversation with a language exchange partner, can also be considered acts of identity and the site of power dynamics (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985). An additional construct introduced by Norton (2000), also connected with agency in SLA, is *investment*, which captures the degree to which people actively put symbolic, material, and other resources into their language learning based on a kind of cost-benefit assessment, and in light of their desires and hopes.

Currently, attention is being focused on how interlocutors' actions, perceptions, and *language use* serve to position language learners/users and their investments in particular ways. That is, the focus is not just the "objective" identities of individuals but how certain aspects of their identities are constructed subjectively by others (e.g., as "legitimate" or "illegitimate"; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Morita (2004) provides a detailed study of six female Japanese international students in Canadian university content courses in which the participants had various experiences
related to their in-class participation, perceptions of their English L2 proficiency and content knowledge, and the identities imposed on them but also contested by them.

In another study, of Japanese L2 learning in a Canadian university program, Nakamura (2005, Duff et al., 2006) showed how a small-group of Japanese learners negotiated meanings related to the Japanese language and also content, as well as their own identities and histories as L1 and L2 learners. The Japanese (heritage) background student in the group tried to foreground her identity as a Canadian with reasonably good conversational Japanese ability, but one who preferred to speak English in class and showed some resistance to being positioned as Japanese, consistent with her having dropped out of Japanese heritage-language courses as a child. Her lack of Japanese literacy skills, and particularly Japanese characters, kanji, was foregrounded. The Chinese Canadian immigrant students, on the other hand, foregrounded their literate identities, as people with expertise in character recognition, based on their proficiency in L1 Chinese characters, drawing attention away from their lack of Japanese oral skills. They were also positioned by the Japanese-Canadian classmate as people who did not know Canadian culture or geography, as relative newcomers to Canada, and they therefore deferred to her knowledge of oral Japanese and the local culture to complete the assigned task.

In a Chinese L2 learning context, Lantolf and Genung (2002) described Genung's unhappy experiences of attempting to fulfill a PhD program language requirement by studying intensive Chinese. Genung, who was multilingual in several European languages and a colonel in the US Army and highly motivated to learn Chinese at the outset, kept a journal and later produced a retrospective account of her experiences as a highly frustrated student in the course. She felt a lack of agency in the course because of the inflexible rules for classroom interaction and the lockstep teaching methods. Classroom greeting and leave-taking routines were “juvenile and demeaning” to her—socializing her into an infantile identity she did not want and especially as a military officer of some rank. She became resigned to enduring the course instruction, however, to obtain the required course credit but did not learn Chinese to the level desired.

The above examples illustrate how students came to their classroom or other interactions with particular kinds of expertise (or lack of expertise), identities, and desires, but these attributes were also constrained or reframed by their classmates or teachers or the curriculum in ways they did not always appreciate and were at cross-purposes with their SLA and identities.

Agency, gendered identities, and SLA

Facile representations of learners and their language-learning-related identities, and especially identities that are too unidimensional and homogenized, are now considered problematic. To assume that all Japanese female graduate students, for instance, will have similar experiences and exhibit similar linguistic behaviors and dispositions in a Canadian university classroom context or across different classroom contexts essentializes their identities as Japanese females, downplaying their many other identities, abilities, roles, and potential acts of agency or choice and also denying the role of their interlocutors and contexts in shaping their actions (Monta, 2004). Essentialism in such work is seen to be a reproduction of stereotypes, both negative and positive. As noted earlier, much of the emerging research on identity, particularly from a poststructural perspective, focuses on the dynamics of identity construction and performance and agency, portraying learners as individuals with wants and needs and with multifaceted identities, who may exert themselves and their interests by making deliberate choices with respect to language learning, including the choice to resist learning or perform in the target language in expected ways (Pavlenko, 2007). Alternatively, they may choose other learning approaches, such as participating in virtual or simulated (L2) worlds—and other identities (e.g., computer nerd, jock, party animal, class clown)—instead.
Despite such discussions of agency, however, scholars interested in gender and (second) language learning point out that often women or learners from historically disadvantaged socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds may have fewer actual choices in SLA and thus limited opportunities to express their agency or realize a fuller range of their (potential) identities due to various social, cultural, and economic constraints (Norton, 2000). These constraints might include domestic duties in the home, restricted opportunities for, or expectations about, their advanced education, or the need to support themselves or their family by working in entry-level positions that do not require or develop higher-level L2 proficiency. In addition, they may experience peer pressure to maintain solidarity with others from similar ethnolinguistic backgrounds and not to leave their primary linguistic communities by becoming too integrated in mainstream society (Goldstein, 1997; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko, 2004; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). That is, the possibility of becoming a student, a lifelong learner, or a proficient speaker and member of the L2 community with many available options and resources may not be welcomed within the home or L1/L2 community. To give another scenario, female learners in study-abroad contexts may find that their agency over their learning may be stymied by sexual harassment in or exclusion from (gendered) public domains where they might otherwise have been able to learn or practice their L2, thus reducing their opportunities to fulfill their potential, their desires, or even their program requirements (e.g., Kinginger, 2008; Polanyi, 1995; see review by Block, 2007a). Their gendered experiences therefore clearly impact their SLA trajectories (Ehrlich, 1997).

On a more positive note, engaging in SLA can enable some learners, such as the Japanese women learning English in McMullin’s (1997, 2001) and Kobayashi’s (2002) studies, to develop and express aspects of their identity in more egalitarian or empowering ways than would be possible or acceptable in their L1, Japanese. Learning English may therefore be considered an act of resistance to hierarchical and gendered cultural norms within “communities of resistance” and a language with many other possibilities (McMullin, 1997).

Core issues

Definitions of identity and agency

Identity. Issues connected with identity in relation to bilingualism and L2 learning and use have been theorized and researched in various ways over the past several decades. Identity, the focus of this chapter, is crucially related to one’s core self (or senses of self). Sometimes identity is used synonymously with subjectivities or subject positions in the burgeoning literature in this area, which now includes the Journal of Language, Identity and Education and many articles and collections in other journals and books with a focus on identity in second language (L2) or multilingual contexts (see Block, 2007a; Block and Ushioda, 2009; Jackson, 2008; Kramsch, 2009; Menard-Warwick, 2009). Identity traditionally was understood in terms of one’s connection or identification with a particular social group, the emotional ties one has with that group, and the meanings that connection has for an individual. Tajfel (1974, 1978) is commonly cited in early sociopsychological treatments of identity relevant to SLA (see McNamara, 1997, pp. 562–564). Processes of self- and other-categorization, awareness of social identity, social comparison, and social distinctiveness in intergroup relations were central to his conceptualization of identity. Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004), representing a more recent, and quite widely accepted theoretical perspective, describe identity as “a dynamic and shifting nexus of multiple subject positions, or identity options, such as mother, accountant, heterosexual, or Latina” (p. 35). Norton (2000), influenced by feminist poststructuralist theory (Weedon, 1997) and critical sociology (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977, 1991), conceives of identity as follows:
... how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future. I argue that SLA theory needs to develop a conception of identity that is understood with reference to larger, and more frequently inequitable, social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. (p. 5)

Thus, scholars increasingly emphasize the *multiple* possible social groups or roles that individuals such as language learners may identify with at any given time and how language (or discourse) itself works to construct those same identities situationally whether in research interviews or in L2 classrooms.

Consider the term *heritage-language (HL) learners*, such as Chinese-Canadians learning Chinese. The assumption that HL learners represent a fairly homogeneous and stable identity category is very problematic for both theory and practice. HL learners’ levels of expertise in, and affiliation with, the heritage language and with HL literacy practices, may vary considerably from one HL person to another, at different points in the learner’s life, and with different interlocutors, despite their heritage; furthermore, their (home) language may be a different variety than the one taught in educational institutions (Leung *et al.*, 1997; see also Blackledge and Creese, 2008; He, 2004, 2006). To give another example, *Generation 1.5 English language learners/users* typically immigrate to an L2 context as children and experience some or most of their primary/secondary education there, unlike their parents. However, the same students may be construed as hardworking, model minority students (i.e., “good students”), or as students with problems in language or literacy development, attitudes, and in their academic work as well (“the worst”) (Harklau, 2000; Talmy, 2008).

These (1997) argued that “educators need to expand the repertoire of identity categories by which they describe and explain the complex and often contradictory stances that students take in the acquisition of academic literacy” (p. 487). McKay and Wong (1996), drawing on earlier work by Norton Peirce (1995), were among the first to examine the intersection of identity and agency in the different “discourses” being negotiated by their Chinese-American high school case study subjects with respect to their identities at school (e.g., model-minority status, gender, and nationality).

Current discussions of identity in SLA textbooks are framed in terms of “social aspects” or “social dimensions” of language learning (e.g., Ellis, 2008, and Ortega, 2009, respectively) rather than as primarily affective or individual factors. Identity is therefore associated with the “social turn” in SLA (Block, 2003) and with particular qualitative approaches to research, such as narrative inquiry, and theory that ranges from interpretive to poststructural to critical (Duff, 2008a). Interpretive research tends to focus on how language learners and others (e.g., teachers) make sense of their experiences and also how researchers in turn make sense of (interpret) data obtained from interviews, observations, narratives, and other sources. Poststructuralism eschews fixed categories or structures, oppositional binaries, closed systems, and stable “truths” and, rather, embraces contradictions and multiple meanings (Pavlenko, 2002, 2008). Critical research is more directly ideological, normally assuming that particular social relations and structures historically disadvantage certain participants, such as language learners, or certain kinds of learners who have less power and control over their conditions than others, based on their race, gender, class, age, immigrant status, and so on. Not coincidentally, perhaps, these research methods and theories have gained some prominence in SLA together along with dynamic systems approaches, complexity theory, and new understandings of social context and the ecology of language learning (e.g., Atkinson, 2011; Block, 2007a, 2007b; Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; Kramsch, 2002; Menard-Warwick, 2006; Norton, 2010; Ricento, 2005; Swain and Deters, 2007). A similar shift
toward an examination of identity and the incorporation of poststructural perspectives has occurred in L1 and L2 literacy studies (e.g., Ivanič, 1997; Starfield, 2002; Warriner, 2007), in second/foreign/heritage language education (Day, 2002; He, 2004; Kubota and Lin, 2006; McKinney and Norton, 2008; Miller, 2003; Nelson, 2009; Potowski, 2007; Toolehy, 2000; White, 2007), and in other fields in the social, human, and applied sciences (e.g., sociolinguistics; Bucholtz and Hall, 2004a, 2004b; Ehrlich, 1997; Omonyi and White, 2006). Other research has examined the interactions between language teacher and language learner identities (e.g., Clarke, 2008; Duff and Uchida, 1997; Kubota and Lin, 2006; Nelson, 2009; Pavlenko, 2003; Varghese et al., 2005). This work, taken together, considers how social/cultural and professional identity, race, gender, language proficiency, and sexuality, and other aspects of identity (e.g., expertise, non-native vs. native speaker status and thus perceived legitimacy) are (co-)constructed in classroom SLA especially. Language socialization research also places an emphasis on identity and agency in SLA (Duff and Hornberger, 2008; Ochs, 1993; Wortham, 2006) by examining the cultural apprenticeship of newcomers into not only new communities and linguistic and social practices, but also new identities, ideologies and worldviews (Duff, 2010).

Agency. Agency refers to people’s ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation. Ahearn (2001), a linguistic anthropologist, defines agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112). A sense of agency enables people to imagine, take up, and perform new roles or identities (including those of proficient L2 speaker or multilingual) and to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals. Agency can also enable people to actively resist certain behaviors, practices, or positionings, sometimes leading to oppositional stances and behaviors leading to other identities, such as rebellious, divergent student. A perceived lack of agency on the part of learners might lead to similar outcomes as they become passive and disengaged from educational pursuits. Agency, power, and social context (structures) are therefore linked because those who typically feel the most control over their lives, choices, and circumstances also have the power—the human, social, or cultural capital and ability—they need to succeed. Indeed, Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) argue that:

ultimately in second language learning relies on one’s agency ... While the first language and subjectivities are an indisputable given, the new ones are arrived at by choice. Agency is crucial at the point where the individual must not just start memorizing a dozen new words and expressions but have to decide on whether to initiate a long, painful, inexhaustive and, for some, never-ending process of self-translation.

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Although children, displaced people, or students fulfilling language requirements may have relatively little apparent choice or control over their L2 learning, reaching advanced levels of L2 proficiency arguably requires concerted effort, sustained and strategic practice, and opportunity—all manifestations of personal and social agency (see Flowerdew and Miller, 2008; Gao, 2010).

Data and common elicitation measures

The most common research methods for the design, collection, and analysis of empirical data related to identity and agency in SLA are one or more of the following: (1) case study methods (e.g., Duff, 2008a); (2) ethnographic research with embedded case studies (e.g., Day, 2002; Duff, 2008b; Toolehy, 2001); (3) narrative inquiry (Pavlenko, 2007, 2008); (4) mixed-method research involving proficiency interviews and personal narratives (e.g., Kinginger, 2008); and
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(5) conversation analysis or discourse analysis to examine interactions in classroom, interview, or
other settings (e.g., Talmay and Richards, 2011). However, these methods are not mutually
eclusive.

With respect to the first two categories, case studies and ethnographies, Day (2002) conducted
an ethnographic case study of a young Punjabi-Canadian boy, Hari (age five when her study began),
one of five participants in her larger (dissertation) study of diverse learners in a kindergarten class in
a suburb of Vancouver, Canada. Day examined interactions between Hari and his ( Anglo) teacher,
on the one hand, and Hari and his friends and classmates, on the other, noting how his home
language use shifted at school to English even with Punjabi speakers, who deferred to him.

Toohey (1998, 2000, 2001) conducted a similar multi-year ethnographic multiple-case study
of ethnolinguistically diverse students in the same contexts, focusing on their disputes, their
positioning of one another and positioning by the teacher in both socially/academically advanta-
geous and disadvantageous ways and positioning by other students as well (cf., Norton and
Toohey, 2001). Again, the analysis involved a triangulation of data from various sources, including
classroom observations, interviews, document analysis, and discourse analysis. Data included in the
publications included representative classroom discourse excerpts revealing some of the themes
that emerged connected with social exclusion, for example.

Other research has been based more on the analysis of learners’ narratives about their
experiences than on direct observations of their interactions in public spaces (see Pavlenko,
2007, 2008). The narratives take various forms, typically diaries, journals, and often published
memoirs produced by the authors/researchers themselves; or narratives elicited from others by
means of in-depth interviews or written diaries or journals. The narratives are usually subjected to
a content analysis of emerging themes related to identity, agency, and SLA, from various
theoretical perspectives—ranging from neurobiology (Schumann, 1997) to poststructuralism
(Norton, 2000). In the narrative inquiry tradition, it has been much less common than in more
traditional approaches to SLA to document and analyze learners’ I2 proficiency. Thus, the
narratives have been current and retrospective accounts of learners’ experiences and perceptions
(e.g., about their identities in relation to SLA), produced either in their L1 or L2, without any
independent analysis of their linguistic development or their linguistic profiles.

The fourth approach has been to combine SLA proficiency interviews with narrative traditions
to provide a better sense of learners’ actual abilities and identities—and changes over time—in the
L2. Kinginger (2008) described in some detail the linguistic profiles of a group of American study-
abroad learners of French both before and after their sojourn in France. She combined her
linguistic description and analysis with a thematic analysis of learners’ narratives (journals, interview
accounts) produced mostly in their L1 throughout their time abroad.

The fifth approach can take data from a variety of sources and perform an in-depth analysis of
interactional features in discourse such as turn-taking, repetition, repair (corrections), questioning
strategies by teachers, and so on, thought to be connected with identity, agency and SLA.

Data analysis

Researchers can analyze qualitative data for evidence of identity and agency in SLA in many
different ways. For example, pronoun use by speakers (teachers, students, interviewers, and
interviewees) might be analyzed and interpreted as a sign of different group affiliations connected
with identity: us vs. them, we vs. I, the local children vs. us, the other workers vs. me. Alternatively,
learners may be asked to come up with metaphors to describe themselves, their experiences, and
SLA itself, and these metaphors might be analyzed and compared conceptually. Categorical noun
phrases used in oral or written texts might also be relevant, especially when they reference the
roles, backgrounds, or status of oneself as an L2 learner or of others: ESL students, White students, non-native speakers, Chinese students vs. Canadians, foreigners learning Chinese, outsiders, newcomers, and other such terms (Duff, 2002). Normally there are no measures, per se, unless quantification of one's identification with a language or group or identity is sought, which is not typically done.

Critical incidents or interactions (e.g., with native speakers in an L2 context) reported by participants or observed by researchers might also be analyzed for how they seemed or were reported to affect language learners' identities, practices, or persistence as L2 learners, for example.

For a more linguistic analysis of agency, the kinds (and mood) of verbs and modal auxiliaries used by speakers might be very telling: e.g., chose vs. was forced to ..., conquered/mastered (the language) vs. failed (to learn), tried vs. did not manage to ..., will vs. might, can vs. cannot. Other expressions of agency might also be relevant, such as by focusing on adverbials such as intentionally, persistently, or without giving up or adjectives such as devastated, disappointed, euphoric, confused, fluent, tongue-tied. Or the researcher might simply take note of the decisions made by speakers in a content or thematic analysis of data: took a course, dropped a course, sought out language exchange partners, practiced as often as possible, joined online chat rooms, or withdrew from all interactions involving the L2. What is coded or selected by researchers for analysis and interpretation depends a great deal on the research questions, the constructs, the quantity of data and types of data, the number of participants (e.g., a single case analysis vs. a cross-case analysis) and the length of the study. Whether one codes, quantifies, or pinpoints relevant linguistic expressions or simply chooses highly representative examples of their use and meaning vis-à-vis identity, agency, and SLA again depends on the research approach and theory that is adopted. Non-verbal behaviors, social networks, artistic constructions (photo collages, artwork, plays) or essays created by learners to represent themselves might also be examined more holistically for evidence of how language learners perceive or portray themselves and/or their linguistic and cultural attributes, histories, and futures.

**Empirical verification**

Empirical verification may take the form of inter-coder reliability checks or quantification, as in other SLA traditions, possibly using qualitative data analysis software, or may be achieved by conducting a systematic and rigorous analysis of multiple texts or datasets pertaining to the same individual as part of the process of triangulation. An analysis of changing perceptions by oneself or others, or even inherent contradictions, tensions, or counter-examples, may be important to include as part of the empirical verification and validation (see Duff, 2008a). Verification or validation in some research on identity and agency is not based on whether the researcher—or the research participant—has produced the "truest" or "best" account of SLA. The work is judged based on whether it is a credible, convincing, or plausible account, and perhaps even presents a novel interpretation of data, but one whose claims or assertions are well supported by evidence and are relevant to existing or new theory. In this way, the reader can also feel confident about the interpretations or, alternatively, may arrive at different conclusions and a sense of how relevant the findings are to other SLA contexts and populations.

Narrative- and interview-based research at present also recognizes that the narratives and other types of data produced by learners—in whatever form—are social constructions, produced in a particular situation, with an intended audience, for particular purposes, and based on the contingencies of the mode and language of production itself. How research participants represent themselves and their histories or experiences may depend to a great extent on their assumptions about what the researcher expects to hear. Therefore, explicit reflection by researchers on the research process and the social context in which recruitment and data collection took place, and
their own role in the research and their connection to the research participants is normally included in such research (Talmy, 2010). In summary, the researcher should provide justification of; and explanations for, theoretical, methodological, analytical, and representational decisions to be as transparent and ethical as possible about the research process.

One trend in SLA case study research related to identity is to include several cases, rather than just one, providing some indication of the representativeness of the cases in terms of sampling and findings (see Duff, 2008a, for examples). Other research attempts to include “member checks” in which research participants (if willing and able) can provide feedback on the researcher’s interpretation of the data analysis or can offer alternative perspectives.

Applications

Studies of identity and agency in SLA have very clear relevance for both language learners and educators. It is important for teachers and learners to understand their own stances and positionings, and how these affect their engagement with (or participation in) language education. Furthermore, we must better understand how teachers, learners, and language textbook writers (e.g., Shardakova and Pavlenko, 2004) portray or position learners, either inadvertently or intentionally, in classrooms as well as in published instructional materials, or influence the kinds of language students are exposed to in such a way that they may reinforce existing stereotypes or provide an inadequate range of registers and genres through interactions and course materials. We must also consider how such positioning might affect the opportunities the learners have to expand their future L2 repertoires and identities.

Abdi (2009, 2011), for example, in her recent study of Canadian high school Spanish classes with a mixture of heritage and non-heritage language students, found that the well-meaning teacher in that class (non-Hispanic, but formerly married to a Mexican) identified quite closely with some of the Hispanic-background students in her class—and with a very charismatic, outspoken teenaged Hispanic male in particular. She encouraged the HL students to speak Spanish in class to help expose their peers—and her—to authentic Spanish. However, her positioning of some students as Spanish-background (HL students), even when they were not (e.g., in the case of a Portuguese-speaking Brazilian) or, conversely, her lack of recognition of some Spanish-background students as such, when they were, or her sometimes dismissive attitude to the potential contributions and needs of the non-HL students, gave the individuals not only different sorts of validation related to their linguistic or cultural expertise, but also different opportunities to use their Spanish in class and thus to improve by having more opportunities to practice and get feedback. However, as Abdi reported (and Morita, 2004, documented in a related study), the teacher was quite oblivious to the sometimes very detrimental effects that her ways of viewing, grouping, and discussing students and their abilities and backgrounds had on students, their learning, identities, and motivation.

Thus it is important for teachers to know learners’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds, abilities, and aspirations better, to begin with, as well as other aspects of their identity that are important to them (artistic, academic, or athletic abilities, other interests, or strengths; Cummins, 2006). This knowledge will enable teachers to provide encouragement and support for students and to find suitable topics or projects about which they might wish to communicate in their L2. Finally, teachers can play a crucial role by inspiring students to persist with their L2 development and use, and with their ongoing L2 identity construction, through the use of engaging and pedagogically sound instruction. They can also introduce them to new digital media and platforms enabling students to take more control and responsibility for their own learning (exercising personal agency).
Identity, agency, and second language acquisition

Future directions

Research on identity and agency in SLA shows every sign of becoming a more significant aspect of SLA theorizing. With new means of conducting and disseminating research, especially mediated by new information and communication technologies and multimodal, multilingual graphic interfaces, it is likely that future research will aim to incorporate more languages, images, voices, and sound, visual, and textual data into accessible online research accounts (cf., Swain and Deters, 2007) that can be annotated by participants, by stakeholders, and by other researchers in so-called Web 2.0 (i.e., second-generation, more collaborative, interactive, Web-based) communities and platforms. Accordingly, research questions that could be addressed in the future include these:

1. How might developments in research on identity and agency transform theory and methodologies in those areas of SLA that have previously not considered those aspects, as in recent developments in motivation research—e.g., Dörnyei and Ushioda’s (2009) embrace of selfhood, subjectivity, and dynamicity in social-psychological research? Related to this question, how might more interpretive and critical research, that is, research that applies critical theory by examining power in SLA, together with an examination of identity and agency, be brought to bear on the teaching, learning, and use of languages in contexts of language revitalization, Indigenous languages, postcolonial settings, lingua francas, non-European target languages, and signed languages, all of which have been seriously understudied in SLA? For example, how might findings in research on Chinese or Japanese as an additional language with Turkish, Ugandan, and Vietnamese L1 learners (in those countries and/or studying in China or Japan) differ from existing work with predominantly White Anglophone learners of European (especially English and French) and Asian languages (mainly Chinese and Japanese) with respect to identity and agency (Duff et al., forthcoming)? And how might those same results change when diverse populations of learners, with varying race, ethnicity, professional standing, age, and gender backgrounds, are included in the studies?

2. What new technological and theoretical innovations in identity research and in the multimodal and multilingual representation of findings, perhaps drawing on fields outside of applied linguistics (semiotics, cultural studies), could inform research in this area so that it continues to produce original new insights and not just print-based, somewhat predictable accounts of people’s struggles and negotiations as L2 users? And how might truly longitudinal research be undertaken in such a way that identity and agency can be tracked over time, across contexts and languages, satisfactorily?

3. How might participants in identity/agency research be more centrally involved in decisions related to the research enterprise and to authorship so that the researcher is not given primary ownership and authority over the collection, analysis, interpretation, representation, and publication of data that is jointly produced?

4. How might research bring together in innovative, interesting, and multidimensional ways the contingencies and hybridity of teacher, researcher, and student/learner/research participants’ experiences with respect to issues of identity and agency in the same study? One possibility, for example, would be to represent their experiences multilingually rather than monolingually, through translation, or using code-switching in the research reports themselves (cf., Brogden, 2009).

5. What new qualitative data analysis tools and insights might be integrated in the analysis and presentation of narrative data so that the results are sufficiently theorized, contextualized, and exemplified, following recent suggestions by Pavlenko (2007, 2008)? For example, how
might corpus research or qualitative data analysis software help tag the linguistic expression of agency or identity in narratives in a systematic and theoretically interesting manner?
(6) How might the technologically sophisticated language learners/users of today and tomorrow engaged in learning and using language in creative new ways via social networking, gaming, simulations, and other virtual experiences that may involve different kinds of identities (e.g., imagined or simulated ones) and agentive acts, help advance SLA theory, empirical research, and educational practice in keeping with new advances in our highly globalized societies? Since practice-based and sociolinguistic approaches to SLA both emphasize that language experience with roles, audiences, interactions, and texts of various types is necessary to effectively expand one’s communicative repertoire, how might new media facilitate this in engaging ways?

To conclude, research on identity and agency in SLA—and in many related areas of academia—has made tremendous strides in recent years. This work is now having a major impact on subfields of SLA that previously looked at identity in more simplistic or categorical terms. Identity research now goes well beyond issues of ethnic or linguistic affiliation to other social factors, including gender, race, sexuality, transnationalism, and extends to digital or textual identities. Identity categories once seen as relatively monolithic are now being viewed as much more differentiated, variable, and socially and temporally constructed than before (e.g., non-native speaker, refugee, Generation 1.5 learner, heritage-language learner, Japanese female learner, immigrant). With future research combining approaches to identity that include the multiple facets of learners’ languages, lives, and modes of expression, SLA research will be enriched and transformed. Finally, as researchers with more intimate knowledge about the symbolic (linguistic, textual, cultural) resources and social/cultural practices, traditions, and linguistic ecologies of different communities of language learners become trained in applied linguistics, our understanding of the creativity and resourcefulness of language users internationally—their symbolic competence—will increase exponentially (see, e.g., Kramsch and Whiteside, 2008).

Note
* I thank Alison Mackey, graduate students at Georgetown University and the University of British Columbia, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on an earlier version of this chapter.

References
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