“I knew who I was this morning, but I’ve changed a few times since then”¹ (Carroll, 2000).

“Every time learners speak, listen, read, or write, they are not only engaged in an exchange of information; they are organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. They are, in other words, engaged in identity construction and negotiation” (Norton, 1997, p. 410).

In recent years, identity has come to be recognised as complex and multilayered, fluid, and in constant flux (Block, 2007/2014; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Norton, 2000/2013; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton & Toohey, 2011). Individuals are seen to perform and negotiate identities through actions and language, in multiple modes and in diverse times and spaces. Stemming from the social sciences and sparked by societal changes of ‘globalisation’, performative orientations to identity have fed into studies of language teaching and learning. These approaches challenge the assumptions which characterised the structuralist conceptualisations of language, culture, and identity that have characterised foreign language teaching (Firth & Wagner, 1997) and also intercultural education (Dervin, 2013; Dooly & Vallejo Rubinstein, 2017; Phipps, 2014; Piller, 2017).

In this chapter, I explore identity in relation to learning and interaction, with a particular focus on language learning – in part because of my background as a language teacher and researcher, and also due to a recognition of the limitations that the ‘traditional’ language classroom has offered in terms of identity positionings, as highlighted in the previous chapter. Having a greater

¹. Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass; http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2375385
understanding of identities and how they are negotiated in interaction and in educational contexts can, I believe, be of relevance to educators working in any context. Orientations to different identities can have a strong impact on power dynamics, student participation and the extent to which learning can take place.

2.1. Structuralist and poststructuralist views of language and identity

The Newtonian or Modernist view of the world as described in Chapter 1 can be found in structuralist conceptualisations of languages as static, bounded entities and systems, the acquisition of which entails mastery of stable patterns and structures. Linked to this are views of language as an aspect of individual cognition, which have dominated the field of second language acquisition. In their highly influential 1997 paper which critiqued this approach, Firth and Wagner (1997) note that “the imposition of an orthodox social psychological hegemony on second language acquisition has had the effect of reducing social identities to ‘subjects’, or at best to a binary distinction between natives and non-natives/learners” (p. 288). This has led to a preoccupation with the learner over other potentially relevant social identities.

The identity positions available to language learners in classrooms which embrace purely structuralist conceptualisations of language are quite limited and fixed. As Pennycook (2001) writes,

“the issues of language learning have been cast as questions to do with the acquisition of morphemes, syntax, and lexis, with pronunciation or communicative competence, and the learner has been cast as a one-dimensional acquisition device. From this perspective, learners are viewed according to a mechanistic metaphor, as a sort of language learning machine, and identity-related issues are categorised as ‘learner variables’ which need to be ‘controlled’ in language learning contexts” (p. 143).
Whilst second language acquisition theory has certainly provided valuable insights into the way grammar is acquired and the role of formal instruction in language acquisition, it has little to say about the contexts of learning, language as social action, or learners as people with multiple identities. In language teaching, this focus on mastery of the system and an emphasis on grammar or vocabulary and correctness has led to approaches which emphasise linguistic knowledge and communicative competence rather than the expression of personal identities and meanings. Even the communicative language classroom encourages learners to become able to perform specific functions in communication contexts by learning and practising a repertoire of formulated, memorised textbook dialogues rather than authentic communication of their own interests (Ushioda, 2011).

On the other hand, poststructuralist theories (more in line with the complex systems view of the world described in Chapter 1) see language as a social phenomenon: situated utterances in which speakers seek to create meanings in dialogue with others. Drawing inspiration from Bakhtin (1986), according to whom language had no existence outside its use, language learning has come to be seen (by some) as a process of struggling to use language in order to participate in specific speech communities. Conceptualising language as usage sees speakers as being constrained in some ways by past usages to construct meaning, but also recognises their ability to use language to express their own meanings. This view of language is at the basis of poststructuralist conceptualisations of identity. Just as language and meaning making is viewed as a social phenomenon, so is the establishment of identity. Block (2007/2014) summarises poststructuralist framing of identity as follows:

“Poststructuralist social scientists frame identities as socially constructed, self-conscious, ongoing narratives that individuals perform, interpret and project in dress, bodily movements, actions and language. Identity work occurs in the company of others – either [face to face] or in an electronically mediated mode – with whom to varying degrees individuals share beliefs, motives, values, activities and practices. Identities are about negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of the past, present and future. Individuals are shaped
by their sociohistories but they also shape their sociohistories as life goes on. The entire process is conflictive as opposed to harmonious and individuals often feel ambivalent. There are unequal power relations to deal with, around the different capitals – economic, cultural and social, that both facilitate and constrain interactions with others in the different communities of practice with which individuals engage in their lifetimes. Finally identities are related to different traditionally demographic categories such as ethnicity, race, nationality, migration, social class and language” (p. 32).

As mentioned in the introduction, research on identity in language learning seeks to draw links between language learning and the larger social world. Poststructuralist theories of language and identity can offer new perspectives on language learning and teaching and offer a conceptualisation of the language learner as having “a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to large and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interactions” (Norton Pierce, 1995, p. 579).

2.2. Identity, subjectivities, and positioning

The origins of poststructuralist views of identity in language learning are generally attributed to the work of Chris Weedon (1987/1997), who used the term “subjectivities” to refer to “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation in the world” (p. 28). In contrast to the essentialist, static view of identity in structural theories, Weedon’s (1987/1997) subjectivity is “precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak” (p. 32).

Subjectivity makes reference to the way the subject positions herself and/or is positioned through discourse and is socially and historically embedded. It is thus dynamic, contradictory, and changes over time and space. The term subjectivity makes relevant the notion that individuals can simultaneously be the subject of a
set of relationships (e.g. in a position of power) and subject to a set of relationships (e.g. in a position of reduced power). Weedon (1987/1997) observes that the adoption of subject positions, that is performances and positioning, does not take place in a vacuum. In a sense, the ongoing push and pull and give and take of discursive activity translates into the constant positioning and repositioning and the constant definition and redefinition of who one is (Block, 2007/2014, p. 24).

### 2.3. Locating identities in language

A framework for the analysis of identity as constituted in linguistic interaction, starting from the definition of identity as “the social positioning of self and other” is proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005, p. 586). They approach identity as “a relational and socio-cultural phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse contexts of interaction rather than as a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). Their work reflects the poststructuralist conceptualisation of identity as fluid and emergent, performed and negotiated through interactions with others in situated contexts, facilitated and constrained by power relations (Block, 2007/2014; Norton, 2000/2013; Norton Peirce, 1995). Their framework for an in-depth multi-dimensional study of identity as constituted in interaction draws insights from theorists in several fields including sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, socially oriented forms of discourse analysis, such as conversation analysis, and linguistically-oriented social psychology (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Bucholtz, 1999, 2003; Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a, 2004b; Butler, 1990; Davies & Harré, 1990; Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1974, 1981; Goodwin, 1995; Ochs, 1992, 1993).

If we take this sociocultural linguistic view, identity does not precede discourse in predefined, static, broad sociological categories such as nationality, race, or gender (to name but a few), but rather emerges within discourse and is achieved intersubjectively through interaction. This location of identity in discourse allows the incorporation of more identity positionings than the macro-categories mentioned above, as it also includes local ethnographic positionings, as defined
by the situated context (for example student and teacher identities in classroom contexts). These situated identities are performed through discursive actions, for example teachers initiate interactions, students respond, and teachers evaluate responses and/or offer feedback. Identity is produced at these different levels through linguistic resources which *index* these positionings, for example labels, implicatures, stance, and even the use of specific languages and/or language varieties.

Viewing the construction of identity through interaction means it cannot be viewed as an individual process but rather as an intersubjective one, which entails different kinds of relations. The *relations* of sameness and difference have been the main focus in studies of intercultural interactions, but there are also relations of realness and fakeness, and power and disempowerment (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 608). Finally, associated with this emergent view of identity as constructed through interaction is the understanding that all representations of identity are necessarily *partial*, and dependent on interactional, ideological, and structuralist constraints. In any one interaction, only some of our identity categories are oriented to, for example when I go to a parents’ evening at my children’s school, it is usually my identity as a parent which is oriented to by my interactants, the teachers, not for example my professional, national, or political identities.

If identity is understood as discursively constructed and reconstituted every time we engage in interaction, it becomes clear how contexts and practices can limit opportunities for language learners to engage in language use. However, the opposite also holds, contexts and practices can surely be designed specifically to offer learners enhanced possibilities for social interaction and positioning. Pedagogical practices can be transformative in offering language learners more powerful positions than those they may occupy both within and outside the language classroom. Within the teacher-led language classroom, learners are often relegated to the position of respondent who answers teachers’ questions and is then evaluated on the correctness of these responses (Richards, 2006). By offering different identity positionings, we can enable learners to engage in different discourses, advance beliefs, and challenge, defend, explain, and
judge arguments. Technologies and the practice of virtual exchange have vastly increased the range of situated contexts available for identity work, and like face to face contexts, these can be constraining or enhancing.

### 2.4. Identity, investment, and language learning

The notion of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2000/2013; Norton & Williams, 2012) is an important construct from the identity and language learning literature which is potentially of great relevance to the field of virtual exchange. The notion of investment recognises that “learners often have variable desires to engage in the range of social interactions and community practices in which they are situated” (Norton, 2000/2013, p. 420). Norton (2000/2013) draws on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1984, 1991) economic metaphors and notions such as capital and its exchange value as she observes that learners ‘invest’ in the target language in certain times and spaces because they see it as leading to the acquisition of symbolic and material resources which will increase the ‘value’ of their cultural ‘capital’ – and hence their sense of themselves. Investment and identity signal the “socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 9). According to Kramsch (2013), Norton’s (2000/2013) adoption of the economic metaphor of investment suggests that the exchange value of learners’ cultural capital is intrinsically linked to neoliberal conceptualisations of market value, in terms of employability and strategic economic possibilities. The frequent association of the notion of investment with the English language\(^2\), often recognised as the language of neoliberalism (Piller & Cho, 2013), reinforces this link.

However researchers have shown that learners may invest in a language for a range of reasons. Individuals may invest in a language because it is a part of their heritage (Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013), or because they may see it as a tool

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2. Norton Peirce (1995) developed the concept as she was doing research on immigrant English as a second language learners and she and other researchers usually refer to the English language when discussing investment (e.g. Darvin & Norton, 2015; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007) but research on the notion of investment has also been carried out as regards other languages, such as French (Bemporad & Jeanneret, 2016).
to spread knowledge about their culture and beliefs to those who do not speak their language. Individuals may invest in a language because it will allow them to communicate their shared needs and goals with national and transnational communities, as in the case of Rigoberta Menchu (1984), the Quiché indigenous leader who learnt Spanish to communicate with other indigenous communities in Guatemala and across Latin America. Individuals may also invest in a language because it is the “language of the enemy” (Pavlenko, 2003, p. 313, cited in Charalambous, 2014; Mohd-Asraf, 2005, p. 113).

2.5. Imagined identities

Strongly linked to the notion of investment is learners’ membership in ‘imagined communities’ and hence imagined identities, which draws on Anderson’s (1991) view of nation states as imagined communities. In their conceptualisation of imagined identities Pavlenko and Norton (2007) also draw on Wenger’s (1998) conceptualisation of imagination as a form of engagement with communities of practice, and the notion of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which represent individuals’ conceptualisation of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. Imagined identities can affect individuals’ learning trajectories and influence their agency, motivation, investment, and resistance to the learning of English, Pavlenko and Norton (2007) argue.

The English language may represent for some individuals a way to connect to a broader community – not necessarily of people in Anglophone countries, but rather English users – who share political, environmental, social, or leisure interests and concerns. At the same time, if we consider the experiences of many countries with colonialism, the imposition of English and the outlawing of other languages in certain contexts, the teaching of English as a missionary language (see Pennycook & Coutand-Marin, 2003), concerns about the loss of cultural values, identity and local languages (Mohd-Asraf, 2005) as a result of using English, we can understand how imagined identities might also invoke resistance to the language.
2.6. Online identities

Darvin and Norton (2015) have reviewed Norton’s (2000/2013) model of identity and investment from a more global perspective, in acknowledgement of the “demands of the new world order, spurred by technology and characterized by mobility” (p. 35). This new model occurs “at the intersection of identity, ideology and capital” (Darvin & Norton, 2015, p. 36) and regards not only investment in (English) language, but also in digital literacies (Norton & Williams, 2012) which are seen to have expanded what is socially imaginable for learners and has extended the range of possible identities. Technological developments and increased mobility have increased the number and nature of spaces available to learners, and at the same time call for the ability to shift between different sets of communicative norms and power dynamics in spaces where power mechanisms are less and less visible. It is important, they argue, to interrogate ideologies and examine the sociopolitical contexts of schools and communities in order to examine how power manifests itself materially in the practices of a classroom or a community, in the positioning of interlocutors and the shifting values of linguistic and cultural capital.

Several scholars have reported on how online contexts give young people the chance to invest in and construct identities which are not available to them in their formal, monolingual classrooms (Chen, 2013; Iskold, 2012; Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013; Lam, 2000; McBride, 2009; Pasfield-Neofitou, 2011; Sauro, 2014; Schreiber, 2015; Sharma, 2012; Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008; Thorne & Black, 2011). Most of this work on online identity construction has regarded the ‘public agora’ (Dervin, 2013) whereby learners interact in pre-existing online communities of practice, social networks such as Facebook, Vkontakte (for Russian), or Mixi (for Japanese), or fan fiction sites and online games.

Lam’s (2000, 2006) study is one of the most-often cited studies in relation to online identities and language learning (Kramsch, 2009; Norton & Toohey, 2011). She explores the ways in which technology provides language learners with the means to construct imagined lives by examining the computer-mediated transnational identities that immigrant youth in the USA were fashioning for
themselves as multilingual, multicompetent actors. She found that these identities afforded broader opportunities for language learning than their school environment where they were stigmatised as immigrants and incompetent language users. Lam concludes that identity issues for teachers and learners are significant factors in the philosophical, pedagogical, and professional domains of language teaching.

Identity work and empowerment has become one of the main themes in research into online or computer-mediated fan fiction practices (Sauro, 2017). Black’s (2009) case studies describe how adolescent writers of English as a second language chose to represent themselves not as learners of English, but rather as transcultural and multilingual writers who were a source of linguistic and cultural expertise. Sauro (2017) highlights how through fan engagement in online settings, L2 learners and users are “able to renegotiate new and more productive multilingual and international identities, and confront and challenge social issues and dominant discourses” (p. 141).

What seems to emerge from the literature on online identities for language learners is the increased opportunities for identity positionings that arise from becoming part of a group or community which has a shared interest or aim. As research into communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) has found, social participation means being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities, (actual or imagined) in relationship to these communities. Positionality in online groups or communities has been explored through the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) and more recently the Community Indicators framework (Galley, Conole, & Panagiota, 2014; Hauck, Galley, & Warnecke, 2016). Identity is one of the four components of the Community Indicators framework which also includes participation, cohesion and creative capability as indicators of community.