A framework for the study of identity in online interactions through virtual exchange

In this chapter, I propose a theoretical framework for the study of identity in interaction that is grounded in the poststructuralist views of identity as social action that I explored in the previous chapter. It is specifically targeted for the study of identity in online interactions and builds on five key principles. These include the situatedness of interaction and identity work; the mediation of technology in online interactions and identity work; and three principles drawn from the work of Bucholtz and Hall (2005); positionality, indexicality, and relationality. These principles are explained briefly in this chapter, and then each will be explored in further detail in subsequent chapters, drawing on examples from the study of interactions in a specific context of virtual exchange.

3.1. The situatedness principle

“Emerging arrays of online environments now constitute primary settings through which routine constructions of identity are created, and curated, through the use of textual and multimodal expression, some of which arguably involve new literacies, communicative genres, hybrid linguistic varieties, processes of group formation, and social practices” (Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015, p. 216).

The virtual space called the web has been recognised as the largest language contact zone and social space on earth, a new sociological and anthropological reality which presents challenges to the analyst who needs to depart from the anachronistic mode of analysis which characterises much research on social
networks (Blommaert & de Fina, 2015). The range of transnational spaces of communication are varied and are constantly changing, so they need to be continually studied to understand the changing contexts of language and/in social life (e.g. Herring, 2007; Thorne, 2016). Often, the sites of digital language and literacy in the ecology of multilingual environments that the internet offers are merely mentioned rather than studied in the research literature (see though Androuutsopoulos & Juffermans, 2014; Lam, 2014; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2014).

The principle of situatedness stems from the field of ethnography, according to which “the distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic is an artificial one since every act of language needs to be situated in wider patterns of human social behavior, and intricate connections between various aspects of this complex need to be specified” (Blommaert, 2015, p. 8). In analysing interaction in online sites, we cannot ignore the contexts and purposes for which the spaces themselves were designed (educational, recreational, commercial, social, political, etc.) and the purposes for which they may be used by the different communities. Online contexts of interaction are “socially constructed and historically contingent” (Williamson, 2013, p. 40), they are socially shaped and socially shaping. Virtual learning environments such as Moodle, Blackboard, and many more were designed for educational contexts and are shaped by (Western) educational models which see a strong need for providing (limited) access to teacher-selected academic content and controlling, monitoring, assessing and grading the structured and sequenced activities of students.

Social networks, on the other hand, have been designed for ‘creating connections’ between people – as is well known, Facebook was launched as a social network for Harvard University, initially to connect students to one another. It has since evolved above all for commercial ends – and is highly profitable if we consider that its net annual income for 2017 was over 15 billion dollars1. Facebook’s design was shaped by the context within which it was born and has grown, and it is also socially shaping – the main functions, ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ are designed to foster convergence and the sharing of content amongst the like-

minded, with the ‘help’ of targeted Facebook ads which are directed to us on
the basis of knowledge that Facebook has acquired (and sold) through our web
surfing habits. The interactions of communities within Facebook are also likely
to index events which occur outside the timespace of their online group, both in
the individual lives of the participants but also on a more global level. The online
and the offline times and spaces thus interact with and shape one another.

According to Herring (2007), aspects – or facets – which should be taken into
account when describing the situated contexts of online interactions include the
purpose of the group and the goals of interaction; the participation structure,
which includes the degrees of privacy, the membership in terms of numbers
of participants, the directionality of the communication (one-to-many, many-
to-many); and the characteristics of the participants and their roles in the online
space. However, what is missing from these ‘facets’ that Herring (2007) has
defined are macro-level situational factors, linked to the ideologies and the
sociopolitical nature of online contexts that may also shape interactions and
participant positionings within these, as discussed above.

If we look at educational contexts and ‘educational technology’ (Selwyn & Facer,
2013) we should consider them as a site of negotiation and struggle between
different actors (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), which include the designers and
developers of new tools and curricula, consultants, funders and advocates, as well
as the young people that the educational projects are addressing, their families and
communities. They should be explored on a ‘macro’ level of social structure of
society as well as the microlevel of the individual and the learning context.

3.2. **The mediation principle**

“Artifacts and humans together create particular morphologies of
action” (Thorne, 2016, p. 189).

Whilst all discourse is mediated, in electronic environments, discourse, and
hence identity work, takes on additional layers of mediation, with a technological
layer of operations in addition to the social interactional layer. This principle challenges the notion that technology is a neutral or transparent medium for communication and identity work and instead sees mediation as radically transforming these and other social processes (Kern, 2014, 2015).

As stated in Helm (2017, p. 8), taking for granted the existence of the Internet and its effects on communication, and indeed education, is reductionist and fails to take into account the multiple forms of online mediated activity; the contexts of the creation, development, uses, and transformations of technologies and their mediating effect. Kramsch and Thorne (2002) raise this very issue as they ask the extent to which the medium changes the parameters of communication and the nature of language use (see also Blommaert, 2015; Thorne, 2013). The mediating effect of technologies and the affordances they offer cannot be ignored in the analysis of online interactions (Hampel & Hauck, 2006).

The first assumption within the mediation principle is that all interaction is multimodal (see Kern, 2015, p. 223), not just technology-mediated interactions. *Multimodality* “makes sensory information accessible in diverse semiotic modes and offers the opportunity to produce, comprehend and exchange information simultaneously through different channels” (Guichon & Cohen, 2016, p. 510). However, sometimes the additional mediating layers of technology can create dislocations for participants in interaction who need to negotiate the technological as well as linguistic, social, and/or intercultural aspects of interaction (Kern, 2015).

What technologies have added are new modalities and media for communication. Different media can facilitate or favour different kinds of meaning making and identity work (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010); media can also constrain communication through the design of the tools themselves and the differential access to the means of production and reception of these meanings. An important concept within this principle is ‘affordance’, which stems from ecological theory. It refers to the relationship between properties of the environment and the active learner. An affordance is a particular property of the environment that allows for further action. In language learning, the
environment the learner has access to and in which they become engaged is “full of demands and requirements, opportunities and limitations, rejections and invitations, enablements and constraints – in short, affordances (Shotter & Newson, 1982, p. 34)” (van Lier, 2000, p. 253).

What was originally seen as an affordance of text-based computer-mediated communication for identity work is the anonymity it allows, for visual identity markers disappear. The well known adage, which stems from the cartoon by Peter Steiner On the Internet nobody knows you’re a dog – reflects what some saw as the liberatory power in terms of self representation and identity construction that the (perceived) anonymity of text-based communication offered.

The affordances of anonymity in computer-mediated communication have, in the public sphere, been overrun by the negative effects that the lack of accountability has offered for hate speech and abuse. It is not only the anonymity, but also other factors that contributed to what has been called the Online Disinhibition Effect and these include invisibility, asynchronicity, and what is called ‘solipsistic introjection’, that is the fact that you can’t actually see your interactants online and thus have to guess at who they are and their intent.

Recent technology developments have strongly affected mediation in online contexts. Audio and video are increasingly being used for everyday communication, and also in educational contexts, with multiple modes of communication being available in any one environment, and users being required to navigate and negotiate these modes through different devices and interfaces. The implications of video and aural communication for identity work are significant since anonymity disappears through video, and visual identity markers are available to interactants. The audio mode of communication also introduces identity markers such as accents, which text-based communication does not transparently reveal.

---

2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Internet,_nobody_knows_you%27re_a_dog
3. http://www.wired.co.uk/article/online-aggression
Chapter 3

The emergence and phenomenal success of social networking sites have somewhat changed the dynamics and attitudes towards anonymity in online identity work because their main aim is for users to curate their identities and their personal, social and/or professional networks. The importance of mediation can also be seen in the construction and negotiation of identities online, with much of the recent research focusing on the affordances of social networking sites and multimodal media used for engaging in ‘identity work’ (boyd, 2006). The aims of the social networking site, the conventions developed for communication within the network itself, and the technical affordances of the tools influence the message and the identities that are mediated through these tools.

3.3. The positionality principle

“Identities encompass (a) macrolevel demographic categories; (b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 592).

This principle challenges the notion that identity is simply a collection of broad social categories, those macro-identity categories such as age, gender and social class, which have dominated the quantitative social science literature and early sociolinguistic work. It brings in a concern with how identity relations arise in local contexts and draws on the work of linguistic ethnographers regarding how language users orient to local identity categories and also the micro details of identity as it emerges through interactional positionings.

These different levels of identity positionings, which are not mutually exclusive, have been conceptualised by several theorists, but in this book I draw in particular on the work of Zimmerman (1998), who distinguished between transportable, situated, and discourse identities. Transportable identities refer to identity categories which are commonly recognisable across large groups, such as ‘female’, ‘young person’, ‘Muslim’. Situated identities are those local,
ethnographically specific cultural positions which are somehow institutionally existent, such as teachers and students, doctors and patients and, in the context of this book, facilitators and participants. Finally, discourse identities correspond to interactionally specific stances and participant roles, for example questioner – respondent, speaker – and listener.

These three levels of identity positionings are not unrelated, nor do they occur in isolation, but can occur simultaneously in single interactions. Most research studies in this field have explored the correspondence between discourse and situated identities, particularly in institutional contexts. According to Boden and Zimmerman (1991),

“[t]he structure of institutional talk minimally consists of the recurrent pattern of normatively oriented-to, situated identities along with the corresponding discourse identities and the conversational machinery through which the work allotted to participants assuming such identities is done. In the case of television news interviews, for example, interviewer-interviewee are the oriented-to identities which allocate (and constrain) certain discourse activities, e.g. asking questions and giving answers” (p. 13).

Richards (2006), who has used Zimmerman’s (1998) framework to study identities in classroom interactions, argues that most research studies on classroom interaction take the default identities of teacher and student for granted. Furthermore he found that these default, situated identities offer little scope for moving outside of what could be seen as the default pattern of classroom interaction: initiation, response, and feedback. In the excerpts that Richards (2006) first analyses, it is the teacher who takes on the discourse identity of initiator and has the authority to control the floor, ask questions, give instructions, and prompt, while the students (aka respondents) are expected to respond directly to these turns and address the teacher. The teacher is also the evaluator and provider of feedback or follow-ups which can take on many forms (positive evaluation or remedial action such as explicit correction, clarification requests, repetition, and reformulation to name but a few).
In his study, Richards (2006) then analyses interactions in which students’ transportable identities are brought into play, and he argues that this offers opportunities for subverting the *initiation-response-feedback* dynamic as students are engaged in a conversation where they are actively involved in the construction of shared understanding. Richards’ (2006) main claim is that introducing transportable identity in the language classroom – both of teachers and students, can redress power dynamics and transform the sort of interaction that takes place in the classroom.

Many other studies have explored classroom interactions and indeed the *initiation-response-feedback* pattern has been found to predominate (cf. Hall & Walsh, 2002; Heritage, 2005; Seedhouse, 2009). In telecollaboration studies where interaction patterns have been explored (Liddicoat & Tudini, 2013; Loizidou & Mangenot, 2016), similar findings have been made, only it is usually the ‘native speaker’ student who takes on the ‘teacher/tutor’ identity by providing feedback on the ‘non-native’ peer’s ‘errors’. A recent study by Dooly and Tudini (2016) on the other hand found that in a dyadic pair of student-teachers, the non-native peer took on the role of teacher/tutor more frequently than the native speaker, in regards to ‘guiding’ the online talk. The pedagogic discursive practices discussed thus far are but some of the many forms of interaction an active user of a language will engage with once outside of the classroom. Indeed, it is argued that these institutionally situated pedagogic interactions can potentially disempower learners, constraining their agency to obedience and limited participation (Train, 2006).

Telecollaboration ‘in the wild’ (Thorne, 2010), whereby language learners interact in pre-existing online communities, offers increased opportunities for identity positionings that encourage participants to seek to become members of authentic, online communities of practice. These communities can include public internet discussion forums (Hanna & de Nooy, 2003, 2009; Lam, 2006), fanfiction sites, virtual worlds, gaming sites, and social networks (Thorne, Sauro, & Smith, 2015). The increased opportunities for building socially meaningful relationships and identities arise from becoming part of a group or community which has a shared interest or aim. In these settings, participants
work to position themselves as ‘members’, and particular uses and forms of language that are central or specific to the target community form the primary resources for doing so.

3.4. The indexicality principle

“Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one’s own or others’ identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participants’ roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 594).

This principle regards the multiple levels at which subjectivity and intersubjectivity can be constituted in interaction. An index is essentially a linguistic form that depends on the interactional context for its meaning, such as the first person pronoun ‘I’, ‘the’, ‘here’ (etc.), and temporal expressions such as ‘now’ (often referred to as deictic words in semantics). However, indexicality also regards the linking of linguistic forms and social meanings and the ideological structures on which identity formation is often based, and is far less clear-cut than semantic indexicality, as the very word implicature implies.

Social category labels (such as age, gender, ethnicity) have been used in the study of identity primarily by non-linguistically focussed social science researchers, but linguistic researchers also have a long history of attention to this area. Table 3.1, below, summarises the categories which key research on language and identity have focussed on. Taken-for-granted categories of identity (some can be described in a single word such as gender, class, and nationality, while others are more complex to define) are seen to reflect structural conditions and established social practices. These identity categories can be used (and abused) to position people, to empower and/or disempower them. From a poststructuralist view,
established identity categories can be made relevant but also ignored through interaction; they can be challenged and negotiated.

Table 3.1. Identity categories in studies of identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Ethnicity</td>
<td>• Ethnicity and nationality</td>
<td>• Race and ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Class</td>
<td>• Gender</td>
<td>• National identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gender</td>
<td>• Race</td>
<td>• Migrant identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Language and communicative competence</td>
<td>• Class and social status</td>
<td>• Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Able bodiedness</td>
<td>• Social class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sexuality</td>
<td>• Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Religious affiliation</td>
<td>(Second/foreign)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Linguistic competence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and ability to claim a ‘voice’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Socio-cultural linguistic researchers, including those mentioned above, but also those more focussed on the study of interaction, have offered more systematic methodologies for understanding labelling and categorisation as social action. The work of Harvey Sacks (1992) on membership categorisation in conversation, and its development in the two related but distinct ethnomethodological approaches of conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis (Stokoe, 2012) regard categories and labels both through their overt mention but also the assumed behaviour and attributes of category members.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) draw on the work of du Bois (2007), who interprets stance as both a subjective and intersubjective phenomenon and characterises it as social action. In this view, a subject takes a stance by evaluating something, positioning themselves and others, and aligning – or disaligning – with other subjects. Positioning oneself is thus a component of taking a stance. Looking at stance thus reveals how interactants position themselves and others (“I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and align [or disalign] with you” (du Bois, 2007, p. 163) as particular types of people.
Many public online discussion forums, particularly those where issues that are closely intertwined with identity (such as migration), are characterised by adversarial positionings and ‘flaming’ with polarised discussions and comments removed by moderators. On the other hand, in online intercultural exchange, there has been a strong influence of the notions of ‘sociocultural competence’ and an emphasis on alignment with the other, to the point of dissimulating one’s own point of view (Savignon & Sysoyev, 2002). In the telecollaboration literature, researchers have identified a tension between fear of ‘failed communication’ due to misunderstandings which lead to the preliminary termination of communication between peers, and ‘missed communication’ (Ware, 2005), that is missed opportunities for deeper engagement with one another due to superficial communication.

According to Bucholtz and Hall (2005), entire linguistic systems such as languages and dialects as well as particular linguistic forms can be indexically tied to identity categories. They cite the issue of language choice, which has been studied in the field of language and globalisation, and is perhaps one of the most explored constructs in studies in the field of language and identity (Higgins, 2009; Lee & Norton, 2009; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

### 3.5. The relationality principle

“Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice and authority/delegitimacy” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 598).

This principle emphasises that “identities are never autonomous or independent but always acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 598). This relational foundation of identity as opposed to the conception of identity as an inherently individual, psychological trait is what Bucholtz and Hall (2005) see as being at the heart of their model. Hanna and de Nooy (2009) highlight the relevance of
this principle in their study of online discussion forums as they write “forum discussion […] is not a game of solitaire where one’s strategies can be adopted without reference to other players but rather a game where self-positioning also depends on that of the other participants in the debate” (p. 154).

The dimensions of this principle of relationality go beyond sameness and difference which are the most widely-used and also over simplified identity relations. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) have added other dimensions which relate to realness and fakeness, and power and disempowerment. These different dimensions, they argue, typically work in conjunction with one another.

Adequation and distinction are the terms used by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) to refer to relations of similarity and difference from which they draw, but also depart from. These are not dichotomous relations, same or different, but rather represent a continuum. The term adequation is used to refer to the foregrounding of similarities and the downplaying of social differences which might undermine or support identity work. It means being “understood as sufficiently similar for current interactional purposes” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 599), it does not entail being identical. Distinction on the other hand refers to the suppression of similarities and allows for the construction of difference. If I say “Oh yes, I am a religious person” to somebody who has told me they go to the mosque every day, I am engaging in adequation, highlighting a degree of similarity with that person, though I do not belong to the same religion. If on the other hand I say “I am a Catholic and have never been into a mosque”, I emphasise distinction and highlight difference. There are occasions on which and, more importantly reasons why, a speaker may choose to focus on difference, and others in which adequation is preferred, depending on the contingencies of the situation. It is important to be aware that reducing differences to similarities has often been used to dominate or silence others (Agbaria & Cohen, 2000; hooks, 1994).

Authentication and denaturalisation are the terms used for claims made by interactants to realness and artifice. Authentication regards how identities are discursively verified, and how the language users and the types of language
they use counts as ‘genuine’ for a given purpose. Authentication occurs when fellow members of a community of practice accept the symbolic behaviour of an individual as appropriate and ‘real’, and this is expressed through participants orienting to one another. In her study of keypal interactions, Klimanova (2013) found that expression of genuine interest in various aspects of Russian language and culture was considered a form of self-proclaimed peripheral belonging to a Russian speakers’ community. Self-identification as deficient speakers of Russian, which solidified their Russian learner identities, allowed novices to save face and mitigate their linguistic deficiencies and cultural faux-pas and be accepted by their interactants. Denaturalisation on the other hand, regards the claims made to artifice, how assumptions regarding the seamlessness of identity can be disrupted. Through denaturalisation, claims about inherent rightness of identities are subverted and attention is called to the fragmentation or problematicity of identity. In Hanna and de Nooy’s (2009) study of discussion forums and sites specifically established for language learning (such as those of the BBC), they found that these sites set up default identities of language learners and teachers which replicate the default positions of the classroom context. These positions determined the topics and mode of discourse according to a small number of well-rehearsed patterns, but offered little scope for deep discussion on topics other than the learners themselves. One participant reported in their study attempted to denaturalise this learner identity which was ascribed to participants and to start a discussion on student protests, but the other participants on the forum oriented only to the language (i.e. errors) of her posts (which, the authors write, was well up to the task) rather than engage with the topic proposed (Hanna & de Nooy, 2009, p. 141) and thus did not authenticate her intentional and intended identity.

The final pair of identity relations takes into consideration structural and institutional aspects of identity that are enacted through contextually established situated identities. First of all, we have authorisation which is the “affirmation or imposition of an identity through structures of institutionalised power and ideology, whether local or translocal” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 603). Its counterpart, illegitimisation, regards the ways in which these same power structures dismiss, censor, or ignore identities.
These latter pairs of relations can also be linked, I would argue, to the concept of communities of practice, which informs some of the research carried out on identity and language learning, for it shares the assumption that learning is situated in our lived experience and is a fundamentally social phenomenon. As identity formation is fundamentally a social and relational process, agency also needs to be understood as a fundamentally socioculturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001). In this sense, agency is intersubjective, that is, it is not only the result of individual action, but distributed among several social actors. The Communities of Practice framework, and others which regard communities, thus offer potential in understanding the notion of distributed agency and joint activity or co-construction. As Norton and Toohey (2002) write:

“a shift from seeing learners as individual language producers to seeing them as members of social and historical collectivities, moves observers toward examining the conditions for learning, for appropriation of practices, in any particular community” (p. 119).

If we conceive these communities as aggregates of people who come together to engage with the practices of their communities, in which there are ways of doing things and ways of talking, it is the community that offers authentication and denaturalisation, authorisation, and illegitimisation of participants’ identities.

In Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conceptualisation, communities of practice are not just groups of individuals but rather they are social aggregates that have and impose rules of entry. Individuals gain entry to communities of practice by means of “legitimate peripheral participation”, which is achieved via exposure to “mutual engagement with other members, to their actions, and their negotiation of the enterprise, and to their repertoire in use” (Wenger, 1998, p. 101). This conceptualisation may be useful for already established communities that novices enter, as in Hanna and de Nooy’s (2009) study, but is slightly less so for new groups that are established online. A more recent framework has been developed for the analysis of the emergence of online communities, which includes identity as a category, the Community Indicators framework (Hauck, Galley, & Warnecke, 2016). Within this framework, establishing limits, boundaries,
purposes, and expectations is a component of the group identity, as are shared vocabulary, group self-awareness, and identification of existing knowledge and experience patterns.
Emerging identities in virtual exchange
Written by Francesca Helm

Rights: this book is published under the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives International (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. Under the CC BY-NC-ND licence, the book is freely available online (https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2018.25.9782490057191) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the authors and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.

Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book is believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors’ alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never ‘out of stock’ or ‘out of print’.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, UK: British Library.